

• Book Reviews •

The Amazing Crawfish Boat. By John Laudun. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016. 234 pp., 35 illustrations, 10 maps and figures, bibliography, index).

There are objects that arise in American culture that do not have definite origins in time or place. Others do. There is an important distinction between things that arise in specific places and things that have less definite origins. Those without definite origins often give rise to myth. Those with traceable origins highlight specific people who gave rise to that object and the importance of the object to the culture of a region. John Laudun begins *The Amazing Crawfish Boat* by describing this boat as “a particular machine that seems to have emerged on a particular landscape at a particular point in time” (ix). Laudun goes on to examine the crawfish boat as a folklore object. He says, “I found myself drawn to an extraordinary artifact whose very realization screamed creativity and yet whose natal scene was grimy, noisy, and as modern as one could imagine it” (xvii). In fact, in his introduction he states that the crawfish boat is almost the perfect folklore object and one that opens up the connections between folklore and creativity studies (xvi). He does not proceed with a technical exploration of the boat’s construction or its history. Instead, he frames the book around those whose daily lives are spent maintaining and operating the boats and what their “ability to make something no one has seen before” tells us about creativity (xx).

Laudun starts the book with several sections that situate the reader on the landscape and then moves from thinking about how the boat causes reflection on the landscape to how the landscape focuses reflection on the people who have shaped it and made it useful to the culture of the region. He writes, “In order to understand the landscape, we have to see it as the people who live and work on it see it. In order to understand them, we need to listen to what they say and watch what they do, and this is never as easy as it sounds” (ix). The book, ultimately, is not about the crawfish boat but about how an object like a boat can illuminate the

people connected to it and the culture out of which it originated. Anyone familiar with the culture of Southern Louisiana knows that crawfish are central to the social life of the region. Crawfish boils are all-day affairs that bring together friends and family around large picnic tables covered in newspaper topped with boiled crawfish, corn, potatoes, and as much cold beer as can fit in a cooler. Laudun presents us with the front end of the industry that makes these rituals possible and, in particular, the one technology on which the industry relies.

Everything about Laudun's book and the creature that this industry is built around is peculiar. He states, "Crawfish are not a crop like rice or soybeans, and they have largely . . . resisted easy understanding" (4). But crawfish are harvested in a similar way to those crops and actually share space with rice crops. When the fields of southern Louisiana flood, they make a perfect, shallow ground for crawfish to gather and breed. To harvest them you cannot use a regular boat or tractor. You need something in between. So, from necessity a hybrid was created, the crawfish boat. A familiar sight for anyone driving on the back roads of the region, Laudun writes, is a boat emerging from one of the rice fields onto the road by means of one set of rubber tires and a large metal wheel that drags the boat from the field and drops it onto the road and down into the next field. In a section titled "Antecedents and Parallels," he argues the necessity of southern Louisiana residents creating "boats that could handle the mixed nature of the landscape on which they found themselves" (75).

Laudun's style is also peculiar and what he describes as "novelistic" (xix). His style, much like the boat he examines arose because of necessity. Much of his six years of research on the book took place "standing in the middle of a metal shop or riding on a jump seat of a tractor or standing at the edge of a hot field on a summer day in Louisiana" (xix). The style can be off-putting at times for someone looking for a word-for-word transcription of his notes, but it does not detract from his overall exploration of the boat's central role to the culture of the region. The structure follows a similar pattern. It is as if Laudun wants the reader to meander back and

forth between topics related to the boat just as the boat winds its way through fields teeming with crawfish. There are no traditional chapters but sections that could act as independent essays on aspects of the boat, southern Louisiana culture, and creativity studies. After his necessarily lengthy introduction that situates the reader within the culture of the crawfish boat industry, sections follow with titles like "Shops," "Working the Land," "Emergence," and "Building a Boat" that all describe the processes that go into the construction of the boat and harvesting the crawfish. In a section titled "Fluorescene," he describes the production efficiencies that made the Louisiana crawfish industry thrive in the midst of the 1980s oil crash and the "influx of cheap Chinese crawfish" that proved a real threat to the industry in Louisiana (100). This section includes color photographs of some of the first crawfish boats used in the region.

In three final sections titled "Thinking Things," "Toward a New Understanding of Creativity," and "Backwards," Laudun returns to initial thoughts on the relationship of folklore to creativity studies. These sections act as his reflection on craft and craftsmanship. There are, he writes, "A handful of people within any particular family or community to whom expertise has been attributed. . . . To them, we bring our problems. From them, we anticipate solutions" (187). In these sections Laudun brings to bear on the crawfish boat years of thinking about creativity and his argument for why the boat deserves its place within folklore studies. Here, the reader might also begin to sympathize with the seemingly overstated "amazing" of his title. Yes, the boat as object is under scrutiny in this book, but so too are the networks of shops, farmers, mechanics, and operators that allowed for innovation and adaptation that created differing "valves, engines, rams, motors, pumps, welds, bends, curves, lengths, widths" that are all adaptable to different fields and situations (193). This, for Laudun, is the core of creativity.

The book itself is a beautiful object. The thick, high-gloss pages give weight to the book, and the stories Laudun tells of his experiences with the people who make this industry possible are documented with color photographs of the boats, their

operators, and the shops that keep the boats going. Laudun also includes sketches of objects and processes the reader might be unfamiliar with such as a rice field cut and drain. This interlocking device allows fields to grow rice while simultaneously providing a nesting ground for crawfish. Other sketches show the positions of specific operators' shops in the Lafayette region and the flow of water into and out of the rice fields—patterns that boat operators must understand for navigating fields that contain both rice and crawfish.

As someone who covers southern Louisiana in his work, I know all too well the focus that the southeastern region takes off the other regions of southern Louisiana. Laudun's book highlights the vital cultural and economic links between these regions not only through their shared agricultural history—rice was brought to Louisiana by enslaved persons in the eighteenth century through the port of New Orleans—but also through the shared misunderstanding that both regions face from the rest of the nation. He admits his project all started with "the storms" of 2005 and the questions that came after: "Why did people stay? Why did they build there in the first place? Why would they want to rebuild?" (13). This is Laudun's attempt to help us understand the region a little better through a specific object. A reader looking for a straightforward historical analysis of the crawfish boat and what it tells us about southern Louisiana will not find it in Laudun's book. What they will find is an ethnography of the people who have shown themselves adaptable to shifting geographic and economic landscapes. The contribution Laudun makes both to the study of southern Louisiana culture as well as to folklore studies can be found in his own conclusion. He says he wants future folklorists to understand how creative people—these craftsmen that communities come to for solutions—"discover places where their individual abilities and proclivities fit within a larger sociocultural matrix such that they make a decent living, contribute to the economic success of their community, and demonstrate the power of ideas when they have a proper audience" (208). Such a statement would seem utopian if the creators of the amazing crawfish boat had not made it a reality.

JOSEPH DONICA
Bronx Community College, CUNY