

**[Review of] American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An Encyclopedia of American Folklore [edited by Christopher R. Fee and Jeffrey B. Webb (online version)]**

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**American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An Encyclopedia of American Folklore.**

Christopher R. Fee and Jeffrey B. Webb, editors. ABC-CLIO, 2016. eBook 9781610695688. 1272 pages, 3 volumes.

ABC-CLIO's *American Myths, Legends and Tall Tales* is described as a "comprehensive introduction to folklore in the United States [covering] not only Native American mythology and folklore, but also the many traditions that were carried to North America by immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania." "This three-volume encyclopedia," the Introduction continues, "is not meant to be the final word on its numerous topics, but rather to provide beginning and advanced students, as well as interested general readers, with the entry points and pathways they need to pursue further exploration and discovery." The editors define their topic broadly enough to include entries about "popular conspiracy theories, urban legends, and even superheroes."

The encyclopedia's three volumes include over 490 entries by 150 contributors, with over 90 "primary documents" consisting of extracts from original sources; e.g., an extract from Charles Hoy Fort's *New Lands* (1923) accompanies the entry of UFO abductions, and a section from an FBI report expands the entry on gang matriarch Ma Barker. Entries are signed and include bibliographies and "see also" references; some also include black and white illustrations. There are also numerous short boxouts, like the one for "Kiva" embedded in the "Kachinas" entry, written by co-editor Fee.

The Introduction defines the terms *myth*, *legend*, *folklore*, and *tall tale* as they are used to determine the scope of the work. The encyclopedia attempts "to balance the pressures of inclusion and diversity with those of tradition and the generalist needs of nonspecialist and student readers [...] erring on the side of sensitive inclusion rather than excluding materials that are important and substantial additions to the standard canon of American folklore." It appears to do an admirable job of meeting this goal. And it does not neglect the modern campfire around which so many stories are now told—the computer screen. The introduction also emphasizes the importance of context to American folklore, and describes the country as "an imaginative landscape flowing with milk and honey, the stuff of legend [and] an active motive narrative force on its own terms."

Other front matter includes a "Guide to Related Topics," which lists entries by ethnic origin (African, Asian, Native American), type (conspiracy theories, ghost stories, tall tales), and the meta-topic of the study of folklore and myth itself; and a "Chronology" of events relating to folklore in America from the 1531 manifestation of the Virgin of Guadalupe near Mexico City to the 2014 Slender Man murders. Back matter includes a short selected general bibliography

which supplements the individual article bibliographies; a list of contributors and their brief biographies; and an index.

The first entry, "Academe, Legends of," is a good representative of the sort of coverage provided in this work. For example, the persistent legend that you get all As for the semester if your roommate dies is explained, traced to its first appearances, and provided with references to movies and television shows that make use of this ploy. Myths about campus buildings are also considered, as well as tall tales about professors tricking students and vice versa. One specific example, the story of a haunted building at the campus of one of the primary editors of the collection, is highlighted in a boxout. Cross-references and a brief bibliography follow the name of the contributor.

Some entries, though, seem to lack any folkloric or mythical component; for example, while Clara Barton was a legendary historic figure in American medicine, the entry on her is purely factual (81-84), as is the entry on Sojourner Truth; entries on other outstanding American women, like Amelia Earhart or Harriet Tubman, do include legends connected to the facts of their lives and thus it makes more sense to include them.

I noticed in the "Beauty and the Beast Folklore" entry that the classic 1876 illustration by Walter Crane is not credited to the artist but instead is just described as a "late nineteenth-century wood-cut." This seems to be standard practice for out-of-copyright artwork in this encyclopedia; for example, the illustration accompanying the article on Huck Finn and its use of American folklore is not credited to Edward W. Kemble, nor is the painting of Captain Kidd credited to Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, while more recent illustrations do have artist credits. The "Beauty and the Beast Folklore" essay itself is a very competent comparison of the "beastly bridegroom" type of tale in the European and Native American traditions and the important differences between them, but it lacks discussion of American popular culture adaptations such as the Disney movie. Other articles were similarly good, though not exhaustive, as befits an encyclopedia. For example, the article on Roanoke, the lost North Carolina colony, is reasonably thorough, but does not list the long-running outdoor play among media retellings of the story (the Wikipedia entry does include it).

The encyclopedia is particularly strong on Science and Health-related Myths (as they are called in the Guide to Related Topics), such as folklore about weather prediction or the origin and spread of AIDS. "Nuclear Lore" is a good example: the entry covers, among other sub-topics, entities invented for physics thought experiments (Maxwell's Demon, Schrödinger's Cat), myths about nuclear power plants and bombs, stories told by or about Richard Feynman and his jokes and pranks at Los Alamos, and folklore and macabre memes about the Three Mile Island incident. The essay as a whole is a thoughtful analysis of the anxieties, uncertainties, and lack of trust in officials (political, business, or scientific) that give rise to folkloric responses like gallows humor, conspiracy theories, apocalyptic beliefs, etc. A "[t]heme of attempting to maintain psychological equilibrium and a modicum of hope" unites these various folk responses to nuclear power. I would have liked a reference to nuclear anxieties as expressed in

popular music or movies—like Tom Lehrer’s “We Will All Go Together When We Go” or the movie *Dr. Strangelove*—to go with the quotations from bumper stickers, but space is necessarily limited in a collection like this.

As far as the mechanics of this online version of the encyclopedia, the fact that this is simply a scan of the printed pages means it is not optimized for a digital environment. ABC-CLIO’s interface is hard to use on a laptop—the text window is too small and is arranged horizontally so the user can’t see a whole page at once, and there are no options to rearrange the components of the page to one’s needs. It would work far better on a desktop, but students working on their own devices will find it awkward. The table of contents links to separate articles, but there are no links within the text from “see also” lists, from the “Guides to Related Topics” to the individual articles listed, or from authors of individual articles to their biographies or lists of their other articles—simple cross-referencing I would expect of a decent online reference work. (The index does, at least, provide links back to page numbers.)

More alarmingly, the “Extract” function, which allows the reader to pull out a segment to quote, is not optimized to handle two columns of text—it reads straight across both columns—which will undoubtedly result in word salad in student papers, and worse, makes the product useless to students with print disabilities who need to use a text reader. This same problem manifests in search results, making it very difficult to determine if the results are actually relevant or not. It’s a shame to see a product from a major company like ABC-CLIO rendered so difficult to use, and to see basic accessibility issues not addressed, due to careless conversion of a print product to electronic.

*American Myths, Legends and Tall Tales* is a decent introductory guide to the wide variety of myths, legends, and folklore of the U.S., surveying the three main sources to be found in this country: Native American, immigrant cultures (both early and more recent), and uniquely American home-grown contributions. A perusal of the table of contents is a good way for the student to become familiar with the primary topics, tales, and tropes defining the field of American folklore studies. Some entries go beyond facts, providing useful or thought-provoking analysis as springboards for the researcher. But it is hard for an encyclopedia with this sort of short entry, designed primarily to provide a brief orientation to a subject, to compete with a Wikipedia entry and its list of references for the student investigating a particular topic in depth. A library with a need for a basic reference work on American folklore for high school or undergraduate students would find this suits it well, but at the risk of being called a Luddite, the many drawbacks of the electronic interface lead me to say I’d prefer to use the print version myself.