

Reviews

Midwestern Strange: Hunting Monsters, Martians, and the Weird in Flyover Country. By B. J. Hollars. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Pp. 198 + 10 bibliography.

“Go ahead. Take my hand. Let’s wallow in the weird together” (7). With this intriguing invitation, author B.J. Hollars, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, begins his journey of exploring the strange and paranormal in his wide backyard, the Midwest. He encourages readers—and himself—to question the oddities of this world with an open mind: “What if, rather than scoffing at the unknown, we approach it from a place of curious inquiry? What if, rather than dispensing with the weird, we try to embrace it instead?” (5). Hollars accomplishes his goal and relays his discoveries in nine “Case Files” arranged in three sections: *Monsters*, *Martians*, and *The Weird*. The book investigates the Beast of Bray Road, Oscar the Turtle (aka the Beast of Busco), Mothman, alien encounters, the Kensington Runestone, Project ELF, and the Hodag. Throughout his explorations, delivered in an easygoing, casual writing style, readers are encouraged to consider the possibilities, keep an open mind, and understand what a mystery can do for a town—or to an individual.

There are two overarching themes in all the chapters: How experiencing “the strange” impacts an individual negatively and how the same experience creates a positive effect for a community. Hollars discusses what he terms “monster mar-

tyrdom,” where the more one believes in the existence of the so-called monster, the more a person’s credibility suffers. Those who claim that the stories of the supernatural or weird are true face ridicule, humiliation, and a severe disruption to their lives. Gale Harris, the original sighter of the Beast of Busco, spent years trying to prove the creature’s existence, even going so far as to drain the lake. Joe Simonton, a local plumber in Wisconsin, found himself the object of ridicule after receiving his space pancakes from aliens in a UFO. Historian Hjalmar Holland’s reputation was ruined as he tried to prove the authenticity of the Kensington Runestone in the early 1900s. Hollars quotes Jerome Clark, an investigator and author of books on anomalies about the social cost involved in discussing the strange: “‘Ridicule really enforces silence,’ he says. ‘Ridicule keeps the boundaries firm. And people don’t want to be ridiculed, of course’” (81). Those who approach their encounters with the unexplained with a skeptical viewpoint fare the best and escape much of the censure. Sheriff’s deputy Val Johnson could not explain what happened to him in an encounter in 1979. The deputy was on patrol when he spotted a strange light in the sky. Before he knew it—and without remembering all the details—Johnson’s police cruiser was damaged in unusual ways, and he sustained facial burns. However, after speculating on what happened—from a UFO to time travel to a government experiment—Johnson stated, “[M]y pay grade does not permit me to make all these speculations with any credibility. So I don’t” (120). This indifference to whether or not he could determine the source of his encoun-

ter allowed Johnson's experience to fade into the background of his everyday life.

Even though these strange events and beings have negative consequences for the individuals who claim their authenticity, the opposite holds true for the community where they happen, particularly in the case of cryptids. In the towns where Mothman, the Beast of Busco, the Hodag, and the Beast of Bray Road supposedly live, the residents may or may not believe in the existence of the entity, but they celebrate the notoriety it brings to the town. Churubusco resident Chuck Jones said, "after all, the story's better than the real thing" (51). Another local, Miles Wilson, said of his town's infamous turtle, "Oscar gave us a dot on the map...Before him, Churubusco was not known" (49). Jerry Shidell, who took up the story of the Hodag mused, "the Hodag makes us a place on the map...We've gone to a lot of little towns, and they're nice little towns...but I would guess the thing that's missing is a rallying point. Something to identify with." (145-46). Instead of facing ridicule, the local economy and reputation of these places thrive with festivals, museums, and tourists. "The strange" gives these tiny towns cachet—a reason for visitors to stop and pay attention (and spend their money).

The tales of small, Midwestern towns and the people who live there star in this volume. Yes, there are plenty of details about the strange and the weird, but more so, the stories of the people who "come at the subject from a place of curious inquiry...[who] have no intention to mislead" (193) take primacy. This book draws attention to the oft-overlooked heartland and its many oddities. Yet, while doing so, it reinforces the message that the extraordinary is experienced

by the very ordinary—the plumber, the Sheriff's deputy, the fisherman. Although Hollars sought to find an answer to these Midwestern mysteries, he found that the truth lies "somewhere between the 'evidence' and the perception of that evidence" (2). This book feels like a leisurely road trip with informal conversations about curiosities along the way. Scholars will find it a welcome change from heavy theory, and casual readers will likely enjoy the vignettes of small-town life woven with the bizarre. Hollars reminds us that not all events have a clear explanation, and we can just enjoy the thrill of the strange.

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Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork. By Lisa Gilman and John Fenn. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 271, acknowledgments, introduction, works cited, index, black and white photographs, tables, and charts).

It is likely that the past three generations of folklorists and ethnomusicologists have read work by Kenneth Goldstein, Sandy Ives, Bruce Jackson, or similar guidebooks to doing fieldwork during their graduate studies. The best of these guides blends practical experience with current theory and practice. Unfortunately, even the best fieldwork

manuals can quickly become dated with the rapid pace of technological change. It is difficult to update these older manuals, thereby creating a real need for a new resource for use in classes, workshops for applied projects, and consultation by students, instructors, and practitioners. Lisa Gilman and John Fenn's book admirably fills this gap. Their writing is reminiscent of the best of the earlier guidebooks, and they integrate new technology in ways that will keep this book current for a new generation of fieldworkers.

The *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork* is divided into three sections. Part I is a thorough discussion of methods for preparing for entry into the field. These chapters clearly define fieldwork and develop discussion of ways to develop a project, design a research plan, and find ways for arranging to document and fund projects. Various chapters stand on their own as pull-out readings, and they can be used for workshops, institutes, or conventional classroom instruction. Part II brings readers directly into the field. These five chapters outline research settings, explain the essentials of participant observation, provide tips for successful interviewing, and explore additional techniques of documentation while also touching on interpersonal (and personal) aspects of life in the field. The third part offers excellent techniques and discussion for working with field materials after time in the field. The discussion of using metadata with the resources is particularly strong, and Gilman and Fenn provide resources for coding and interpreting data as well as a wealth of ideas for presenting the results of fieldwork through scholarship and public programming. They both have in-depth knowledge of the latest tech-

nology, and their writing is especially strong when they offer readers ways to use even newer technology in response to the emergent needs of fieldwork.

The writing is engaging and accessible throughout the book. Gilman and Fenn illustrate points by drawing from examples in their own fieldwork. While both authors have worked in Africa, Gilman's scholarly research and publications provide a strong basis for sharing her experiences throughout this handbook. Gilman brings in additional diverse scholarship, including research with veterans that contributed to other publications and the documentary "Grounds for Resistance." In addition to referencing his own fieldwork in Africa, Fenn describes his fieldwork with a great variety of projects, including research on builders of guitar effect pedals, Chinavine.uoregon.edu, and research on musical traditions in Malawi. They both use these references to develop and expand upon their discussion of the importance of reflectivity and reflexivity in ethnographic fieldwork. These incidents also will spark a reader's curiosity to investigate the author's other publications and projects. The book also includes ample examples of classroom-tested instructional activities. They are presented throughout the book and cover a range of topics. Each activity simulates how situations that arise in fieldwork are relevant to interpersonal situations that occur outside of research situations. These classroom activities illustrate one of the authors' main points: the value of connecting fieldwork to everyday experiences.

The book is oriented toward the interests and needs of ethnomusicologists and folklorists, especially in terms of

practical techniques for *in situ* documentation. The smooth writing seamlessly moves from topic to topic, and they make shifts into second and first person that pulls the reader into the world of fieldwork. As I was reading, I began to either anticipate their references to some of the classic writing on fieldwork methodology, and I kept flipping to their selected bibliography, where I found many of the works that I have been assigned or have else assigned in fieldwork classes. This approach helps to preserve the fine insights from earlier writers, and Gilman and Fenn, in turn, make their own contributions that are relevant to contemporary practice. Those who plan to use this handbook in their classes may wish to assign excerpts from their list of Works Cited. Instructors may also fill in some gaps by including more books or articles from related fields such as cultural anthropology and sociology. The wealth of new publications on reflexive fieldwork would be an excellent supplement to this handbook.

They offer a good discussion of library research, use of archives, and the integration of scholarship into fieldwork. Gilman and Fenn suggest several ways to process fieldwork materials, and they give specific resources that inform a researcher how to log fieldwork, transcribe interviews, create forms and systems for metadata, and they offer perspectives on ethnographic coding. These resources will all be useful, especially for community-based fieldwork projects directed by researchers beginning their research practice outside of an academic context. The challenge is to integrate these techniques with academic research, the authors note that as students they “received little guidance about moving from data to

analysis” (211). This shift from documentation into analysis and interpretation remains a central challenge for those who write these kinds of fieldwork guides as well as for teachers in the classroom. The use of resources from approaches developed within grounded theory and ethno-science can be useful for helping to spark the shift from documentation into cultural interpretation. Perhaps subsequent publications can illustrate how to move beyond the preservationist imperative into gaining new perspectives on analysis and interpretation. One problem is that there is such a variety of theories that make it difficult to spark ways for students to make heuristic leaps. Nevertheless, specific example of spreadsheets and annotated transcripts that illustrate ethnographic coding would be a welcome resource in this respect.

The book is an excellent handbook for learning to do fieldwork and developing innovative ways to do research. Its orientation to issues that are central to folklore and ethnomusicology is both a strength and a potential weakness. The discussion of photography and videography is limited and needs new complementary guides that are designed for use in other humanities fields. There is space to develop a take on visual documentation that reflects central perspectives from folklorists and ethnomusicologists. The authors include discussion of ways to document material culture, but there is limited discussion of techniques used to document vernacular architecture and landscape. Curiously, these topics are included in the numerous guides that are being published in other disciplines. It would have been useful to either incorporate some references to visual anthropology from this literature or to carve

out approaches that are characteristic of folklore methodology. The book's title clearly identifies its intended audience, but it could also be useful within a wider range of disciplines and practices, including oral history, cultural anthropology, and heritage studies. The discipline-specific foci could be especially helpful for interdisciplinary use. It also could carve out a limited readership for this volume. These challenges are not unique to crafting such a handbook. Rather, they are endemic to the field as a whole. Fenn and Gilman have made an excellent contribution to folklore and ethnomusicology. It would be especially rewarding to find ways to extend their good work to related disciplines.

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