

**MID-AMERICA
FOLKLORE**



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MID-AMERICA FOLKLORE

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Review Essay

Once Upon a Time:
Approaches to Popular Folktales Collections

By Timothy R. Tangherlini

Pantheon's four new volumes form an excellent addition to their series, the Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library, which offers growing coverage of the oral narrative traditions of diverse cultures throughout the world. As a folklorist, one may be initially put off by the series' somewhat odd title, as it exhibits a generic slovenliness, or at least an overemphasis on one particular genre, namely the fairy tale. This fluidity is found in the volumes themselves which include everything from classic fairy tales (tales indexed between AT 300 and 749) to a host of other folktales, legends, and myths.

Each of these new volumes has its own particular personality -- some are produced by experienced folklorists, others are produced by translators, and others are produced by teams of scholars and translators. The volumes are consistently good, despite the surprising range of styles of presentation and the varied philosophies of each volume's editor. This review essay focuses on four of the newest volumes, *Lone Thygesen Blecher and George Blecher's Swedish Folktales and Legends* (New York: Pantheon, 1993. Pp. xxvii + 383, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, list of illustrations, permissions acknowledgments, \$25.00, cloth), which attempts to fill the gap left after Lindow's excellent collection went out of print; *Howard Norman's Northern Tales, Traditional Stories of Eskimo and Indian Peoples* (New York: Pantheon, 1990. Pp. xxix + 343, introduction, maps, notes, bibliography, permission acknowledgments, \$16.00, paper), which includes a surprising range of narrative from Native American and American circum-polar people; *Hennri Pourrat's French Folktales* (Selected by C.J. Bjurstrom, translated with an introduction by Royall Tyler. New York: Pantheon, 1989. Pp. xxvi + 484, introduction, notes, bibliography, list of illustrations, \$17.00, paper), in which Tyler has gleaned a selection of tales from the collections of Henri Pourrat; and *A.K. Ramanujan's Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages* (New York: Pantheon, 1991. Pp. xxxii + 346, preface, introduction, map, notes, permissions,

acknowledgments, \$16.00, paper), an exceptional collection of folktales from India.

Ramanujan prefaces his collection of Indian tales with a competent introduction. In it, he explains why his title is "from India" and not "of India," mentioning his desire to avoid an overdeterministic representation of Indian oral tradition. He expresses a clear appreciation of the multiple cultural groups and distinct linguistic entities found on the Indian subcontinent. Regrettably, he includes little mention of the history of folkloristics in India. Thus, there is no attention paid to the various collectors, the history of collection, or the conceptualization of the "folk" which informed the folkloristic endeavors of Indian scholars. Instead, there is a somewhat pedantic introduction to the study of folklore in general. Ramanujan, however, does point out the need for an understanding of the tales in their situated context and thus places proper emphasis on the performative nature of folklore. As he accurately points out, written records are but a pale echo of the tales as they are performed. Interestingly, in his cursory discussion of the study of folktales, he avoids any mention of Benfey's hypothesis concerning the westward migration of tales from India which was a main inspiration for works like the Aarne-Thompson tale index. The only recognition of this theory comes implicitly, as he suggests that the Aarne-Thompson index and the motif index are based on outdated theories. Luckily, this negative evaluation of the indices does not prevent Ramanujan from providing tale type numbers. The inclusion of these numbers will doubtlessly facilitate the use of the book in introductory folklore classes.

The organizational principles of the volume are slightly confusing. The tales are arranged in eleven "cycles," comprised of eight to eleven tales. Each of these cycles, in turn, contains several types of tales that are various on a theme, and simultaneously pay homage to the disparate cultures of India. Ramanujan breaks the tales down into male-centered tales; women-centered tales; tales about families; tales about fate, death, gods, demons, ghosts, etc.; tales about animals; and stories about stories. This last categorization is fascinating, and provides insight to the metanarrative aspect of much tale telling -- the intense awareness among many storytellers that they are indeed telling a tale. The characterizations of the other groupings is at times problematic since they do not apply across genres, particularly in the case of the first two. While the intentions of such an organization should be lauded, the groupings make it troublesome to find similar tales quickly and, in the absence of an index, render the book difficult to use as a source for scholarly inquiry. Despite these minor shortcomings, the

collection is quite successful. The tales are well translated and easy to read while the book is nicely illustrated with whimsical depictions of buildings, spirits, and plants. Annotations are generally excellent, and although the book is intended for the general reader, the additional information presented in these notes guarantees the collection's usefulness both for instruction and for the comparativist unable to learn all of the original languages.

Unlike the other books reviewed here, the tales in *French Folktales* are all from the collections of one person, namely Henri Pourrat (b. 1887, d. 1959). As such, the work provides a glimpse into the collections of a poorly known French amateur folklorist who was perhaps better known for his literature. Pourrat lived in Auvergne in Southern France and fell in love with both the countryside and the people who worked the land. Most people would expect a collection of French fairy tales to make extensive use of the well known collections of Charles Perrault or other collections of *Contes de ma mere l'Oye* (Mother Goose tales). Seen in this light, one must recognize that his tales are not exactly the type that a modern folklorist would be interested in -- Pourrat edited his tales extensively and never took notes while he was collecting. Instead, he would retell (or more accurately write) the tale from memory in the evening.

Pourrat was not an academic folklorist, and as folklorists were getting further away from the romantic glorification of the peasant, he wanted through his collections to "grasp and convey, through the eternal verities of peasant life, the uncorrupted, universal mind of mankind" (p. xiv). Tyler notes that "what he had in mind was spiritual renewal through a return to the earth and to peasant ideals" (p. xiv). Pourrat's extensive collections were published in France as *Le trésor des contes* in thirteen volumes (and were recently republished in seven volumes); this current work is but a small sampling of the extraordinary breadth of this collection of primarily legends and folktales. In his introduction, Tyler provides an excellent overview of French folkloristics and thus makes it possible for the reader to situate this collection in the broader field of scholarly inquiry. As Tyler's remarks make clear, it is questionable if these tale really are a reflection of oral performance or, like Hans Christian Anderson's literary tales, a work with only faint echoes of the oral tales that presumably lay at their base.

The tales themselves are wonderfully translated, easy to read, and clearly arranged. Furthermore, the illustrations are selected from the seven-volume Gallimard edition of the *Trésor* and thus offer the reader yet another glimpse into the extraordinary work of Pourrat. The three main divisions, fairy enchantment, bestialy, love and marriage, are fine, particularly since

the tales are the product of a literary mind and thus not subject to the otherwise thorny issue of thematic classifications. Tyler includes no annotations to the tales, nor are there any AT index numbers, both of which are tacit recognition of the distance between Pourrat's collection and folk tradition. This book is certainly an excellent collection for enjoyment, as well as for French literature in translation classes. The teacher of folklore, however, would have to use this collection with caution, or he might fall prey to the demon that haunts all teachers of Scandinavian folklore, namely the need to reiterate time and again that Hans Christian Anderson wrote short stories that mimicked oral tradition and was not the "author" of numerous folktales.

Norman's collection of northern tales opens with the suggestion that "northern tales are tuned to the ancient rhythms of human and animal speech and to landscape" (p. xi). This somewhat New Agey approach to the oral narrative traditions of diverse native peoples of northern North America and circumpolar regions informs most of the collection. In a note to the reader, he disavows the use of "Eskimo," but oddly neglects to point out the equally politicized nature of the word "Indian." Norman does provide helpful maps to help locate the often overlapping geographic regions the various groups inhabit and with the collection covers a surprising range of cultural and linguistic groups. It is not an easy task to present in a coherent fashion tales from so many disparate peoples. Indeed, Norman's task is no less difficult than the task faced by Ramanujan in presenting the tales of India.

The history of the field on northern folkloric and anthropologic study presented in the introduction is unclear and hard to follow, but it reflects the convoluted history of the study of circumpolar traditions. Fortunately, Norman's bibliography is an asset to this collection and helps pierce the neophyte in the right direction for further, directed study. In contrast, the annotations to the individual tales are somewhat sparse and reveal Norman's reliance on published collections and other transcripts of performance. Thus, many of the tales are not direct recordings, but rather come to us second-hand. Regrettably, the hand of editors can be felt in many of the tales. More emphasis on performance contexts for individual tales would have been helpful as a means to situate these tales ethnographically. Question such as "Are certain tales told at certain times?" and "Are certain people more likely than others to tell specific tales?" nag the reader throughout the work.

Norman eschews simple generic classification and offers creative solution to the difficult problem of organizing tales from disparate groups.

In his introduction he explains his organizational principles. Thus, each section of the collection is preceded by a short introduction which points out salient aspects of the tales grouped in that section. The first section, entitled "Embarrassment of the Cranberry People" focuses on village interactions, and the stories presented here work partly as ethnographic documents offering a wealth of information on day-to-day life. The next section, "Etiological tales," includes tales which describe both the order of the universe as well as origins of aspects of material culture. In "Tricksters and culture heroes," Norman introduces tales about the trickster figures from three groups: Smart Beaver of the Tagish Indian, Kuloseap of the Micmac, and Wenehjo from the Chipewea. The section, "Stories about animals," provides an interesting glimpse of the conflicting perceptions of the same animals in different cultures while "Shaman stories" includes many of the legitimizing tales for the practice of shamanism among these northern peoples. "Stories of strange and menacing neighbors" explores tales of the various supernatural beings that threaten these groups while "Hunting stories" emphasizes tales of luck and hunting. This last section is surprisingly short given the importance of hunting in these communities. Norman concludes with a section, "Stories about all sorts of marriages."

Although generally quite good, and certainly a fine introduction to the exciting cultures of the north for the general reader, Norman's work has several annoying shortcomings. First, there is no index, which makes quick access to tales and themes all but impossible. Second, the lack of page numbers on even numbered pages at time makes it laborious to find one's place. Finally, Norman does not include tale type numbers, making comparative use of the collection cumbersome. Despite its occasional flings, however, this collection provides excellent source material for courses in circumpolar anthropology, as well as Native American folklore. The teacher must be aware however of the inconsistencies in collection and editing.

Of the four volumes reviewed here, **Swedish Folktales and Legends** is by far the most disappointing. The work attempts to fill a definite need left by the disappearance of Lindow's (1978) collection. Regrettably, this collection is unable to measure up to Lindow's excellent volume with its extensive, well-written introduction, faithful translations, and consistently informative annotations. Pantheon would have served their readers better by reprinting Lindow's collection, perhaps in concert with this current volume. The introduction to this volume opens with Thygesen Blecher's rambling recollection of a childhood spent on Bornholm -- part of Denmark -- and bears little relationship to the work at hand. Seen in

context of Lindow's work, this introduction seems preposterously facile and reveals Thygesen Blecher's profound lack of training as a folklorist. This deficiency comes to the fore in an uninformed discussion of the differences between legend and folktale marked by statements such as, "unlike the legend . . . the same folktale can usually be found in many different countries, with each adding its own variations" (p. xviii). The folkloric record countermands such claims, as variants of similar legends as well as folktales can be found throughout Europe. Indeed, one of Scandinavia's leading folklorists, Reidar Christiansen, went so far as to develop an index of "migratory" legends. Oddly, Christiansen's work is listed in the bibliography, but it seems that Thygesen Blecher had little knowledge of its content. While the overview of the development of Swedish folkloristics and collecting is fine, it is somewhat cursory. Finally, Thygesen Blecher states that the emphasis of the present volume is on folktales rather than legends, although that does not turn out to be the case. The strong point of the work is the excellent collection of illustrations from numerous classic volumes of Swedish children's literature. These illustrations save the volume from the lack of scholarly rigor which marks the introduction.

Thygesen Blecher has broken the volume into numerous sections based primarily on thematic considerations without providing any clear motivation for the proposed divisions. The annotations at the end of the volume are generally good, but solely limited to factual aspects of collection. They in no way compare to Lindow's theoretical and analytical annotations, but it may be a blessing that Thygesen Blecher shied away from offering any type of interpretive apparatus. The bibliography is helpful, but despite a claim that there are many good collections of Swedish legends available in English, the only one listed is Lindow's now out-of-print work. While this volume could be seen in classes -- on Scandinavian folklore, for example -- it offers an overly quaint picture of Scandinavia. The translations are quite competent, yet in some cases the editorializing of the original collector comes through. For the general reader, the volume offers an acceptable overview of Swedish narrative tradition as collected in the nineteenth century, but for the Scandinavian specialist, it is a disappointment. For the book to be an attractive option for class use, it will need to be issued in paperback as are the other volumes.

The new additions to the Pantheon series are generally good. Unfortunately, the qualifications of the editors are inconsistent. Ramanujan is the most competent folklorist of the bunch, while Tyler has an excellent grasp of the literary nature of his project; Norman also exhibits an excellent understanding of the cultures of the north. In contrast, Thygesen Blecher's

credential seems to be that she grew up in Denmark and has worked as a translator -- a somewhat specialized endeavor such as this is out of her league. If she had been teamed with a competent folklorist many of the pitfalls could easily have been avoided. The volumes are all quite handsome -- the illustrations in the French volume and the Swedish volume are perhaps the most interesting since they are not ancillary to the collection, but a vibrant part of the work itself. As the Pantheon library continues to expand, one hopes that they will lend more toward the earlier volumes like Abraham's collection of African folktales, and that they will consult experts when they select future editors to avoid the somewhat unfortunate result of the Swedish volume.

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DELTA STUDIES SYMPOSIUM III: THE BLUES AND BEYOND

The Department of English & Philosophy at Arkansas State University (Jonesboro campus) will hold a third interdisciplinary Delta studies conference on April 10-12, 1997. There will be scholarly papers, organized panels, and creative multimedia presentations and demonstrations on the blues and related forms of expressive culture from various humanities and social science disciplines. Address inquiries to:

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