

***Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith: Children's Myths in Contemporary America.* By Cindy Dell Clark. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. ix + 158, ISBN 0-226-10777-9 cloth.)**

Carole H. Carpenter

Volume 19, Number 2, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087703ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087703ar>

[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

Carpenter, C. H. (1997). Review of [*Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith: Children's Myths in Contemporary America.* By Cindy Dell Clark. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. ix + 158, ISBN 0-226-10777-9 cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 19(2), 180–182. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087703ar>

These points notwithstanding, *A Trade Like Any Other* adds significantly to the growing body of scholarly work on music and dance in this region. Van Nieuwkerk synthesizes much information and many perspectives to characterize the lives and conditions of female performers, past and present, within the larger context of Egyptian society. As van Nieuwkerk herself notes, her findings on the constructions of gender and body in Egypt are a starting point for further anthropological and feminist research in this area. This ethnography also could be used as a model for fieldwork techniques and their translation into a conclusive study.

MICHELLE FORNER
Library of Congress
Washington, DC

Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith: Children's Myths in Contemporary America. By Cindy Dell Clark. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. ix + 158, ISBN 0-226-10777-9 cloth.)

The ethnography of children began internationally as the province largely of women. Whereas late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century male scholars tended to investigate foreign or at least exotic folk, their female counterparts generally were encouraged by the cult of domesticity to find subjects closer to home, frequently focusing upon the "noble savages" amongst us — our children. This gendered (some have said "natural") association persists, evident in the substantially female current membership of the Children's Folklore Section (of the American Folklore Society). Likewise persistent is the tendency to view children's folklore scholarship as marginal, seldom central to the disciplinary mainstream unless undertaken by men, such as by scholars from W. W. Newell (1883) to Roger Abrahams (1969, 1981) and Brian Sutton-Smith (numerous major works from 1959 to the present), or occasionally, by women teamed with them (the classic works of Iona and Peter Opie). The past two decades of cultural scholarship at the margins have, however, increasingly drawn us to confront central concepts, approaches and directions which are consequential to our lives, as well as to our discipline.

Cindy Dell Clark's work is rooted in this well-established tradition of female, marginal/marginalized yet personally significant scholarship. Hers is a modest volume, written in comfortably accessible prose laced with wit and common expressions, and illustrated with appealing children's drawings. But it carries a powerful and potentially revolutionary message encapsulated in the statement she quotes from Alistair Reid: "Children are entitled to their otherness, as anyone else is" (p. 101). To make children the "other" is not at all exceptional (the adult world does that daily). But to accord them the full

scholarly treatment and respect currently prescribed for ethnographic studies of identifiable linguistic, religious and racial "others" certainly is unusual, though (as her many references indicate) not unique.

Clark's exploration of children's otherness is rooted in a recognition of young people not as mere passive recipients or consumers but rather as active manipulators and producers of culture. While carefully documenting children as separate, she eschews what might be termed the "cute factor", that is, the prevailing popular tendency to recognize or even indulgently celebrate cultural artifacts of children while denying them significance. The book is replete with potential "cuteness", but Clark insistently demands that serious attention be paid to the voices of the young, in part through careful analysis of their interconnections with the concepts, patterns and actions of contemporary North America culture. Even more important, however, is her emphasis on the phenomenological, sociological and cultural significance of imaginal thought and belief both during childhood and as a means of enabling faith to flourish in later life.

In the brief introductory chapter, Clark states her central argument that "Children experience the world in ways that differ from adults, but their experience has just as much validity and their faith just as much truth and sacredness as the faith and experience of adults" (p. 4). She then proceeds to document three central contemporary children's "myths", commencing with the Tooth Fairy then moving on to consider Christmas and Easter as seasonal rites of passage with modern relevance (the Christmas Spirit as personified by Santa) and finishing with a look at the Easter Bunny and Easter.

Throughout the discussion, Clark weaves extensive, illuminating commentary from her child informants and their parents (mostly female). This material has been derived from solid fieldwork undertaken in the Chicago area by the author and six other researchers between 1985 and 1990. Clark succinctly documents this research, as well as the specifics of her methodology, and she raises general concerns about "child anthropology" in an appendix; this thorough approach is indicative of the sound scholarly underpinnings of the entire work. The author utilizes an eclectic range of cultural scholarship, from Sir James Frazer through to contemporary specialists in child studies, and generally succeeds in distilling their ideas (albeit occasionally in an oversimplified manner) for the general readership she primarily addresses.

There is much in the work of benefit to scholars as well, especially the two concluding chapters on "Commerce, Family, and Meaning: Institutions in Children's Ritual" and "Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith: Issues of Consequence". Here Clark most vehemently attacks the paradigm of adultcentrism that typically results in the trivialisation of children and their culture. She cogently and forcefully argues for the relevance of what children have to teach us and for the profundity of their beliefs and the rituals associated with them.

This seemingly simple and highly entertaining book offers a strong argument for child ethnography, one which clearly demonstrates that children

are knowing, and are “already somewhere, not just on their way to an adult destination and, further, in a very interesting place indeed” (p. 123).

References Cited

- Abrahams, Roger. 1969. *Jump-Rope Rhymes: A Dictionary*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Abrahams, Roger. 1980. *Counting-Out Rhymes: A Dictionary*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Newell, William Wells. 1883. *Games and Songs of American Children*. Rpt. New York: Dover, 1963.
- Opie, Iona, and Peter Opie. 1959. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Opie, Iona and Peter Opie. 1969. *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1959. *The Games of New Zealand Children*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian, Jay Mechling, Thomas W. Johnson, and Felicia R. McMahon, (eds). 1995. *Children's Folklore: A Source Book*. New York: Garland.

CAROLE H. CARPENTER
York University
North York, Ontario

Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine, 1880-1948: A Social History. By Jehoash Hirshberg. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Pp. xiii + 298, bibliography, index, musical examples, \$101.50, ISBN 0 19 816242 1.)

This is a fascinating account of the development of music, and, perhaps even more, of musical institutions, in the area that became the State of Israel in 1948. The focus is on Western art music, and to a somewhat lesser extent on the development of the folk song and the continuation of the traditional musics of the different communities.¹ In each case, the book's strength lies in

1. Or one could also conceivably adopt Bohlman's view that "the most pervasive ethnic music in the Central European Jewish community was western art music" (1989:100).