Review: Mythology for Storytellers: Themes and Tales from Around the World

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here by Michael C. Steinlauf, we hear about the entertainments of the poor in a Lithuanian town: the blind musicians and the “look-box” peddlers, whose pleasures sold for just a few kopeks each. The Polish-language writer Urke Nachalnik, translated here by Frank L. Vigoda, treats us to a highly personalized account of the Jewish underworld, replete with pulpy tropes of honor among thieves and young apprentices in crime. For scholars of popular culture, Nachalnik’s work has the added benefit of including many phrases from interwar Poland’s underworld slang, which give the excerpt the feel of a Polish Damon Runyon story.

Polin also includes reviews of recently published books on Polish Jewish culture, most prominently Gross’s aforementioned text, correspondences regarding earlier volumes in the series, and obituaries for the celebrated pianist Władisław Szpilman and the historian Stanislaus A. Blejwas.


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Mythology for Storytellers provides storytellers and other readers with a rich selection of myths from regions as diverse as Siberia and the Kalahari. As Sherman writes in her introduction, “The stories in this book are not restricted to any one region or any one era. How could they be? Mythology really does belong to everyone” (p. 16). She organizes the anthology thematically into myths of creation, death and rebirth, origins, gods, and heroes, thus enabling the storyteller to concentrate on a particular kind of story. Each section begins with a brief introduction to the category, which explains its subgenres. This method of compilation allows readers to compare similar myths across diverse cultures. For those wishing to see complete translations or more myths from a particular culture, Sherman includes a citation of her sources at the end of each selection.

The versions here are brief, each preceded by an introduction that identifies the main character as necessary. Before “Heiseb and Death” (pp. 94–5), for example, Sherman explains that Heiseb is a trickster figure in San mythology. Cultural keys are also identified. Sherman explains in this same introduction to the Heiseb myth that in the Kalahari region there are strict rules concerning food and its consumption, because of the scarcity of resources. The aim of these introductions and versions clearly is not to tell storytellers how to perform the stories, but rather to provide them with a more complete understanding of the tale that they will be performing. Additional apparatuses provide further information on the cultural contexts of these myths, including a bibliography, character name index, and culture index.

Each of the thematic sections includes myths from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Along with more commonly known stories such as the Norse Ymir creation myth, Sherman includes “Something from Nothing” from Melanesia and the Amana creation myth of the Calina people of South America. Mythology for Storytellers is truly an international anthology, providing storytellers with a culturally and ethnically diverse selection of myths, translated into English and edited down to facilitate storytelling without sacrificing the important contextual keys that a native audience would recognize.

The most important asset in this volume, aside from the selection of myths, is Sherman’s introduction, which tackles the thorny question of the ethics of performing a myth from outside one’s own culture. Because the stuff of myth is rooted in belief and religion as well as fantasy, storytellers who perform mythic texts must demonstrate an even greater degree of cultural sensitivity than that required of other tellers. For this reason, Sherman is adamant that “a retelling should stay true to the original and not be deliberately and radically altered to make it into a ‘better’ story” (p. 5). One might argue that no myth should be told outside its context, particularly those from belief systems to which many still adhere. Knowing that these fascinating stories will be told out of context by someone at sometime, however, Sherman empha-
sizes that the responsible storyteller will be both educated and sensitive to the origins of each myth.

The introduction also includes highlights of myth studies from Plato to Campbell, while much of the second half of the book is devoted to modern American myths, including those born out of popular culture, and draws parallels between the hero archetype and James T. Kirk, ritual Navajo sand paintings and the art of Salvador Dalí, and pagan Russian spring rituals and the operas of Rimsky-Korsakov. Bringing the readers’ own secular and sacred myths to their attention, Sherman both highlights the relevance of mythic texts and heightens readers’ sensitivity to the delicate intersection of belief and myth.

The secular performance of myth outside its ritual contexts will continue to invite reproach from postcolonial critics. Advocates of diversity and multiculturalism will continue to argue for the value of learning such stories as a means to cross-cultural understanding. Sherman attempts here to educate the latter so as not to offend the former. If storytellers heed her advice and seek a deep understanding of what they perform, we as a society may move closer to this highly desirable middle ground.


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A number of folklorists are making valuable contributions at the cutting edge of global debates about heritage policy and the relevance of intellectual property law to the survival of local cultures. Yet I suspect that, for many of us, the current moment is one in which we are often made to pause in the pursuit of everyday professional duties, look up with surprise, and discover that the intellectual landscape has shifted around us in complex ways. One day, we open the pages of our flagship journal and there, amid the thoughtful considerations of expressive culture, are equally nuanced essays reflecting on policies being debated by international bureaucracies in Geneva and other cosmopolitan locales. Such work conjures up images of distant conference halls filled with lawyers and politicians debating the nature and relevance of folklore. Welcome to the strange and contentious new world evoked by unfamiliar, ominous acronyms: WIPO, ICG-GRTKF, IP, TEK, GATT, EoF (“expressions of folklore”, of course), CPR, ICH, USPTO, WPPT, WTO, and RAFI. Behind the capital letters and the structures of power and the expert knowledge that they encode are issues, sometimes life and death ones, that matter tremendously to the global communities in which we live and work. Those of us not yet in the vanguard nonetheless have contributions to make to these debates. But where do we begin?

For the uninitiated, Michael Brown’s thoughtful book, Who Owns Native Culture?, can serve as a welcome point of entry into current debates on cultural property. Written for a general audience in an engaging style, the book offers a virtual fieldtrip in which readers are introduced to the issues through consideration of recent court cases, public debates, and policy developments. Although global in scope, the book’s core examples are drawn from the Americas and Australia, where indigenous communities continue to renegotiate their statuses and rights within the nations that encompass them. Despite Brown’s use of indigenous examples, the book’s relevance is general. Around the globe, cultural forms, practices, knowledge, and even identities are being recast as forms of property and subjected to regimes of legal control in a market context. The struggles of indigenous peoples represent a rich sector within which to consider this process, but such shifts are unfolding everywhere. They bind everyone—from Amazonian healers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and French farmers to corporate lawyers and hip-hop musicians—together in a new and often paradoxical web of interrelationship. Globalization, new biotechnologies, indigenous rights movements, and the corporate enclosure of the public domain are among the factors at play in such transformations.

In considering how and why cultural expressions are being transformed into commodities,