

**Paul SMITH (ed.), guest editors Tom GREEN and Sylvia GRIDER,  
*Contemporary Legend: The Journal of the International  
Society for Contemporary Legend Research*, volume I (Enfield  
Lock, Ifissarlik Publishers)**

**Anna Guigne**

Volume 15, Number 1, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082549ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082549ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

**ISSN**

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Guigne, A. (1993). Review of [Paul SMITH (ed.), guest editors Tom GREEN and Sylvia GRIDER, *Contemporary Legend: The Journal of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research*, volume I (Enfield Lock, Ifissarlik Publishers)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(1), 148–152. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082549ar>

Finally, I wished that there had been essays in the volume dealing with the commensal rituals of people of color in the United States. While the essays cover ethnic diversity among white Americans quite broadly, there is no mention of African-Americans at all, and Native Americans and Hispanics have just a brief mention in Griffith's article on the Tucson festival. Descriptions of the food festivals of people of color would greatly enrich the volume and our understanding of the wonderful ways in which food recreates community.

Carole COUNIHAN  
Millersville University  
Millersville, Pennsylvania

---

Paul SMITH (ed.), guest editors Tom GREEN and Sylvia GRIDER,  
*Contemporary Legend: The Journal of the International  
Society for Contemporary Legend Research*, volume I (En-  
field Lock, Ifissarlik Publishers).

Since the 1960s and particularly following the first American symposium on legend held in 1969, there has been increased discussion regarding the specific structure, form, content, function, theoretical and methodological approaches to legend studies. Many of these debates were brought to the forefront in the 1980s with the institution of the "Perspectives on Contemporary Legend" seminars at Sheffield, England under the direction of Paul Smith. The birth of the International Society For Contemporary Legend Research in 1988 and the recent launching of its journal, *Contemporary Legend*, are the direct result of the Sheffield seminars held annually since 1982. This first volume compiled by guest editors Tom Green and Sylvia Grider, is primarily a selection of papers from the seventh annual "Perspectives On Contemporary Legend International Seminar" held for the first time at Texas A & M University in 1989. More importantly, it also symbolises the new trends and directions manifest within the present legend scholarship.

The title *Contemporary Legend* represents a distinct departure from the more traditional approaches to the genre. As described on the inside cover, the aim of the publication is to:

promote and encourage research, and to provide a forum for those working in this vibrant area of traditional narrative scholarship. Within this context the term 'legend' is inter-

preted in its broadest sense as including Sagen, dites, popular rumours, sayings and beliefs as well as narrative. Similarly, 'contemporary' refers not only to so-called 'modern urban legends' but also to legends in active circulation in a given community.

In adopting a broad-minded working definition of what constitutes possible explorations into present-day legend studies, the editorial board proposes that there can be many ways of exploring contemporary legends. But it is obvious even in this first volume that many of the debates among scholars pertaining to this traditional narrative are not easily reconciled. As Green and Grider note:

legend scholars continue to grapple with the issues of definition, function, structure, meaning, collection and transcription, to name a few. None of these issues is new in legend analysis in particular or folklore scholarship in general. What is new is the intensification of the dialogue and dissent surrounding these issues. Like the legend genre itself, the scholarship generates a dialectic of disagreement (p. 8).

One of the most current disagreements in fact centres on whether "modern" or "urban" legends represent a genre distinct from more traditional legends. It is therefore fitting that this new journal begins with Linda Dégh's challenging and provocative article "What is the legend after all" (p. 11-38).

In this work, Dégh confirms her position on several issues by asking why scholars should use the term "contemporary" to define legend, when "contemporaneity is a sine-qua-non of a legend" (p. 18). Her article also reveals much about the ongoing divergence of opinion in the scholarship about such problematical issues as form and structure.

For example, Dégh disagrees with such scholars as Nicolaisen who suggest that the legend in fact has a distinguishable structure. She stresses that it is primarily "the core idea of the story" (p. 19), the content and the belief which give life to the legend. Moreover, "belief is *the* cornerstone of the legend genre" (p. 24) and disputability its *raison d'être* (p. 32).

Dégh agrees that one of the features which distinguishes present-day legends most often is their dissemination in modern media. However, she suggests, folklorists have all too often tended to base their assumptions on the nature of more contemporary legends primarily drawing on media examples to the exclusion of oral sources. As a result, Dégh asks, how do scholars differentiate between legend material gathered from the media, and that gathered from oral circulation? This inaugural article is particularly engaging for its delineation of many of the long-standing philosophical and intellectual differences amongst specific scholars regarding approaches to definition, analysis, and methodology.

But issues of definition and approach are also addressed elsewhere in this volume. For example, in "A behaviour analysis model of contemporary legend" (p. 93-106), Sandy Hobbs and David Cornwall caution that academic bias and beliefs frequently influence the interpretation of contemporary legends, particu-

larly in reference to "issues related to identification, classification and interpretation of contemporary legend data" (p. 98). Legends, after all, are basically the products of people and there may be many ways of looking at them.

The additional contributions in this volume represent just a sampling of the diverse interests currently generated by the discipline. They include both general explorations and specific case studies. Collectively the articles typify the diversity of approaches being utilised to explore legends in circulation today. A central theme linking all these works is that they embody new efforts to explore the grey zone between folk tradition and current culture.

For example, in "Cattle mutilation: contemporary legends and contemporary mythologies" (p. 39-80), Bill Ellis explores the existence of three popular "mythological" theories pertaining to cattle mutilations which took place between 1972 and 1980 in the American Great Plains. Many of the stories, rumours, and reports circulating related the phenomena to either satanic cults, government experimenting or the supernatural. Ellis explores the role of subcultures in creating and perpetuating and enhancing these belief systems and argues that the existence of these stories is part of much larger "global structures" or "contemporary mythologies" (p. 40). Although stories which explain the phenomena of cattle mutilations may not be legendry in themselves, they have evolved from old legends and give motivation for new ones. It is this mythology which in turn allows for a social construction of reality. Based on his findings, Ellis suggests that previous distinctions between that which is "legendry" and "mythological" may not be so separate (p. 44).

William M. Clements' "Interstitiality in contemporary legend" (p. 81-91), similarly explores the role of legend in challenging the order of culture itself. Through legends, we are able to realise and confront our greatest fears, and to deal with aspects of our cultural order that are not so visible or socially approved. In so doing, we are able to deal with these threats.

Joel Best's work "Bad guys and random violence: folklore and media constructions of contemporary deviance" (p. 107-122) is an interesting study of the influence and interplay of the media, folklore, and popular culture in enhancing the spreading of new bogeyman images. Best illustrates how knowledge derived from such sources as folklore, media, and popular culture merge to create current concepts of menacing figures. For example, the existence of certain contemporary legends which "describe specific instances of villainy by kidnapers or Satanists" (p. 114) enable us to generalise to much larger concerns. Best suggests that our notions of the existence of these figures, which lead to the construction of a social reality about deviants, is more a product of the times than of reality.

*Contemporary Legend* also promises to provide an opportunity for the much-needed publication of case studies of legendary material in current circulation. The articles by Paul Smith and Janet Langlois are two excellent examples. In "Contemporary Legend and Popular Culture: 'it's the real thing'" (p. 123-152), Paul Smith explores one method for unlocking the interactions, transformations, exchanges, and simulations which take place between folklore and popular culture. Smith suggests that contemporary legends need to be explored as "parts of a cultural complex which includes both synchronic and diachronic perspective" (p. 126) and that many existing individual beliefs are in fact "mini-encapsulations" or "digests" of potential narratives, and part of a much larger complex of beliefs (p. 126). As a way of unravelling the cokelore complex of folklore and popular culture, Smith examines the specific uses of a vast body of traditional, popular, and elite material to illustrate some of the multiple possibilities. As the outcome Smith identifies some 27 examples of exchanges and transformations with a summary of the cultural destinations of these exchanges.

Similarly, Janet Langlois' article "'Hold the Mayo': purity and danger in an AIDS legend" (p. 153-172) demonstrates how a locally based rumour about AIDS has in fact much broader international connections and implications. Langlois does this by examining the transmission of this legend and the cultural motivations. In the process, she illustrates how two legend cycles, one about AIDS and the other about contaminants, merge into one.

The final entry in this journal is a research note by Daniel Barnes, "The contemporary legend in literature: towards an annotated checklist" (p. 173-183). Drawing mainly from his own files, Barnes presents a series of annotated entries of recognisable contemporary legends in literary works, with the intention of creating a checklist.

Barnes notes that entries are according to established titles and/or titles from Brunvand's "A Type Index of Urban Legends" (typescript 1991). While such works are much needed, many potential contributors and readers may not be aware of this specific classification project. To do justice to Barnes' efforts and to Brunvand's Type Index, if a mandate of the society's journal will be to develop working checklists or annotated bibliographies, it might be an excellent opportunity for the next issue of *Contemporary Legend* to provide additional background information and some context for such undertakings.

The actual institution of this journal speaks well for the considerable growth and development in legend scholarship which has taken place since 1982. Undoubtedly its existence will have a considerable impact on the direction of future legend studies. While many of the rudimentary arguments regarding the very nature of legends will persist for some time to come, at least the existence

of this journal will go a long way towards providing a more open forum for these discussions. More importantly, its existence will undoubtedly facilitate the growth of the discipline by allowing scholars and students a means by which to share, debate, and discuss their perspectives on the genre. As a vehicle of expression for those involved in the scholarly pursuit of this sometimes elusive genre, its arrival is undoubtedly well timed!

Anna GUIGNE  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Newfoundland

---

Don HANDELMAN, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 330 p., ISBN 0-521-35069-7).

This is a collection of Handelman's own essays from the past twenty or so years. It is woven together with new material to make a loosely knit, relatively coherent treatment of public events, a category broader than, but inclusive of, what others have called ritual, cultural performance, symbolic interaction, or ceremony. Among the major events considered are the Palio of Siena, Italy; Christmas mumming in Newfoundland, Canada; holiday celebrations in Israeli kindergartens; state ceremonies in Israel; and clowning among Pueblos and Hopis, as well as Pakistani weddings. He also includes two chapters on what Erving Goffman would have called "interaction rituals" in the workplace; Handelman calls them "proto-events". His aim is to understand the logic of design or composition implicit in public events. Thus, he hopes to grant to such events an epistemological primacy that refuses the easy reductionisms of functionalist alternatives. Public events, he implies, are worth thinking about, perhaps even worth thinking *with*.

Three of the chapters are based on his own fieldwork; four are reanalyses of ethnographies by others. Most of the chapters attempt to balance ethnographic account with theoretical reflection. In a three-chapter, theoretical introduction Handelman formulates a threefold typology: (1) events that model the lived-in world; (2) events that present the lived-in world; (3) events that re-present the lived-in world. With the exception of the chapter on state ceremonies in Israel, however, most of the chapters are not substantial elaborations on the typology, though they sometimes allude to it.