

Blank, Trevor J., and Lynne S. McNeill, eds. *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*. Utah State University Press, 2018. 216 pp. Softcover. 978-1-60732-780-6. \$24.95.

Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill's *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet* is a welcome contribution to an understudied subject. It is the first edited collection to treat the subject of Slender Man, and only the second book-length study on the topic. (The first was a 2015 monograph by Shira Chess and Eric Newsom). The book contains an introduction by the editors that provides a history of Slender Man's development as an internet character, as well as an orientation to the methodologies employed by the contributors; eight chapters; contributor notes; and an index. The contributors approach Slender Man in relation to legend studies, folklore studies, and children's culture. The volume as a whole is rigorous yet accessibly written, and is likely to interest scholars of horror, new media, and digital cultures, as well as non-academics interested in Slender Man. As a bonus, the collection revisits disciplinary assumptions about urban legends, and offers a fresh look at folklore in the digital era. Importantly, any academic study of Slender Man requires addressing the 2014 "Slender Man stabbing" in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in which two twelve-year-old girls attempted to murder their best friend, ostensibly to appease Slender Man. This tragic and shocking event is the pivot point around which the collection's contributions orient.

Andrew Peck's chapter, "The Cowl of Cthulhu: Ostensive Practice in the Digital Age," for example, uses the media response to the Waukesha incident as an opportunity to refute the popular assumptions that murders based on urban legends are common. Rather, Peck argues, even dressing up as Slender Man is a fairly ordinary ostensive act (a concept in folklore studies that, in this context, means "enacting an aspect of a legend cycle in real life" [52]), and the connected nature of new media creates a healthy dynamic that reorients ostension away from individual acts and toward what Peck terms "ostensive practice" (52), in which the collective actions of many people fosters a dynamic of "collaboration, critique, and reflection" among practitioners. Timothy H. Evans makes a similar argument in his chapter, "Slender Man, H.P. Lovecraft, and the Dynamics of Horror Cultures" (130). Assuming that participating in the horror culture centered around Slender Man is depraved, Peck argues, mistakes the actions of the most extreme individuals as representative of the whole, and precludes noticing the vibrant, and fundamentally playful, online and offline ecosystem of ostensive practice.

Jeffrey A. Tolbert likewise seeks to problematize the assumption that participation in Slender Man practices is deviant or dangerous (93). In his chapter "'Dark and Wicked Things': Slender Man, The Folkloresque, and the

Implications of Belief,” Tolbert emphasizes the culpability of human actors over narratives or legendary characters when it comes to real-world actions: “[f]olklore is emphatically not to blame” for Waukesha (93). Tolbert explores belief in Slender Man through the lens of the “folkloresque,” a term he and Michael Dylan Foster explored at length in their own 2016 edited collection to explain fictive creations that “feel” like folklore, whether they have real identifiable precedents in folklore or not. In his analysis of media discourses of belief in Slender Man, Tolbert counters the deviance narrative with the assertion that the folkloresque quality of Slender Man makes such belief at least as natural as belief in any other folkloric character, owing to what he terms the “atmosphere of belief” created by such narratives (93). Here Tolbert echoes Peck in highlighting the participatory nature of Slender Man (105).

Elizabeth Tucker’s “Slender Man is Coming to Get Your Little Brother or Sister: Teenagers’ Pranks Posted on YouTube” turns to the study of children’s culture to explore the questions surrounding the Waukesha incident, namely “How can we be sure our children can truly separate reality from fantasy?” and “What are the warning signs that children are confusing the two?” (142). Her evidence from children’s folklore studies suggests that violence between children usually has a rationale and does not stem from delusion, and that extreme cases like Waukesha are not useful for understanding the actual behavior of most people. She notes that the Waukesha incident may be best explained as an extreme example of the interpersonal dynamics of friendship and exclusion, as well as the misunderstood dynamics of children’s play, such as the tendency for children to torment one another (142-43). The moral panic that Tolbert observes, and the legend Mikel J. Koven postulates in response to media effects (122), might be correctly explained by adults being poorly informed about childhood and adolescent play (142). Tucker’s section on Slender Man “pranking” videos underscores the fact that “[k]ids who use YouTube are skilled at portraying Slender Man’s threatening behavior and discussing its meaning in the context of their everyday lives” (153).

Though Koven in his chapter “The Emperor’s New Lore; or, Who Believes in the Big Bad Slender Man?” comes to the same conclusion as Peck, Tolbert, and Tucker regarding the culpability of folklore in real-world actions, he questions the “atmosphere of belief” surrounding Slender Man. Koven agrees that there is a contemporary legend that has formed around Slender Man, but notes people do not actually seem to believe in Slender Man’s existence. Instead, Koven takes up Tolbert’s frame of a moral panic and locates the contemporary legend around the “danger” of Slender Man narratives themselves (122). The rest of the chapter explores the panic surrounding Waukesha as “legend formation around media effects” (124). Koven expresses a traditional disciplinary definition of what the legend genre contains, and the disciplinary debate about this term is one of the strengths of the volume.

Several authors in the volume examine the ways different media types and genres produce differing affective senses of authenticity and believability, even when the content is held constant. For example, Paul Manning's chapter, "Monstrous Media and Media Monsters: From Cottingley to Waukesha," shows that the ability of a given monster to survive as a cultural phenomenon capable of producing credible ostension ("pointing out, showing" [155]) depends on its inhabiting media forms that are indexical, in that the genres or media forms "make some appeal to realness," such as legends or ghost stories (155). He contrasts those forms and genres with media spaces characterized by "hypermediacy," in which the monster remains in a wholly unreal media space with no ability to slip weirdly into the real world. He likens this distinction to the opposition between legends, which he says are "understood to take place in 'the real world,'" and folktales, which are "understood to take place in an unreal space of 'once upon a time'" (156). Andrea Kitta's chapter, "What Happens When the Pictures Are No Longer Photoshops? Slender Man, Belief, and the Unacknowledged Common Experience," takes a different methodological approach, but likewise explores the way the medium of an experience authorizes or dis-authorizes the conditions necessary for an experience that *feels* real. She suggests Slender Man taps into an unacknowledged common experience of the supernatural that feels real even when we don't necessarily believe it to be. Kitta and Manning's medium-focused explanations offer a contrast to Tolbert and Peck, who attribute the feeling of realness attached to Slender Man to Slender Man's folkloresque nature. All four authors' arguments may be of interest to scholars of the fantastic who study affect.

Some concluding remarks and suggestions for approaching the volume: This is a volume that should be read—almost has to be read—in its entirety. The chapters are deeply intertextual, with frequent intra-volume citations connecting different strands of argument advanced by the contributors. That said, for the reader outside the discipline of folklore studies, I might suggest, after reading the introduction, which provides a summary of the Slender Man mythos and a history of Slender Man's development as an internet creation, turning to Evans's and Manning's chapters first, even though they come later in the collection. While Tolbert's first chapter situates Slender Man within a disciplinary context and therefore may be the right first chapter for folklorists, it may not be the right one for readers outside that discipline. Evans's argument that the Slender Man Mythos is similar to the Cthulhu Mythos—in that both share a weirdness resulting from the blurring of the barrier between verisimilitude and fictitiousness and both are trans-medial cultural phenomena whose ontological instability is enabled by the media forms themselves—uses familiar content to enable a useful synthesis of ideas presented both within the volume and elsewhere that ground the larger discussion. Similarly, Manning's contribution cites many of the other chapters

in the volume, which helps to give a sense of how the many approaches fit together. Manning also engages most closely with concepts familiar to the narratological tradition of the fantastic. Though he never engages that literature, he instead shows how folklore studies engages similar questions, and his “[a]esthetics of indexicalism” (169) might offer avenues for a revitalization of that tradition in a new media context.

From the perspective of a literary critic, Blank and McNeill’s *Slender Man Is Coming* is remarkable for the approaches it opens up. Slender Man’s viral, mythos-generating nature resists conventional literary analysis and, as the editors note, most scholarship on Slender Man thus far has been from the fields of new media and communications (17). If the contributions in Blank and McNeill’s excellent volume are to be taken as a guide, scholars of the speculative and the fantastic looking to study viral internet legends should be looking to folklorists for their cues.

JOSHUA B. TUTTLE