

Peter NARVAEZ (ed.), *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York & London, Garland Publishing Inc., 1991, xiv+519 p., ISBN 0-8240-7100-X)

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Volume 15, Number 1, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082544ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082544ar>

[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

Taft, M. (1993). Review of [Peter NARVAEZ (ed.), *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York & London, Garland Publishing Inc., 1991, xiv+519 p., ISBN 0-8240-7100-X)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(1), 131–134.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1082544ar>

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTEs RENDUS

Peter NARVAEZ (ed.), *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York & London, Garland Publishing Inc., 1991, xiv+519 p., ISBN 0-8240-7100-X).

If the fairy horde seems to be fast disappearing from the modern world — or at least has increasingly retreated into the planet's few remaining fens — scholarship on the subject of “the good people” has come out of hiding and into open view with the publication of this collection of studies. Narváez has compiled sixteen new and original essays on fairylore and has reprinted revised versions of three further articles on the subject. Taken together, these studies acquaint the reader with a large storehouse of information on the Anglo-Celtic fairylore of Ireland, Great Britain and Newfoundland; several authors touch upon similar traditions in Scandinavia (including one article by Skjelbred devoted to the subject); while only Rojcewicz carries the discussion to fairy traditions from other parts of the world.

The editor has divided these studies into six sections: regional fairylore, fairy belief and religion, physical disorders related to fairylore, the social functions of fairylore, fairylore and popular culture, and the semantics and epistemology of fairylore. The approaches which the authors take, however, might well form an entirely different set of divisions: collectanea, social-historical treatments, structural-functional approaches, comparative studies, and ethnographic analyses.

I was least enchanted by the collectanea articles. Linda-May Ballard reports on the supernatural legends of Rathlin Island (off the northeast coast of Northern Ireland) and concerns herself only partly with fairy narratives; she is not analytical in her treatment of this island's legend repertoire, and thus presents the reader with little more than a survey. Similarly, Robin Gwyndaf's long article on fairylore in Wales is essentially a collection of field-recorded narratives with an accompanying description of the salient features of Welsh *Tylwyth Teq*. Bradford's study of the Shetland and Orkney traditions is, perhaps, a more cohesive and descriptive survey, but also suffers from the lack of a strong analytical base.

The social-historical studies make an interesting triumvirate. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin offers a good explanation of the conflicts between fairy belief and orthodox Christianity in Ireland, showing how the hegemony of middle-class Christian belief eventually led to the demise of pre-Christian, peasant beliefs. Richard P. Jenkin's study of the same culture is a fine catalogue and structural

classification of witchcraft practices and fairylore (especially changeling and elf-shot beliefs) with a view towards explaining their role in aggressive social behaviour, scapegoating, and the ambiguous position of women in Irish society; he is less convincing, however, on beliefs in infant changelings as a social commentary on anxiety. Paul Smith recounts the twists and turns of the Cottingly Fairies hoax, and in the process explains how belief drives observation, how the same technical and physical evidence can be used with benefit by all sides in a controversy, and how the mass media plays a role in the way people hold to certain beliefs and whether they express or suppress their beliefs; in a classic example of a practical joke which backfired in several directions (to borrow an image from Roger Welsch), Smith describes a case not dissimilar to the Piltown Man fiasco.

The authors who take a structural-functional approach nevertheless represent several different ways of looking at fairylore. David Buchan analyses those Child ballads which address the theme of fairies in order to discover something of the cultural knowledge of the society these ballads reflect, but I found his structuralist approach less than convincing, partly because of the limitations of his material: to what extent do these handful of ballads — greatly removed in context from their original performers and performances — represent a suitable corpus for the kind of analysis which Buchan has undertaken? Barbara Rieti's analysis of the fairy "blast" tradition in Newfoundland springs from a larger (and better) corpus, but her Freudian analysis of the material is weak (as I think she admits) and her functionalism needs further development; the strength of her article lies in the way she counters a simplistic folk medical explanation of the blast.

Peter Narváez also treats Newfoundland fairy traditions, especially the beliefs about berrypickers being led astray by the fairies. His discussion of the way fairy beliefs relate to conceptions of time, space, morality and technology in traditional Newfoundland society is enlightening, but like some berrypickers, Narváez attempts to cover too much ground too quickly — the questions he raises need more detailed examination. Tad Tuleja gives a good survey of tooth fairy origins and lore, and is especially good at relating the tooth fairy tradition to the socialization of children into a capitalist economy; his point is that the tooth fairy ritual is a rite of passage into the world of monetary exchange, value of production and trade. Noel Williams explores the word *fairy* itself as a way of demonstrating the limits of etymology; he shows the underlying problem of trying to analyze a word which refers to such a disunified and ephemeral image as a fairy — a word which has been used quite variously in different contexts and by different writers.

The "comparative school" of fairy scholars includes Ann Skjelbred whose examination of the Scandinavian tradition reveals the relationship between fairylore and Christian rites of passage; her conclusion that these two parallel belief systems are characterized by human/non-human and Christian/pagan binary oppositions is well-argued. Susan Eberly compares the physical attributes and behaviours of fairies with the symptoms of various diseases and congenital

syndromes in an effort to rationalize the belief in fairies, but the selectivity of her comparisons (wherein she concentrates only on similarities between the two traditions at the expense of differences) damages her thesis. In a similar study, Joyce Munro makes a comparison between changelings and “failure to thrive” infants, and although her study is repetitive, her cautious approach makes a better case for a medical comparison than does Eberly’s; her use of Foucault’s concept of “gaze” works well in explaining why scientists were slow to understand infant deprivation syndromes.

Rosemary Well’s study of the tooth fairy leans too much towards Frazerian survivalism for my taste, but it is a good survey of tooth fairy lore, and the comparisons which she makes with childhood rites of passage stand up well; her survey of the use of tooth fairy imagery in modern children’s literature is the best part of her study. From the point of view of approach, Peter Rojcewicz’s comparative analysis of fairylore and UFOlore is the most controversial, but perhaps the most intriguing study in the book. His comparisons are as selective (and as shakey) as Eberly’s, and he makes some horrendous generalizations about what people believe regarding these two phenomena, but all to a good cause. His application of Jungian theory and the more general unified theory of matter and imagination represents a way of looking at all of folklore which reminds me, on the one hand, of the theories of theosophy which Paul Smith described, but on the other hand, of the great paradigmatic shifts which have shaped modern physics; in other words, Rojcewicz forces us to re-examine our own belief systems before examining the world views of others.

There are only three studies in this book which are ethnographic in the fullest sense of the word. While several of the already-mentioned articles use field-recorded texts for their analyses, only three studies observe these texts in their modern performance contexts. Gary Butler’s insightful study of the use of fairy legends by French Newfoundlanders alerts the reader to some of the discourse strategies which performers use in talking about fairies; Butler reminds us that non-belief functions as strongly in narrative performance as does belief, although I wish he had discussed more fully the ludic element in narrative, especially narrative as verbal practical joke. Patricia Lysaght is alone in this volume in her analysis of the repertoire of a single performer — a woman from a small town in Ireland. Similar to Butler’s study, Lysaght explores this woman’s motivations for telling stories of non-belief and, in the process, reveals the teller’s self-examination of her world view. As a study in the performance contexts of fairy legends, Lysaght’s article is the best in the book.

But the most delightful article in the book belongs to Margaret Bennett: her study of the use of fairylore in a town in Scotland shows the kind of breadth and depth which characterizes good ethnography. Balquhider was the home of Robert Kirk, the seventeenth century author of *The Secret Common-Wealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies*, and Bennett explores his legacy, which manifests itself

in unexpected ways in the town. But Bennett goes further by interviewing elderly residents of the town to gauge their belief in fairies, and then interviewing schoolchildren, who show a surprising knowledge and sophistication when it comes to the world of fairies. Bennett exposes the different levels of belief and knowledge present in the community in a way which should make us all re-evaluate the viability of fairylore in the late twentieth century.

As I have outlined above, there are some weak links in this chain of studies, but the value of this book lies in its overall usefulness — even the less-satisfying collectanea articles yield a fine collection of texts, and all of the articles are well-researched and documented. Of necessity, there are gaps in the book's coverage of fairy-study; for example, I would have liked to see analysis of the effects of Disneyfication on our modern perceptions of the fairy, or the use of fairy imagery in literature (other than children's literature). While there are many comparisons with witches, the Devil, angels, and UFOs in this book, the authors make little mention of the connections between fairies and ghosts, or for that matter, the obvious links between the good people and our friend the Sasquatch.

But I am asking too much. My only major criticism with this collection is that it lacks a substantive introduction. Narváez supplies a short introduction at the beginning and one- or two-page introductions to each division in the book, but the anthology cries out for some overall statement. While Williams alludes to the lack of definition of "fairy", an introduction might have explored the question of definition more fully — the authors and editor seem to assume that we all know what constitutes a fairy, even though the creature is, by its very nature, a fleeting, peripheral being.

As well, an introduction might have addressed a central question in the study of any supernatural phenomenon: the belief or non-belief of the researcher. Smith, Williams and Rojcewicz touch on this question, but they are more intent on other investigations. From the internal evidence of their articles, I infer that Butler, Lysaght, Ó Giolláin, Eberly and Munro, at least, do not believe in fairies, while Rojcewicz, on the basis of his general philosophy, is a believer. How do their differing world views affect their perceptions of fairylore? An introduction which was, in some manner, self-reflective, would have contributed much to an overview. Yet, even without an extended introduction this book is a fine contribution to research on belief and narrative.

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