
Social sciences

RR 2017/214

American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An Encyclopedia of American Folklore

Edited by Christopher R. Fee and Jeffrey B. Webb

ABC-CLIO

Santa Barbara, CA

2016

ISBN 978 1 61069 568 8

URL: www.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOCorporate/product.aspx?pc=A4250C

Last visited May 2017

Contact publisher for pricing information

Also available as a 3 vol. printed set (ISBN 978 1 61069 567 1 £239 \$310)

Keywords United States of America, Encyclopedias, Folklore, Myths, Legends

Review DOI [10.1108/RR-05-2017-0115](https://doi.org/10.1108/RR-05-2017-0115)

ABC-CLIO's *American Myths, Legends and Tall Tales*, reviewed here in its e-book version, is described as a "comprehensive introduction to folklore in the USA [covering] not only Native American mythology and folklore, but also the many traditions that were carried to North America by immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania". "This three-volume encyclopedia", the Introduction continues, "is not meant to be the final word on its numerous topics, but rather to provide beginning and advanced students, as well as interested general readers, with the entry points and pathways they need to pursue further exploration and discovery". The editors define their topic broadly enough to include entries about "popular conspiracy theories, urban legends, and even superheroes".

The encyclopedia's three volumes include over 490 entries by 150 contributors, with over 90 "primary documents" consisting of extracts from original sources; e.g. an extract from Charles Hoy Fort's *New Lands* (1923) accompanies the entry of UFO abductions, and a section from a FBI report expands the entry on gang matriarch Ma Barker. Entries are signed and include bibliographies and

see also references; some also include black-and-white illustrations. There are also numerous short box outs, like the one for Kiva embedded in the Kachinas entry, written by co-editor Fee.

The Introduction defines the terms myth, legend, folklore and tall tale as they are used to determine the scope of the work. The encyclopedia attempts "to balance the pressures of inclusion and diversity with those of tradition and the generalist needs of nonspecialist and student readers [. . .] erring on the side of sensitive inclusion rather than excluding materials that are important and substantial additions to the standard canon of American folklore". It appears to do an admirable job of meeting this goal. And it does not neglect the modern campfire around which so many stories are now told – the computer screen. The introduction also emphasizes the importance of context to American folklore, and describes the country as "an imaginative landscape flowing with milk and honey, the stuff of legend [and] an active motive narrative force on its own terms".

Other front matter includes a Guide to Related Topics, which lists entries by ethnic origin (African, Asian and Native American), type (conspiracy theories, ghost stories and tall tales) and the meta-topic of the study of folklore and myth itself; and a Chronology of events relating to folklore in America from the 1531 manifestation of the Virgin of Guadalupe near Mexico City to the 2014 Slender Man murders. The back matter includes a short selected general bibliography which supplements the individual article bibliographies; a list of contributors and their brief biographies; and an index.

The first entry, *Academe, Legends of*, is a good representative of the sort of coverage provided in this work. For example, the persistent legend that you get all A's for the semester if your roommate dies is explained, traced to its first appearances and provided with references to movies and television shows that make use of this ploy. Myths about campus buildings are also considered, as well as tall tales about professors tricking students and vice versa. One specific example, the story of a haunted building at the campus of one of the primary editors of the collection, is highlighted in a box out. Cross-references and a brief bibliography follow the name of the contributor.

Some entries, though, seem to lack any folkloric or mythical component; for example, while Clara Barton was a legendary historic



Reference Reviews

Volume 31 · Number 8 · 2017 · pp. 6–9

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figure in American medicine, the entry on her is purely factual (pp. 81-84), as is the entry on Sojourner Truth; entries on other outstanding American women, like Amelia Earhart or Harriet Tubman, do include legends connected to the facts of their lives and thus it makes more sense to include them.

I noticed in the Beauty and the Beast Folklore entry that the classic 1876 illustration by Walter Crane is not credited to the artist but instead is just described as a “late nineteenth-century wood-cut”. This seems to be standard practice for out-of-copyright artwork in this encyclopedia; for example, the illustration accompanying the article on Huck Finn and its use of American folklore is not credited to Edward W. Kemble, nor is the painting of Captain Kidd credited to Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, while more recent illustrations do have artist credits. The Beauty and the Beast Folklore essay itself is a very competent comparison of the “beastly bridegroom” type of tale in the European and Native American traditions and the important differences between them, but it lacks discussion of American popular culture adaptations such as the Disney movie. Other articles were similarly good, though not exhaustive, as befits an encyclopedia. For example, the article on Roanoke, the lost North Carolina colony, is reasonably thorough, but does not list the long-running outdoor play among media retellings of the story (the *Wikipedia* entry does include it).

The encyclopedia is particularly strong on Science- and Health-related Myths (as they are called in the Guide to Related Topics), such as folklore about weather prediction or the origin and spread of AIDS. Nuclear Lore is a good example: the entry covers, among other sub-topics, entities invented for physics thought experiments (Maxwell’s Demon, Schrödinger’s Cat), myths about nuclear power plants and bombs, stories told by or about Richard Feynman and his jokes and pranks at Los Alamos and folklore and macabre memes about the Three Mile Island incident. The essay as a whole is a thoughtful analysis of the anxieties, uncertainties and lack of trust in officials (political, business or scientific) that give rise to folkloric responses like gallows humour, conspiracy theories, apocalyptic beliefs, etc. A “[t]heme of attempting to maintain psychological equilibrium and a modicum of hope” unites these various folk responses to nuclear power. I would have liked a reference to nuclear anxieties as expressed in popular music or movies – like Tom Lehrer’s *We Will All Go*

Together When We Go or the movie *Dr. Strangelove* – to go with the quotations from bumper stickers, but space is necessarily limited in a collection like this.

As far as the mechanics of this online version of the encyclopedia are concerned, the fact that this is simply a scan of the printed pages means it is not optimized for a digital environment. ABC-CLIO’s interface is hard to use on a laptop – the text window is too small and is arranged horizontally so the user cannot see a whole page at once, and there are no options to rearrange the components of the page to one’s needs. It would work far better on a desktop, but students working on their own devices will find it awkward. The table of contents links to separate articles, but there are no links within the text from the see also lists, from the guides to related topics to the individual articles listed, or from authors of individual articles to their biographies or lists of their other articles – simple cross-referencing I would expect of a decent online reference work. (The index does, at least, provide links back to page numbers.)

More alarmingly, the Extract function, which allows the reader to pull out a segment to quote, is not optimized to handle two columns of text – it reads straight across both columns – which will undoubtedly result in word salad in students’ papers, and worse, makes the product useless to students with print disabilities who need to use a text reader. This same problem manifests in search results, making it very difficult to determine if the results are actually relevant or not. It is a shame to see a product from a major company like ABC-CLIO rendered so difficult to use, and to see basic accessibility issues not addressed, because of careless conversion of a print product to electronic.

American Myths, Legends and Tall Tales is a decent introductory guide to the wide variety of myths, legends and folklore of the USA, surveying the three main sources to be found: Native American, immigrant cultures (both early and more recent) and uniquely American home-grown contributions. A perusal of the table of contents is a good way for the students to become familiar with the primary topics, tales and tropes defining the field of American folklore studies. Some entries go beyond facts, providing useful or thought-provoking analysis as springboards for the researcher. But it is hard for an encyclopedia with this sort of short entry, designed primarily to provide a brief

orientation to a subject, to compete with a *Wikipedia* entry and its list of references for the student investigating a particular topic in depth. A library with a need for a basic reference work on American folklore for high school or undergraduate students would find this suits it well, but at the risk of being called a Luddite, the many drawbacks of the electronic interface lead me to say I would prefer to use the print version myself.

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RR 2017/215

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Online Education

Steven Laurence Danver

SAGE Publications

Thousand Oaks, CA

2017

ISBN 978 1 4833 1833 2

URL: <http://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-online-education>

Last visited June 2017

Contact publisher for pricing information

Also available as a 3 vol. printed set (ISBN 978 1 4833 1835 6 \$495)

Keywords Encyclopedias, Education, Online learning, Online education

Review DOI 10.1108/RR-06-2017-0130

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Online Education contains over 350 entries covering a wide array of topics related to learning online. The *Encyclopedia* is edited by Steven L. Danver, the Executive Director of the Center for General Education at Walden University, who has been teaching in traditional and online classrooms since the 1990s. Individual entries in the encyclopedia are authored by an international group of academics and scholars.

While there are entries dedicated to K-12 and professional online education, as well as a few on online education in international contexts, the majority are focused on online higher education in the USA. Readers can navigate the encyclopedia alphabetically, but a helpful Reader's Guide sorts the entries according to topic areas, which convey the encyclopedia's broad scope: Concepts and Theories; Culture, Race and Ethnicity; Curriculum; Economic Issues; Educational Institutions; Educational Resources, Technology, and Online Platforms;

Evaluations and Testing; Institutional Practices and Policies; Institutional Practices and Pedagogy; Interaction in the Educational Process; Legal, Regulatory, and Accreditation Issues; Online Courses and Degree Programs; Organizations; Research; Social Media; Student Characteristics or Types; and Student Experience.

As a whole, the entries are thorough and accessible, providing readers who are new to the subject with adequate background information and context so they fully understand any implications a topic or concept might have on online education. A few entries miss the mark on this final aspect, seeming to tack online education on to the end of an entry that is mainly focused on the traditional education context. These entries may leave readers wondering how the topics apply to online education, or why they were included in this volume. Although the entries are, generally, at least a few pages long and provide relatively deep analysis, some entries, especially those focusing on specific types of learning management systems, are rather thin and could have been folded into the main LMS entry. The entries are largely text-based, though a few do include charts and tables. The entries are also relatively free from error, although the tables from the entries on online education in Central and South America seem to have been transposed. Every entry includes a list of sources for further reading, and some contain additional websites related to the entry's content.

A series of appendices follow the main text of the encyclopedia. These appendices include tables illustrating trends related to enrollment and student demographics of distance or online learners in higher education; a series of tables containing opinions from academic leaders on distance education; a resource guide of books, articles and journals for specific sub-topics of online education; and a comparison of distance education policy standards.

The online edition of the book, as here reviewed, offers several benefits over the print. First, entries are cross-referenced and hyperlinked. Each entry contains a see also section that directs readers to related entries. In the e-book, these entries are linked so readers can navigate to related entries with a single click. Second, each entry also has its own stable link, which makes these entries easily available for use as course readings. Third, there is a search function in the electronic version, allowing readers to quickly