

Sandra Dolby Stahl. **Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. Pp. xi + 148, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth.

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Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative by Sandra Dolby Stahl presents a meticulously developed methodology for studying personal narrative as a legitimate folklore genre while offering a thoughtful examination of current interpretive practices. Stahl's analysis of several personal narratives includes an extensive investigation of her own position as reader/interpreter and the theoretical implications of that position. She contextualizes several personal narratives in detail by investigating them in relation to literary theories of reader-response and deconstruction as well as more conservative narrative and folkloristic performance theories. Her method of literary folkloristics draws upon and adapts this variety of approaches to justify her collected stories *as* texts. This provides a format which allows them to be discussed and generates interest in their theoretically problematic position between traditional and idiosyncratic material, between truth and fiction, between subject and object. Ultimately, she claims that personal narratives establish and express intimacy between a teller of and a listener to a personal experience narrative.

Stahl begins by claiming narratives of personal experience belong in folklore studies as a genre, at least in American culture, pointing out their close relation to such established genres as memorate, local character anecdote, or family story. Although the content of personal narratives may not be traditional, Stahl maintains "the values or attitudes reflected in the stories are culturally shared and thus traditional" (13). She goes on to validate the position of the scholar as researcher *and* reader/interpreter. Genre recognition and description are both analytic activities and therefore can be located squarely within the province of academics. The methodology of literary folkloristics used to interpret personal narratives is modeled, to some extent, on practices in the interpretation of literature. Personal narratives, although told in the first person, are literary because the teller is always in the process of selecting or rejecting from a paradigmatic array of possible representations. The teller is transformed into a character by this selective process, and the idiosyncratic story of the individual opens out for interpretation in ways similar to literary texts. The story itself cannot represent the whole truth of personality, and it is in the openings left by the teller that the listener becomes an active agent, participating in the text by means of interpretation. Ultimately, Stahl suggests that the interaction between teller and interpreter establishes intimacy between them.

Personal and analytic information contribute to the interpretation of personal narrative, and therefore a competent reader/listener is one who shares in the culture of the teller. Stahl has devised a "daisy-wheel" chart of folk group categories revolving around a central self. She identifies eight categories as significant in the formation and expression of individual identity in American

culture, and offers the diagram as a frame of reference on which to chart correspondences between the teller and the listener, aiding the analysis of a particular story in a given context. She extends the scope of folk groupings by associating them with the five codes under which Roland Barthes groups the signifiers of any text, and with this "reformulated notion of the literary allusion" (41) Stahl analyzes Larry Scheiber's story "Koo-Nar, King of the Rats." In addition, she makes a case for using cultural context as a frame for interpreting personal experience narratives by claiming these stories are what Edward T. Hall describes as "high context" communication, depending on the cultural and internalized information of both the teller and the hearer. The interpreter's response, then, actively participates in the creation of the text, and this response must be recognized and made accessible to other readers through a more complex model than the usual *documentary-instructional* text. Stahl maps the procedure for developing such an *interpretive-instructional* text and uses that procedure to document and interpret "Koo-Nar, King of the Rats" and her mother's story, "The Canary, or the Yellow Dress," devoting a chapter to each interpretation. Her stated purpose in giving these stories such exhaustive treatment is "to make the practice of interpreting folklore a more acceptable one in the discipline" (49).

In arguing for the presence of tradition embedded in personal narrative, Stahl supports the work of Richard M. Dorson and Alan Dundes but sees the task of identifying tradition as more than a search for empirical evidence. For Stahl, subjective elements of interpretation are not only involved but are necessary to understanding a transformation from personal to cultural experience through the telling of personal experience narratives. She builds an interpretation which recognizes subjectivity "in the selection of focus, in the recognition of conceptual, nonverbalized folklore, in the identification of private folklore, in the contextualizing of the instructional text" (118). Although she cites theories of reception, deconstruction, and performance to support the active role of the interpreter in the text, she does not finally carry through the theoretical implications of her position. Questions of subjectivity, whether in personal or literary narratives, are crucial in expanding theoretical approaches to the interpretation of texts. To draw out her theoretical trajectory using the interpretation of personal experience narratives might be informative, not only to folklorists but to anyone concerned with the problems and possibilities of textual interpretation.

In her work on the personal narrative, Stahl touches areas which have the potential for a much broader application. Experience and reading, for example, are closely linked by Wolfgang Iser in *The Reading Process*, in which he claims the act of reading removes the subject-object division and a newly formulated self emerges. "Indeed, we can only make someone else's thoughts into an absorbing theme for ourselves, provided the virtual background of our own personality can adapt to it . . . This is inevitable, if only for the fact that the relationship between alien theme and virtual background is what makes it possible for the unfamiliar to be understood" (67). Perhaps it is this understanding which Stahl identifies as the intimacy created between the teller and listener of personal narratives, that stands at the "break" between personal

and cultural reality. The folklorist's ability to document the transformation from one to the other could contribute to the theoretical understanding of the problematic first-person singular, which remains perplexingly plural.

Diane Tong. **Gypsy Folktales.** New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich Publishers, 1989. Pp. xv + 252, photographs, bibliography, indexes of storytellers. \$19.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

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It is a little inhibiting to consider for scholarly review a work that is clearly intended for a broader, popular market. The first thing one notices about *Gypsy Folktales* is a pronouncement by Alice Walker, printed above the title on the front of the book jacket. She was fascinated by the tales, and Eli Wiesel (who appears on the back of the jacket along with many others) was moved. Clearly the publisher felt it necessary to frame this work by a person not quite as famous as Walker or Wiesel with the right kinds of names which would in turn attract the right kinds of buyers. Amidst all these quotes is also one intended for the folklorist-buyer: Jack Zipes considers *Gypsy Folktales* an extraordinary collection.

Interesting may be a better label than extraordinary, for this collection of eighty stories in a sense falls into the "ordinary" romantic or activist tradition in which folktale editions have resided since the Grimm's *Household Tales*. Diane Tong's enthusiasm is fueled by her justifiable desire to demonstrate the rich narrative folklore of Gypsy culture, a culture that has been persecuted, enslaved, and looked down upon for centuries. Thus Tong's introduction dwells on past and present atrocities against Gypsies, in addition to introducing her collection methods and her own connections to Gypsy culture. Tong is a photographer, and her portraits and scenes of Gypsy life, largely drawn from her travels in the Balkans and Greece, add to the ethnic message she is intent upon sharing.

The tales have in part been collected (and translated and partially edited) by the author, and in part gathered from diverse nineteenth and twentieth-century printed sources. Each tale is preceded by a headnote which attempts to capture the context of the telling (although never in the detailed manner performance scholars would like to see), to place the tale within a larger international canon of tales, or to point out what makes the tale specifically Gypsy. The endnotes recapitulate this information; they also provide the sources of the tale, and mention the original print or performance language. Tong says herself that while some of the tales are specifically Gypsy, others are international tale types. (Probably to avoid scaring away a broader audience, AT and motif numbers are absent.)

The annotated bibliography is useful and seems to be particularly tailored to folklorists's needs, as the type of folkloric material to be found in each source is carefully noted. The absence of a major study, such as Ann Sutherland's