

Robin RIDINGTON, *Little Bit Know Something: Stories in a Language of Anthropology* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 1990, xvii+281 p., ISBN 0-88894-681-3)

Adrian Tanner

Volume 15, numéro 1, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082552ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082552ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Tanner, A. (1993). Compte rendu de [Robin RIDINGTON, *Little Bit Know Something: Stories in a Language of Anthropology* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 1990, xvii+281 p., ISBN 0-88894-681-3)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(1), 154–156. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082552ar>

As a scholar with a particular interest in portrayals of females who do not model socially constructive behaviour, I approached this book with a great deal of enthusiasm. I must confess that I came away extremely disappointed. The apparent lack of any serious editing or proofreading has resulted in a book littered with typos, grammatical errors, and sometimes incomprehensible sentences and paragraphs. Problems created by poor writing style are compounded by the way Kaler presents her material. The chapters dealing with literary characteristics of the *picara* (chapters 3-9), which constitute four-fifths of the book, do not stick to the topics announced in the chapter titles and hence are jumbled and confusing. Also in these chapters the reader is inundated by a flood of examples taken, without sufficient contextual orientation, from a plethora of stories. This simple heaping up of example upon example made it difficult, at least for this reader, to remain attentive and involved.

Kaler also makes a number of factual errors, such as her assertion that Jerusalem is a port city (p. 46) and that the meaning of the name Eleazar is to be derived from Greek (p. 13), that could have been avoided simply by consulting an atlas or a dictionary. Factual errors such as these, while arguably trivial on first reflection, betray, I think, a fundamental carelessness that serves to undermine the reader's confidence in Kaler's scholarship. This assessment was confirmed for me when she discussed topics within my own area of expertise, such as ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern goddesses, and biblical stories. Kaler's treatment of these topics evidenced sloppy reading, forced interpretations and uncritical appropriation of opinions voiced in highly dubious secondary literature.

In summary, my overall impression of this book is that it is insufficiently researched, poorly organized and shoddily published.

Peggy L. DAY
The University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Robin RIDINGTON, *Little Bit Know Something: Stories in a Language of Anthropology* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 1990, xvii+281 p., ISBN 0-88894-681-3).

A few years ago Robin Ridington published a book, *Trail to Heaven*, which immediately commanded attention as one of the first self-consciously postmodern ethnographies, complete with acknowledgements to Clifford and

Marcus. It also featured another of the hallmarks of the genre, the author's own persona. Ridington presented himself as a kind of counterpoint to the subjects of the book, the Dunne-za (Beaver) Indians of the northern interior of British Columbia. His transformation was revealed by means of a series of candid, esoteric accounts of his unfolding relations with a sharply-observed set of Dunne-za characters.

Now a second book has appeared, *Little Bit Know Something*, which is a collection of academic articles on the Dunne-za by Ridington, a professor of anthropology at the University of British Columbia. These were previously published between 1968 and 1989, in a variety of social science and humanities journals and in a variety of styles of writing. The collection shows us other aspects of both the author and the Dunne-za. Many of these articles are experimental in form and content, and include an account of a form of ethnographic presentation called "soundscapes".

The articles prove that in writing *Trail to Heaven*, Ridington did not simply hop on the latest intellectual band wagon; they show he has a long-standing concern with using unconventional forms to communicate his ethnographic understandings. In the book the articles are organized by subject, but if one examines them in chronological order, one finds a distinct progression towards an increasingly experiential evocation of the intangible side of the ethnographic.

After completing fieldwork, all ethnographers face the tantalizing problem that the form of whatever understanding they have arrived at is intricately linked to what was an essentially private experience. How, then, to communicate what one thinks one has learned, but to an audience who has not shared these experiences? With a number of exceptions, since the time of Malinowski the tactic was usually for the ethnographer to produce a series of authoritative-sounding generalizations, usually backed up with examples, as if these were truths arrived at by some unstated but (to the author, at least) self-evidently deductive means. Ridington's postmodern approach, given the realization that the old ethnographic emperor had no clothes, is to attempt to reproduce for the reader those key fieldwork experiences which were essential to the author's process of learning, a kind of literary replication of the ethnographic encounter.

Ridington's early experiences with the Dunne-za were apparently overshadowed by a need to ditch his own intellectual baggage, including his "thesis problem". By his own account, the Dunne-za were only too helpful in changing his direction of thinking. Thus, his ethnographer's question, "What has my encounter with the Dunne-za taught me about them?" becomes more like "What did the Dunne-za set out to teach me?". Informing his readers about the Dunne-za becomes a task of recounting events which together amount to a succession of lessons, many in the form of tape-recorded texts of stories, songs and formal speeches.

In *Trail to Heaven*, this made effective, at times powerful, literature of which few academics are capable, but the approach incurs problems. First, it runs the risk that exactly what some of the texts, or the encounters and events tying the texts together, signify is not always clear. Perhaps this uncertainty is necessary; the postmodern ethnographer's analytic voice is to be kept in check.

But this is where the two volumes differ; many of the articles making up *Little Bit Know Something* use analysis in order to move towards a form of understanding that can be at least compared with the understandings arrived at by other ethnographers working with comparable cultures. Many such comparisons are acknowledged by Ridington himself, and while all of them may not be equally profound, for me they make the collection especially useful. Other chapters are explicitly concerned with the methodology of how to preserve the voice of the other through the use of new techniques of communication.

We must also consider the possibility that these voices, the one of the ethnographer, as well as those of his people, hide as well as reveal. There is both artistry and artfulness in apparently artless self-exposure. But experimental work must be allowed to take chances.

Of the two, *Trail to Heaven* is the volume to re-read, the one given over largely to Dunne-za voices, as they try to make themselves understood to Ridington, and through him to us. But, it is also a book "without interpretation", and thus (for me, at least) often leaves the Dunne-za in their ineffable and unique splendour. *Little Bit Know Something* is a remarkable book which places the Dunne-za in comparative context, nicely complementing *Trail to Heaven*, and serving academia, the Dunne-za, and hopefully many non-specialist readers, well.

Adrian TANNER
Memorial University
St. John's, Newfoundland

James KIRKLAND, Holly MATHEWS, C.W. SULLIVAN III,
Karen BALDWIN (eds.), *Herbal and Magical Medicine:
Traditional Healing Today* (Durham and London, Duke
University Press, 1992, 241 p., ISBN 0-8223-1217-4).

As biomedicine becomes more scientific/scientistic — demagicked — and more firmly entrenched as the dominant model of diagnosis and therapy,