

***Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centred Study of Narration.* By Linda DÉGH. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1995. Pp. 401.)**

Torunn Selberg

Volume 18, Number 2, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087581ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087581ar>

[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

Selberg, T. (1996). Review of [*Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centred Study of Narration.* By Linda DÉGH. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1995. Pp. 401.)]. *Ethnologies*, 18(2), 187–189. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087581ar>

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centred Study of Narration. By Linda DÉGH. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1995. Pp. 401.)

Narratives in Society can be regarded as a scholarly biography. As Linda Dégh herself claims, this is a book about "my ideas, theories, and methods of approach as they evolved." Through a selection of essays and articles we can follow Dégh's writings, from a paper presented at the first Congress of the ISFNR in 1959 to rewrites of recent presentations given at folklore meetings. The twenty essays are arranged according to four different main themes: Creativity of Storytellers; World View: Between Fantasy and Reality; Conduits of Transmission; Case Studies from the Modern Industrial World. The articles present to the reader samples of Linda Dégh's excellent scholarship and her rich experience as a folklorist on two continents. The essays deal with narratives from her native Hungary and from the United States, spanning fieldwork experiences from premodern peasants to mass-media users in modern urban society.

The introduction, "What Can Gyula Ortutay and the Budapest School Offer to Contemporary Students of Narrative," is a personal narrative about Dégh's first and most important folklore teacher, Hungarian folklorist Gyula Ortutay and the impact he had on her decision to become a folklorist. She writes about his attitude towards the storytellers, and the methods of studying narratives she adopted. Dégh prefers to view her work as ethnography, a narrator-centred approach to narrative performance. Her perspective for the study of narratives both in peasant and urban society is the complex study of the relationship between tellers and their tales, of the reinterpretation and internalization of traditional materials. She always has managed to show folklore as an important force in both the traditional *and* the modern world.

Three variables are important to Dégh in her analysis: the individual storyteller, tradition and society; she is interested in the relation between these variables as they are expressed in the storytellers' narratives. "The tale is not an impersonal account of events, lacking emotional involvement and compassion on the part of tellers and their audience," Dégh states. She goes on: "The

realistic portrayal of situations, the narrator's conscious use of his or her life's experiences, is an expected addition to the objective and factual tale plot outline. This personalized elaboration of the plot brings it closer to the audience and makes it viable and flexible (...) Not only are these contributions of individual narrators important in creating new personal, regional, and ethnic variants of tale types; they are an integral part of tale performance in traditional communities" (pp. 99-100).

In her discussion of various narratives, the dialectic between individual storytellers and collective tradition is important. She deals with personal narratives in "Manipulation of Personal Experience," and claims that tradition is integrated into this type of narrative as well; she writes: "It is traditional, not only by the biological rule of inheritance but also because what took place, what the narrator-creator-imitator did, was possible only within the existing and folkloristically sanctioned system of social conventions" (p. 78). Thus personal traits in this genre are toned down and traditional elements are brought into focus. On the other hand, in "How Do Storytellers Interpret the Snakeprince Tale?," she analyzes one of her favourite storytellers, Mrs. Zsuzsanna Palkó, and her variant of "The Snake Prince" (AT 425). Dégh shows how the narrator's life and values are integrated into her telling of a traditional tale known all over Europe. In Dégh's view, therefore, the personal and the traditional are forces behind the creation of the variants both of a personal experience narrative and an old and well-known *märchen*.

The reality of the lives of individual narrators is present in the variants of the magic tale as well. "For the peasant, the magic tale is the symbolization of reality, the telling of one's life story in the language of enchantment" (p. 117). But the magic tale is also present in the storyteller's way of understanding the real world. In "The World of European Märchen-Tellers," we again meet Mrs. Zsuzsanna Palkó, "illiterate master storyteller," on her first visit to Budapest. She had never seen a big city before, but, nevertheless, it was not new to her since she knew it from her narratives. When Palkó approached the city, she saw the city lights as "myriads of stars that came down from the skies," the comfort of her hotel was a "palace," and represented "miracles" of the city. She knew all this from her narratives. Dégh writes: "Throughout her stay in the city, she identified her tale concepts in real life, matching reality against the background of a deeper, subjective truth" (p. 95).

Linda Dégh has been one of the pioneers in the study of folklore in modern society. She was one of the first scholars to point out the importance of the mass media as a transmitter of folk narratives in the modern world. She did not view the mass media as a destroyer of folklore, as many of her contemporary colleagues did. She pointed out, on the contrary, the mass media helped folklore to travel faster and farther, and creatively transformed story plots, motifs and episodes for new audiences. In the study of modern narratives, Dégh's approach is also on the innovative storyteller, shaping the variants with a personal creativity moulded by society and tradition. In the modern world the individual storyteller can be replaced by an invisible professional entertainer, the TV or newspaper. But the creative storyteller is able to use television as a source for creating new narratives, integrating the plots and motifs of television series into traditional narratives, as she shows in the charming essay, "Two Old World Narrators on the Telephone."

This book is a scholarly biography, as already noted, but in many ways it is also a personal narrative. Linda Dégh is able to communicate to her readers her delight in the wonderful narratives, her admiration for creative storytellers, and her involvement with the people behind the folklore text. Together with her forceful defence of folklore scholarship, this makes her work enjoyable reading.

Torunn SELBERG
University of Bergen
Bergen, Norway

Morning Dew and Roses: Nuance, Metaphor, and Meaning in Folksongs. By Barre TOELKEN. Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Pp. xiii + 189.)

In the summer of 1972 I read for the first time Barre Toelken's "Riddles Wisely Expounded" essay in a 1966 issue of *Western Folklore* and was entranced with its very satisfying, completely credible interpretation of a folksong's covert meanings. Toelken's insights inspired my own embryonic forays into textual