

Book Review

Slender Man is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet. Edited by Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2018. 187 pp. illus. \$24.95 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-60732-780-6

The accelerated transmission of images and narratives online poses enormous and exciting challenges for folklorists. Great strides have been taken in this field, and the theoretical implications stretch far beyond the study just of the Internet itself. In particular, the circulation of material online has allowed for closer study of the adaptive folkloric uses of non-folkloric source material and the interaction between such different registers, as well as enabling further investigation of the rapid introduction of such material.

Slender Man has been an instructive example of, as the editors Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill put it here, 'an intentionally created legend that has hit all the right notes to be believable' (3). It poses questions of that relationship between source registers, as well as demanding further complications in our thinking about legendry. Slender Man was already intriguing 'folklorists and folk alike' (3) when its scholarly investigation took on a more urgent cast: in May 2014, two twelve-year-olds in Waukesha, Wisconsin, USA, claimed they were inspired by Creepypasta to stab their friend and leave her to die. They had committed their crime, they said, for Slender Man, an entity that everyone acknowledged to be an evolving work of collective fiction. There was inevitably a backlash of moral panic.

The essays in this invaluable collection probe the questions raised by Slender Man's development in many interesting directions. The historical evolution and definition of Creepypasta is usefully discussed, with a revised and updated version of Jeffrey A. Tolbert's 2013 *Semiotic Review* article laying out the pre-Waukesha emergence of Slender Man. That article, being written for a non-folkloristic audience, usefully presented the theoretical issues identified by folklorists, above all the place of Slender Man in relation to the whole genre of legend. Tolbert's summary recapitulation of ostension allows him to move towards the claim that Slender Man in fact represents a reverse ostension, the privileging of (created) new objects in a 'corpus of "traditional" narratives modelled on existing folklore' (27). Paul Manning, in his article here, points to photographs of Slender Man as attempts not to re-enact the legend but to encounter the character out of context.

This all points towards subsequent theoretical advances in the notion of the folkloresque, which is dealt with at greater length in Tolbert's second essay. It is also usefully illuminated by Timothy H. Evans's article on horror culture as a locus of interaction between popular culture and folklore, drawing comparisons with the work of H. P. Lovecraft. Manning also connects horror directly to legend, and notes that legend allows for ostension while other genres do not.

Centring discussion of Slender Man around genre issues of legend uniquely positions folklorists for exploring 'the nuances of [his] emergence and function' (17), with Blank and McNeill freely acknowledging their intention in securing folklore's place in that discussion, which is laudable and welcome. Other essays here wrangle further with a consideration of ostension. Andrew Peck proposes a theoretical reorientation 'from ostensive action to ostensive practice' (54) as a negotiation of Waukesha and responses to it. Elizabeth Tucker's article, addressing the 'triviality barrier' encountered in children's folklore, tackles practice from the perspective of dark play and children's behaviour.

Not the least significant part of the focus on legend is that folklorists arrive at the discussion equipped with an already nuanced negotiation of the relationship between narrative and belief. It is a mark of the maturity and sophistication of this collection that

Mikel J. Koven's discussion of belief here leads him to question directly whether Slender Man should be classified as a legend at all. Koven's argument that Slender Man's legend-like qualities are 'affectations of style, not ideology' (120) again brings us to the folkloresque, while his insistence that belief is ludic chimes suggestively with Tucker's article. (Also, lest anyone think this collection is anything but readable, I should note that Koven's first footnote here made me laugh out loud.)

These are complicated questions, and Andrea Kitta works through some of the theoretical background on belief and practice, describing Slender Man as 'the name given to a shared experience that bridges both the experience-centered hypothesis used by David Hufford (1989) and the cultural source hypothesis' (78). Elsewhere, Kitta teases out distinctions between a 'typical experience' and 'an experience' without reducing the latter to a 'mere experience' (83). As should be clear, such questions echo through our discipline far beyond this one example. Given the rapidity of technological change being assimilated, they also have longer term implications. Kitta's consideration of generational responses to Internet memes and activity is suggestive in this respect, although there is clearly more work to be done. Her suggested nuance of position between digital natives and digital immigrants (her terms) may already be being theoretically and practically superseded by technology and our adoption of it.

Slender Man is Coming is essential and enjoyable reading for anyone working on belief, legend, the folkloresque, and related topics, but it can be recommended more widely, too. The book would be a useful outreach tool to offer those outside the discipline who are unaware of folkloristic thinking about legend ostension and crime, as it offers a brilliant informed view on the relationship between online narratives and violence in real life. That insight is one of the reasons folklorists will be reading this collection, of course, but it may also be a helpful and necessary volume to circulate outside our own immediate groups.

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