

Book Review

The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination and Folklore. By Andrea Kitta. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2018. 189 pp. £22.20 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-60732-926-8

The Kiss of Death is an exploration of vernacular narratives such as contemporary legend and rumour through the lens of contagion and contamination. The request to review Andrea Kitta's book could not have felt more timely. As the world is gripped by the Covid-19 pandemic, Kitta's study of 'outbreak narratives' feels so apt. Using narrative, Kitta delves into how vernacular understandings of health and illness can usefully be applied in medicine to better understand community perceptions of risk and risk behaviour. As folklorists, she writes, 'we should not only ask [participants] for their stories but also for their input and insight' (10).

What is novel and important about this book is the way it demonstrates the usefulness of folklore for addressing real world issues—such as those pertaining to public health. The book could not feel more relevant than it does in 2021 and I avidly read it cover to cover in one sitting. Despite being published in a pre Covid-19 world, there was much that resonated with everyday pandemic living. Kitta touches on the military metaphors that abound in the language used to discuss health and illness—words such as 'battling', 'losing', and 'defeating' are phrases we hear every day as Covid-19 is framed as the 'enemy' to be defeated as our National Health Service 'heroes' face the 'front line' each day (16).

Kitta draws on stigma in her theoretical interrogation of outbreak narratives, noting that bodies that succumb to disease are often othered in some way and disease narratives often stigmatize outsiders; we only need think of President Trump's referral to Covid-19 as 'kung-flu' to demonstrate this point. Narratives such as these generate public fear that the stigmatized and outsider groups carry disease and will make others ill.

However, the scope of the book is broader than just outbreak narratives and disease, with the main focus being the themes of contagion and contamination and how they are woven through popular and vernacular culture. Kitta provides a detailed definition of the way she frames these two terms in her introduction, and in later chapters explores contemporary concepts such as the folkloresque Slenderman phenomenon (Chapter Three) linking 'slender sickness' to cyber-bullying. In Chapter Four, she delves into vampire and zombie narratives in popular culture. What Kitta does with skill is navigate the spaces and linkages between popular culture and folklore. If I was pushed to make a suggestion, it would be that the book might have been enriched with reference to discussions of 'fake news' and 'disinformation'.

The real strength of the book is its applicability to public health issues. Chapter Five examines the human papillomavirus vaccine and moral panics surrounding side effects and hypersexuality in young women. Kitta's discussion of anti-vaccination movements is again highly pertinent in 2021 as the UK Covid-19 vaccine strategy is implemented. The final chapter, Chapter Six, carries the title of the book: 'Kiss of Death'. It explores intimacy and harm using popular motifs like the 'peanut butter kiss' (121), where an intimate partner suffers anaphylactic shock due to a peanut allergy triggered by a kiss. She also mentions the herpes simplex virus and the very real danger it poses to newborn infants.

Kitta concludes the book with a discussion of disease as a punishment for transgression: observing that narratives are more than just stories (135) and that the perceptions of risk they explore are highly charged both morally and politically. She writes: 'By speaking out about, educating about, and researching legends that reinforce misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of shame associated with embodiment and sexuality, folklorists can demonstrate the power of narrative and how it shapes perceptions' (128). This just reinforces her

argument regarding the importance of studying folklore—an area of academic study that too often remains side-lined. To engage with these narratives, rather than dismiss or overlook them, is one method with which professionals (health care and other) can meaningfully engage with communities to address issues of inequality.

The way Kitta grounds her work is really excellent, allowing the reader to easily apply concepts to contemporary events and situations. She further provides a ‘reading guide’ as an appendix to the book itself, facilitating readers’ more critical engagement with her work. What *The Kiss of Death* successfully demonstrates is the applicability and relevance of folklore to our everyday lives. The book is also highly pertinent to contemporary events. Read it: this book is as enjoyable a read as it is insightful and thought-provoking. In addition, it makes a very valuable contribution to contemporary folklore studies and will no doubt become a staple text in contemporary legend scholarship.

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