

Anne Renaud. *The Extraordinary Life of Anna Swan*. (Sydney, NS: 2013, Cape Breton University Press. Pp.51. ISBN: 1-897009-99-2)

Emily Urquhart

Volume 35, numéro 2, 2013

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1026555ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026555ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Urquhart, E. (2013). Compte rendu de [Anne Renaud. *The Extraordinary Life of Anna Swan*. (Sydney, NS: 2013, Cape Breton University Press. Pp.51. ISBN: 1-897009-99-2)]. *Ethnologies*, 35(2), 203–205. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026555ar>

COMPTES-RENDUS / REVIEWS

Anne Renaud. *The Extraordinary Life of Anna Swan*. (Sydney, NS: 2013, Cape Breton University Press. Pp.51. ISBN: 1-897009-99-2)

This slim, well-illustrated text, details the life of Anna Swan, a Nova Scotia woman who lived in the mid-to-late-eighteen hundreds, and most likely suffered from gigantism. It is a straight-forward biography of Swan's life, geared towards young readers. While Renaud occasionally glosses over the grittier issues of living with a disability, she incorporates beautiful, telling details that nicely illustrate how Swan navigated her world.

Anna Swan was born in 1846 in Millbrook, Nova Scotia to two parents of regular height. At birth she weighed thirteen pounds. By the age four she was nearly five feet tall and would grow to be just under eight feet in adulthood. It wasn't medically diagnosed, but Anna probably had gigantism, which occurs when a tumour in the pituitary gland causes the release of excessive growth hormones. People with this disorder grow faster and larger than their peers in childhood, and have a shortened lifespan. Renaud includes a straight-forward definition of gigantism on page 14, although it might have been better positioned earlier in the text.

When Anna was four her parents travelled to Halifax where they exhibited their daughter to curious onlookers. This generated interest and revenue, and following her stint in the capital city, Anna appeared at country fairs throughout the province. Renaud writes that the child's parents, "welcomed the extra money that these appearances generated, as it supplemented their meagre income as farmers. However, they always made sure Anna was well cared for and the touring not too tiring for her" (6).

This might be a case of revisionist history. In her research for this work, Renaud interviewed several Swan family descendants and I can't help but wonder if that's their version of Anna's story, a tale softened by time. It wasn't unusual for people with genetic conditions to exhibit themselves during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they often gave lectures on their medical issues, educating the audience on the medical

facts behind their unusual appearances. It is unlikely that a child of four would find the same kind of self-affirmation when displayed as a human curiosity. Issues like these aren't explored in Renaud's work and I feel there is a missed opportunity here to encourage critical thinking on issues of difference and diversity amongst younger readers. That said, some of the details that Renaud lists indicate that Anna's parents were sympathetic to her challenges, in particular the modifications her father employs to make his daughter comfortable: when she outgrew her elementary school desk he constructed a larger version and at home he built her an extra-large bed to sleep in.

As an adult, Anna comes across as adept, intelligent, and a shrewd businessperson. She sees opportunity where others might see exploitation. It seems as if Anna accepted her difference and discovered how to use it to her advantage through her work in show business. In some of the most poignant details of the book, Renaud describes Anna's relationship with her fellow performers, how they formed a kind of cohesive family unit and crafted some normality while under the glare of the spotlight: "Owing to their unusual physical attributes – which mean they were sometimes mocked or verbally abused by the general public – Anna and her museum friends formed a close-knit community where mutual respect and loyalty prevailed and no one was ever teased or ridiculed" (16). This helps to illustrate the appeal of circus life for Anna and her contemporaries and, later in the narrative, Renaud writes that Anna's touring friends were frequent guests at her home in Seville, Ohio, where she settled with her husband Martin Van Buren Bates (who'd also toured as a giant).

The couple had two babies together, but neither infant lived. The first baby died at birth and the second lived only eleven hours. Both newborns were extraordinarily large, although whether this contributed to their deaths isn't understood, or at least it isn't explained in this biography. Anna suffered from depression, which Renaud suggests was spurred on by the loss of her two children. Her health also deteriorated and she died of a heart attack in her mid-forties. It's a sad ending, but Anna's tale, at least in this telling, isn't a tragedy. She mingled with royalty – her wedding gown was a gift from Queen Victoria – and she found love and friendship, and enjoyed a certain level of celebrity.

It is difficult to discern whether this book works to further segregate Anna from the masses or to normalize and humanize her. I'm inclined, with a pinch of naivety and optimism, to believe the latter. Renaud mostly achieves this, and she is generous in her descriptions of people living with

human differences; however, silly size-related puns and referring to Anna as “the giant” or to Anna and Martin collectively as “the giants” occasionally undermines her efforts. Giants are the fictional protagonists of legends and myths. Anna Swan was a human being suffering from a medical condition. Her story took place in the mid-nineteenth century, but we live in modern times and people-first language – putting the person before the disability – is common practice today.

Emily Urquhart

Sibelan Forrester, Helena Goscilo and Martin Skoro. *Baba Yaga. The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*. (Jackson: 2013, University of Mississippi Press. Pp. 256. ISBN: 978-1-617035-96-8)

With more than fifty pages of introductory material, this book seeks to acquaint the reader with some context for the Baba Yaga tales before providing twenty-nine of them. Jack Zipes has written the foreword, which situates Baba Yaga tales among their international neighbours. Zipes stresses Baba Yaga’s pre-Christian character, pointing out that even when other monotheistic religions, such as Islam and Judaism are included in her tales, Baba Yaga opposes them all. One of Zipes’s most interesting connections is with a Sicilian character who, like Baba Yaga, is likely connected to an early pagan goddess.

The rest of the book is predominantly authored by Sibelan Forrester, though Helena Goscilo and Martin Skoro are responsible for the images in the book and their explanations. In the introduction, much of Forrester’s background information is linguistic, delving into how Baba Yaga might have been named, for example. He connects information about the uses of words over time with multiple uses of words in the present to suggest multi-valent readings of Baba Yaga and other characters who show up in her tales. He also notes that, since Baba Yaga is rarely capitalized in Russian, and her manifestations can be so varied, she is probably not meant to be a single person. A Baba Yaga is more likely a type of character.