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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* by Jan Harold Brunvand

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# Book Reviews

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*The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction.* By JAN HAROLD BRUNVAND. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., second edition, 1978. Pp. xviii + 460. Bibliographic notes, appendices A–D, index. \$10.95)

Perhaps one can determine, with fair accuracy, the state of health of a discipline through studying introductory textbooks which a large number of practitioners select for use in their own teaching activities. Moreover, if such works are issued in one or more revised editions, one has an opportunity to study what might represent the development and progress of a field of study through comparing early and later versions. Both conditions now apply to this work, since this is a revision of the 1968 first edition. But let us pass from considering such possible grander implications and get on to an evaluation of this particular textbook.

Stated simply, and without frills, except for the bibliographic guides and some parts of the appendices, this is an impossible book. In a short review such as this, a complete case for that judgment cannot be provided. However, it will be possible to list some principal points, along with illustrations of those.

First, this work claims to have no theoretical stance of its own, yet it forcefully insinuates a readily identifiable one throughout without presenting adequate arguments (usually no arguments) for that stance. The claim of theoretical neutrality (or at least noninterest) is hinted at in the preface of the first edition: “this [book] deals largely with materials of folklore and not with theoretical concepts” (p. xii). This is made more explicit in the second edition’s preface: “Rather than adopting any specific contemporary approach, such as performance-centered analysis, my goal was to give beginning students an eclectic overview of modern theories . . .” (p. viii). Yet the book obviously has adopted a specific contemporary approach (theory), namely that insinuated principally in the first three chapters and elsewhere in the book as well. Readers will no doubt spot many passages full of theoretical import, but I suggest the following pages as perhaps more visible instances (and as my personal favorites): pp. 1–8, 12–13, 39, 99–100, 125–126, 221, chapter 13, and 301–302. Basically, any time a classification scheme is presented, or whenever generalizing statements are given in a systematic way, or whenever another series of theories are being commented upon or evaluated, there will be a theory lurking in the background. This is inescap-

able. What is not inescapable is the tendency or temptation to make a virtue of always maintaining one's theory at an implicit level, for that is not a virtue. An explicit and defended background theory is one mark of an objective scientific work, whereas an implicit and hidden background approach usually signifies the opposite. That this is an introductory book is no excuse. Everyone else's theory is openly discussed. Why cannot the same be done with the *book's* background approach? Explicit and objective discussion of theory is central to the health of a discipline, and is a matter to which beginners should be introduced along with other things.

Secondly, the book is literally overflowing with contradictions. One need go no further than the first sentence of the first chapter to find half of the first one. There we are told: "Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people," and "the study of folklore (or 'folkloristics') attempts to analyze these traditions . . ." (p. 1). On p. 12, we see that the whole phenomenon of folklore is understood as "behavior, texts, performances, effects, etc." (This, by the way, describes almost anything.) And, on p. 13 we begin to be told about folklore texts, records, and the "collecting" of such things. Is then a text or tape recording or video tape or film of "something" folklore? Not if we believe the first sentence of chapter 1. Yet roundabout p. 13, we are led to think that such "records" are folklore (they are studied by folklorists, and isn't folklore equal to "that which folklorists study"?). So is the first sentence of chapter 1 false?

I have space for only two more instances of contradictions. In trying to defuse an objection that Biblical narratives ought to be classified as myth, Brunvand says that such narratives are not myths because they do not circulate in oral tradition (p. 100). Yet neither does much of the content of the texts of a great many "folklore" archives, nor does the Homeric or Hesiodic corpus, yet the book holds no bar to their study as "folklore." While it may not be an explicit contradiction, when reading the chapter on superstition, I was continually struck by the seeming applicability of the terminology of "superstition" to something like a Roman Catholic mass in which the priest believes he is literally, and through supernatural means, "magically" changing some food and wine into flesh and blood. One need not limit one's attention to this particular religion—relevant instances from many other established and widely followed organized religions would provide multiple examples. And I am not saying that therefore these religions or their followers are "superstitious," but isn't this book saying that? And I suspect if that issue were faced squarely the author of the book would want to deny that these religious examples are instances of "superstitions," but I don't see how on the basis of the book's presentation that such could be done consistently.

Thirdly, the tone of the book is authoritarian. By this I mean something fairly specific—that resolution of doubts or conflicts in regard to

the subject matter often occurs by means of an appeal to a respected figure, and not through consideration of argumentation and evidence. This procedure is found throughout the book. I cite one clear example from p. 6. There we see that legal processes are not "folklore," and that "only those aspects of culture that are both oral or customary and traditional may be folklore." Here we are told what can and may and cannot be the case, presumably only on the basis of our respect for this book. A little thinking will suffice to show that most of these cases of cannot, may not, and only, are really defensible as mostly or sometimes or once in a while.

The fourth point is that the book encourages a charismatic or arbitrary approach to knowledge. (Folklore is what folklorists do, so do your own thing, pick your own truth, like selecting your favorite candy.) And because it presents an air of scientific procedure, it must do double harm to beginning students who will think that its contents must be an adequate representation of scientific folkloristics. This matter is probably logically related to most of the other points I have raised. In any case, it is but an instance of a wider problem in folkloristics in that many scholars seem to think that anyone who has an identifiable theory or approach may simply have it for the asking without any need for evidential or argumentative support for it, or without any worry or need to revise it in the face of continuing research in the larger world. I choose to illustrate this point by citing what I regard as this book's serious ethnocentric biases, this despite the fact that these matters are widely known and heavily argued against in our profession. On p. 99 we find that "Myths . . . [are] traditional 'prose narratives, which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past.'" This is only a thinly disguised way to say that a "myth" is a story some other people think to be true, but which we know to be doubtful, false, or silly. Were this not the case, why then say that a "myth" is a story those other people *consider* to be true. That must mean we have some special knowledge which takes us from the obvious condition that those people *say* their "myths" are true, to the condition of our saying they *consider* their "myths" as true. If we didn't have this additional implicit claim that their "myths" are doubtful, then we would say that, as "they" say, their "myths" *are* true. This is ethnocentrism. It is also ethnocentrism to continue to use terms such as "folk," "myth," "superstition," and the like. To acknowledge that scholars have pointed out that these terms invite all kinds of biased interpretations implies that *one should not use them*, and especially not in an introductory book. Yet this book uses them profusely. Arguments, thus, are regarded as having no force, and we are left only with an authoritarian resolution of such matters. As the history of science in general shows, terminology is closely connected with the state of knowledge in a particular discipline, such that the way terms are used is intimately connected with the state of understanding or appre-

ciation of truth and knowledge at a particular stage in a discipline's development. This book encourages a continuation of terminological chaos in our discipline through such procedures. If our discipline could resolve alone just to avoid adding the term "folk" in front of some concept under consideration, as if thereby an analysis had been performed, then the scales would tilt significantly.

Since this is apparently a popular textbook, I hope that the principle which lies behind the possible grander implications mentioned in my first paragraph might in the end be a false principle. Otherwise, we are in a lot of trouble.

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*The Dynamics of Folklore.* By J. BARRE TOELKEN. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979. Pp. xiii + 395, preface, bibliography, index, 82 photographs, Instructor's Manual. \$11.95)

I have been teaching folklore courses on the undergraduate and graduate levels for the past ten years and have, during that same span of time, been searching for a decent folklore text. Anthologies are much too uneven and available texts by the Clarkes, Brunvand, and others are too simple (often simple-minded). When Toelken's book was published, I pounced upon it, read it hastily and was delighted. I have now read it through carefully three times and have used it as a text in a graduate course and in an undergraduate course. I am no longer so delighted.

Still there is much to like in *The Dynamics of Folklore*. Toelken's writing style is generally lucid; his obvious humanistic concerns come through; and his use of photographs and extended anecdotes is good, although there are some problems in these areas that I will point out below. A careful revision could turn this book into an excellent text, and I would like to offer in this review some suggestions for revision, based on my experiences with its usefulness as a text.

There are several fundamental areas in which problems in usage have arisen and toward which most of my criticisms are directed. These areas (which sometimes overlap) are organization of the material, writing style, and Toelken's theoretical base and approach to the discipline of folklore.

*Organization:* On the assumption that *Dynamics* is intended to be used on the college level, I would suggest that the Instructor's Manual be eliminated. If college teachers need this manual in order to teach a course in folklore, then they are not ready to teach folklore. Perhaps instead they should consider some graduate training or, at the very least, extensive reading and some research in the field, preferably under the direction of a competent folklorist.