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Legend Tripping: A Contemporary Legend Casebook

Edited by Lynne S. McNeill, and Elizabeth Tucker. 2018. Logan: Utah State University Press. 235 pages. ISBN: 978-1-60732-807-0 (hard cover).

Reviewed by [Janet L. Langlois](#), Wayne State University

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Simon Bronner recently posted on the American Folklore Society's History & Folklore Section Facebook page that the Brothers Grimm, justly famous for their scholarly work on fairy tales (*Kinder-und-Hausmärchen*, 1812-1815), had also written on German legends, never as widely known (*Deutsche Sagen*, 1816-1818). This reminder hints at the need for, and consequently the *raison d'être* of, the projected International Society for Contemporary Legend Study Series. *Legend Tripping: A Contemporary Legend Casebook*, the first volume, examines the folk practice of visiting sites said to be haunted in local legendry. It

admirably meets the stated goals of the series to provide

“thorough and up-to-date studies that showcase a variety of scholarly approaches to contemporary legends, along with variants of legend texts, discussion questions, and project suggestions for students” (ii).

The book's ten chapters begin with editor Elizabeth Tucker's extended summaries in chapter 1 of an article by Linda Dégh from 1969 and her Indiana University students' legend-tripping fieldwork studies from the 1970s, proceeds decade by decade from the 1980s to the 2010s, including a reprinted article per chapter, and concludes with editor Lynne McNeill's recap in chapter 10. Some may argue that it is not “up-to-date” in the sense of “new.” It is not, but its chronological progression is by design (4) and justifies the more inclusive and richer definition of “extending up to the present time: including the latest information” (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*). Its equitable treatment of both earlier and more recent scholarship allows the editors to build their argument, illuminating in its expansion of which individuals and groups do actually participate. The editors state in their good general introduction, “Not all legend trippers are teenagers; some are young or older adults. Legends can inspire trips at any stage of life, but trips taken by young people have captured more interest from scholars” (4), the focus of earlier studies (see chapters 1-4). They continue, “This casebook includes studies of both young and older peoples' adventures” (4), the broadened focus of more recent studies (chapters 5-9). In addition, reprints of McNeill's 2008 article

on ghost hunters' use of technology and the Internet (chapter 8), and of Tucker's 2016 article on groups' use of ghost-hunting apps (chapter 9), are included as examples of digital legend tripping. As a point of comparison, the most recent *Wikipedia* entry for legend tripping as of this writing, revised and accessed 9 January 2020, gives the earlier definition of teens tripping, and so needs to be updated.

The book's inclusion of a "variety of scholarly approaches to contemporary legends," however, is tightly circumscribed. Its theoretical focus is the concept of "ostension," Dégh's and Vászonyi's application of the philosophical term via semiotics to folkloristics, especially to legend tripping's *modus operandi* of extending narrative into action in real-world contexts (11-12). Earlier fieldwork studies prefigure inductively their 1983 JFR article, "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling," while later studies draw from this hypothesis deductively as well. See these titles for explicit proof: in chapter 4 Bill Ellis' 1991 classic "Legend Trips and Satanism: Adolescents' Ostensive Traditions as 'Cult' Activity," that presents and defends teens' ritual acts of rebellion; and in chapter 7 Carl Lindahl's iconic 2005 "Ostensive Healing: Pilgrimage to the San Antonio Ghost Tracks," that compares a range of trippers' ages, genders, and ethnicities, including those of extended Hispanic families, therefore affecting the range of their motivations for coming to this gravity hill. All the articles are well chosen, but I offer a special word here on Tim Prizer's 2004 "Shame Old Roads Can't Talk': Narrative, Experience, and Belief in the Framing of Legend Trips as Performance" (chapter 6). I find it the most theoretically complex while maintaining clarity of an argument, often critical of the very sources used. He melds Dégh's and Vászonyi's, as well as Ellis's ideas of ostension with Bauman's narrative performance model and Hufford's experience-centered concept of the traditions of belief/disbelief about the supernatural within folkloristics (not a mean feat in itself) through the use of Goffman's frame analysis to "discover" legend tripping's import as action.

The concluding chapter, "Living Legends: Reflections on Liminality and Ostension," draws on McNeill's personal experience of legend tripping, and the patterns—both the continuities and their variations—she finds revealed within the preceding chapters, not only in legend-tripping groups and in scholarly approaches emphasized, but also in multiple meanings, both *emic* and *etic*, enacted in transformative moments for participants. As a reviewer long interested in legend research, I presumed that I knew most of the articles included, but found from reading this book that I did not. Patterns emerged that I had not expected. Working with supernatural legend telling myself, often in end-of-life contexts, I was surprised (and maybe should not have been) to note how often fear of death was mentioned in this volume. For example, Ellis writes in his 1983 article on teens' legend tripping that he surveyed in Ohio (chapter 2), "At the same time it dares participants to rebel against adult authority, it provides a psychologically safe way to defy the taboo against confronting fears of death itself" (62). In her 1994 study (chapter 5), S. Elizabeth Bird, also working with adolescents, contrasts older adults' possible motivations for visiting the Black Angel statue on a gravestone in a local cemetery, suggesting that it may tell stories that "pick up on the association of blackness and angels with death and sorrow" (117).

Finally, there is repetition, probably inevitable in casebooks, in the general introduction, individual chapter introductions, and in the introductions of reprinted articles, which the editors of future volumes of this much-needed series should work to streamline.

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