

Dale Jarvis. *The Golden Leg and Other Ghostly Campfire Tales.*

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Volume 23, numéro 1, spring 2008

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds23_1rv10

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Bleiler, R. (2008). Compte rendu de [Dale Jarvis. *The Golden Leg and Other Ghostly Campfire Tales.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 23(1), 108-110.

As with many collections of lyric poems, there are sometimes problems with arrangement. Do the poems tell a story? If so, the fine poem “Infant Abandoned in Hyde Park” seems somehow out of place, poignant though it is. There are few infelicities — “my heartfelt respect for your verdure / that multiplies air” is one. Pick has a fine lyric gift, and the reader is rewarded with many pleasing images. Dawn is night “polishing / sky with a cloth.” Moonlight reminds her of cream: “moon a bowl of cream over fields,” “the orchard at night, moon drizzling cream over fruit.”

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Dale Jarvis. *The Golden Leg and Other Ghostly Campfire Tales*. St. John’s: Flanker Press, 2007, ISBN-10: 1-897317-07-8.

THE GOLDEN LEG and Other Ghostly Campfire Tales contains some 26 folktales, and although their compiler, Dale Jarvis, is Canadian, as is their publisher, the Flanker Press, there is nothing particularly regional about these tales: they are sparsely told, and few have anything approaching a specific or an identifiable location. This it must be stressed is quite intentional — Jarvis’s brief introduction notes that he has “deliberately kept the locations of the stories somewhat vague in the telling” — for this collection is a book with both a history and a mission. The history: Jarvis presented the stories around the campfire at Camp Delight Children’s Oncology Camp in Newfoundland. The mission: Jarvis hopes that other storytellers will use and adapt the stories “to suit the needs of your telling,” and all profits from the sale of *The Golden Leg* will go to assist Camp Delight and its children. These are noble goals, and one wishes Jarvis and Camp Delight every success.

Issues of history and mission aside, the stories in *The Golden Leg* are familiar ones, and a reader reaching the end of the volume will find a section, “About the Stories,” in which Jarvis — holder of an MA in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland — carefully details the origins of his tales. The titular story, for example, is an adaptation of Stith Thompson’s motifs E 235.4.2 (“return from dead to punish theft of leg from grave”) and E 235.4.1 (“return from dead to punish theft of golden arm from grave”). Other stories are equally well documented, the sources often but not always being Canadian.

It is perhaps unfair to fault *The Golden Leg* for being bland in its retelling of these folktales, for this blandness is intentional. Nevertheless, if one has previously encountered other versions of the tales, comparisons are inevitable, and all too often the tales in *The Golden Leg* are less than inspiring. Mark Twain’s version of “The Golden Arm,” for example, recounted in *How to Tell a Story and Other Essays* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1897), opens with a prologue in which Twain details how to tell the story, explaining that “the pause is an exceedingly important

feature in any kind of story, and a frequently recurring feature, too.” He adds that “on the platform I used to tell a negro ghost story that had a pause in front of the snapper on the end, and that pause was the most important thing in the whole story. If I got it the right length precisely, I could spring the finishing ejaculation with effect enough to make some impressionable girl deliver a startled little yelp and jump out of her seat — and that was what I was after.” Twain’s version of the story is told in easily read dialect, with stage directions interspersed — “en he listen — en listen — en de win’ say (set your teeth together and imitate the wailing and wheezing singsong of the wind), “Bzzz-z-zzz.” Compare this vividness — the lively vividness inherent in the best oral tradition — to the flatness of Jarvis’s version, where the lack of stage directions and the general absence of dialogue leave undeveloped the potentials of the situation: “he went to the fresh grave of his mistress, and dug up the coffin. He pried open the lid, and there she was, resting in her golden dress. [He] reached down, took hold of the golden leg, and wrenched it from the body of his dead mistress.”

If one puts aside style and concentrates on substance, pleasures may be found in *The Golden Leg*, and one may draw enjoyable linkages from the 26 folktales to established works of supernatural fiction. The brief “Grandfather King” describes what the shrewd old bootlegger discovers when he seeks to retrieve his buried bottles of rum. At first, it is but a “very bright light” that draws closer, until the light is revealed to be the “very bright eyes of what could only be described as a monster. In size it was taller than the tallest man, over nine feet in height. It was jet-black and covered all over with hair an inch to an inch and a half long, and its eyes were like two big saucers.” After an additional encounter with this being, Grandfather King very wisely eschews further excavations and puts his energies into legitimate efforts. As for the monster? It may have been guarding pirate treasure, and “if you don’t mind nine-foot monsters lurking in the darkness, covered in fur, and with eyes as big as saucers, you are welcome to go and try to find it [the rum and the treasure] for yourself.” Jarvis explains the origins of this story — Michael Taft’s *Manlike Monsters on Trial* (British Columbia: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), as well as providing Stith Thompson’s motifs E 291 (“Ghosts protect hidden treasure”) and E 291.2.2 (“Ghost animal guards treasure”) — but the story is oddly reminiscent of M. R. James’s “The Treasure of the Abbot Thomas,” first published in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (London: Arnold, 1904). In James’s version, the Abbot Thomas has left a guardian watching his treasure, as the inquisitive treasure-hunter discovers to his horror. Similarly, Jarvis’s “The Floating Head” acknowledges the 1911 version of the story given by Elliott O’Donnell in his *Scottish Ghost Stories*, but H.G. Wells’s 1895 “Pollock and the Porroh Man” is earlier and, probably, one of the putative sources lying behind “The Floating Head.”

In conclusion, then, *The Golden Leg* is a pleasantly engaging collection. Although Jarvis’s scholarship is low-key and unobtrusive, it is possible that the book

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might find a niche in academic libraries supporting serious studies in folklore; librarians and scholars at those institutions should certainly consider purchasing it. Nevertheless, one suspects that the most appreciative audiences will probably be campers and camp counselors, those seeking to entertain a young and impressionable audience, and entertaining it certainly is.

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