

Barbara RIETI, *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland* (St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1992, xvi+273 p., note, preface, photographs, notes, bibliography, informant index)

Rochelle H. Saltzman

Volume 15, Number 1, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082554ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082554ar>

[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

Saltzman, R. H. (1993). Review of [Barbara RIETI, *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland* (St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1992, xvi+273 p., note, preface, photographs, notes, bibliography, informant index)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(1), 159–162. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082554ar>

such as “bizarre”, “overly dramatic” and “primitive ideas” indicate that an underlying ethnocentricity pervades the text. This, of course, is a pitfall (increasingly articulated within anthropology) of “studying down”: the adherents of these folk medical systems are members of a particularly impoverished population, as Baldwin points out in the Preface, and a subtle attitude of disparagement can be detected. Here, the demographics are skewed toward the old, the poor and the disabled; however, McGuire (1988) recently demonstrated that very variable groups within the United States exploit diverse therapeutic modalities. This bias is unfortunate and damages the usefulness of this collection of essays which would be suitable otherwise for an undergraduate course in medical anthropology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

OWEN JONES, Michael, “Doing What, with Which, and to Whom? The Relationship of Case History Accounts to Curing”, Wayland D. Hand (ed.), *American Folk Medicine*, University of California Press, 1980, p. 301-314.

MCGUIRE, Meredith B., *Ritual Healing in Suburban America*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1988.

Gail Paton GRANT
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario

Barbara RIETI, *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland* (St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1992, xvi+273 p., note, preface, photographs, notes, bibliography, informant index).

Ever since its settlement, Newfoundland has been home to fairies and their lore. Immigrants primarily from England and Ireland found that the wooded islands off the coast of mainland Canada were populated by fairies, “good people”, pixies, etc. According to Barbara Rieti, fairies were likely to be encountered in the areas “betwixt and between” nature and culture — in gardens, along well-trodden pathways, and in barns. One could be “fairy-led” while out

berry picking and end up miles from home or wandering dazed amongst woods and streams that did not exist normally. Children, especially babies, left alone without the protective talismans of bread, salt, and other charms, could be easily switched with fairies; changelings with wizened faces and afflicted minds were left in their place. Such changelings could be made to leave only by threatening them with red-hot shovels or drowning. Even should the original child return, however, he or she was often left “not right” mentally or with crippled limbs.

Rieti presents the results of extensive research culled from the Folklore Archives at Memorial University as well as her own fieldwork with Newfoundland natives. Her goals were to discover whether or not fairy stories were still being told in Newfoundland and if there had been a complete break between a worldview that encompassed a belief in fairies and that of contemporary culture, which dismissed them out of hand. Rieti also set out to collate the MUNFLA material and to offer the first formal presentation of the province’s fairy lore.

Unfortunately, the depth and breadth of her research is not matched by either analysis or organization. Rieti states in her introductory chapter, “I would like the material to unfold, as it did for me... By the seventh chapter — if not much sooner — the reader will probably chafe at the ‘tedious consistency’ that Barbara Allen Woods points out allows the folklorist to distinguish genuine from dubious sources” (p. 5). It is not so much the tedious consistency that afflicts this work. Rather, it is (again to use Rieti’s own words) “an unavoidable labyrinthine quality in much of the discussion; scanning an early draft of one chapter, a bewildered reader remarked that it was like being fairy-led — you never knew quite where you were going or why” (p. 4). The final draft has much the same problem.

Despite these serious drawbacks, *Strange Terrain* does present an interesting survey of the continued use of fairy lore in Newfoundland. In her first chapter, Rieti poses two questions: Why are accounts about fairies so uniform in content and structure? What need do they fulfill? The author theorizes that two implicit themes found in fairy traditions answer those questions. Fairy lore mediates the nature/culture dichotomy for modern Newfoundlanders as well as for those with a more traditional worldview. Such lore “revolves around interpersonal relationships, specifically around knowing, not knowing, and being known. The fairies are the ultimate strangers, and serve as metaphor for all that is strange not only in nature but in other people” (p. 4).

As she freely admits, the nature/culture mediation notion is nothing new, but the relationship of fairies to strangers and the strange deserves far more explicit analysis than it gets in this book. Although Rieti cites Herbert Halpert, G. M. Story, *et al.* (*Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*, 1969) in noting similarities between the relationship of mummers and strangers to that of fairies and strangers, she does not tarry long on that fascinating analytical path. Neither does she query her informants about possible connections; instead, she merely states the similarity of function of mummers and fairies. Although Rieti does allude to

an early twentieth-century theory that fairy lore derives from the behavior of aboriginal peoples, both in the British Isles and in North America, she does not delve further into the contextual or historical meaning of “the stranger” for Newfoundlanders.

The book amply demonstrates the multitude of ways in which fairy lore is used to explain “the strange”, however. For instance, the author presents a great many tales (quoted in full, often running two or more pages in length) concerning the physical and mental handicaps resulting from capture by or contact with fairies. Unfortunately, Rieti does not specifically ask her informants about their beliefs concerning the relationship of disabilities and fairies. Although she observes that such narratives undoubtedly have their basis in pathology, Rieti also claims that there has been little symbolic analysis regarding those and other fairy traditions. Curiously, she doesn’t offer any herself, except to note the motif of inversion (the exchange of young for old or healthy for disabled) that permeates such beliefs, as well as their use to discuss the (often negative) changes brought on by modern life.

Of course, there is, as the author rightly and frequently points out, a very real problem with an outsider’s asking informants about their beliefs in what those informants know outsiders consider to be superstitions. Fairy lore turns up in the course of conversations about other matters and is rarely elicited directly, and certainly not by strangers. As Rieti stresses, such fieldwork has to be done with informants with whom the folklorist has an ongoing relationship, or with others to whom the researcher is introduced by the primary informants. Language and accent differences also interfere with communication between folklorist and tradition bearer, and the author is quite refreshingly honest about the difficulties encountered with such fieldwork.

As with most performance traditions, the telling of fairy narratives is regarded as a male-dominated arena. Rieti recognizes this and the fact that depictions of fairies emphasize their feminine characteristics, yet does not raise the question of misogyny — or, conversely, of fears about female power. And although she points out the familiar problem of finding more female performance-oriented informants, she apparently does not ask those women she does interview about other women — or about the apparent dearth of women tale tellers.

The topic of fairy lore and its function today is fascinating, and this work demonstrates its continued existence and function in providing explanations for unusual events and an outlet for creative individual narrators in traditional communities. Rieti does indeed find that current accounts about fairies provide a way for young and old to talk about change and modern life. Anyone interested in fairy lore and its social functions should read this book, but with some caveats.

As the author herself observes, her work proceeds as if fairy-led. The narrative leaps from topic to topic without transitions; nor does it tend to follow

up on interesting and valid points introduced at the start of each chapter, e.g. the relationship between fairy lore and tales of extraterrestrial encounters. More problematic, however, is the apparent ignorance Rieti betrays about certain folklore scholarship. For example, she claims that there has been relatively little work done concerning relationships among narrative performance, audience influence, and context; hence she does not cite or even seem aware of the publications on precisely that topic by Dell Hymes, Richard Bauman, or even by Gillian Bennett, whose book is cited in the bibliography.

In sum, I found myself increasingly frustrated by the failure of Rieti to present an even and coherent narrative or analysis. Although excerpts of this publication could be well-employed for classroom discussion of narrative style, I do not recommend the book as a whole for undergraduate or graduate courses. Barbara Rieti is undeniably responsible for her own work, but the editors of this volume did her and the discipline a disservice by not demanding that she present her valuable research in a more usable form. As it stands, this material would have been better issued as an annotated collection of fairy lore narratives with an introductory chapter on the fieldwork and a concluding chapter on the possible contextual meanings of the beliefs and narratives to those who espouse them.

Rachelle H. SALTZMAN
Delaware County Historical Association
Delhi, NY

Diane RAYMOND (ed.), *Sexual Politics and Popular Culture* (Ohio, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990, 249 p., ISBN: 0-87972-502-8).

This is a collection of nineteen articles on popular culture by authors concerned with uncovering/dis-covering power and sexual politics in the United States. All but one are original to this collection. Advertising, popular music, stand-up comedy, literature, film, soap opera, situation comedy and music videos are the forms of popular culture used to address sexual politics.

The essays are organised along five "themes" rather than according to their specific "medium". The editor, Diane Raymond, admits there is no distinctive methodological perspective uniting the essays. In fact, "the volume's organisational framework is, to some extent arbitrary" (p. ii).

Section one, Theoretical Perspectives, contains four essays. "The Politics of 'Meaning-Making': Feminist Hermeneutics, Language, and Culture" by