

## BOOK REVIEWS

### GENERAL

MACDONALD, MARGARET READ. *Ten Traditional Tellers*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xvi + 213 pages. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Paper US\$20; ISBN-10: 0-252-07297. Cloth US\$50; ISBN-10: 0-252-03055-9.

The book starts with simple questions about traditional tellers' choices: "Why do these folks tell? For whom? What started them on the teller's path?" (vii). The author attempts to find answers to these questions by approaching the "traditional teller's voice" (vii), which is, for example, insiders' comments on the context of their heritage.

The author concentrates on interviews where the tellers explain their attitudes and ideas concerning narrative practices (viii). Yet stories are also an essential part of the monograph. These stories represent different narrative genres, and as far as can be understood from the texts each storyteller's presentation style was personal. The tellers' voices are expressed in a totally different manner in these traditional narratives.

All the storytellers selected consider telling to be an important part of their lives (ix). They are also skilled in interpreting their storytelling tradition. They represent very different parts of the world —US (mainland, Hawai'i, Alaska), Tibet, Thailand, Brazil, Liberia, Ghana, and New Caledonia. Although at first sight this choice seems random, a closer look reveals the selection to be quite systematic. The author attempts to demonstrate that the storytelling experience is unique to each person (x). Perhaps this is correct. Nevertheless, I still wonder why has the author collected stories from *these* people in particular. Logically there must be something common that unites different storytelling traditions and the people connected to these practices.

Most of the storytellers presented seem to place strong emphasis on the didactic moment of their activities. They are aware that their tradition must be kept alive, communicated to a wider audience, and transmitted in some form (even if this process is not going on in its original cultural environment because that does not exist any more, at least for these tellers). This helps to guarantee that these stories and the storytelling tradition can continue, even if the narrators have been marginalized in their own culture and have become professional storytellers who represent their culture anywhere in the world (6, 38, 48, 79, 117, 151, 168, 198). It may be that they are creating the possibility for disappearing traditions to be revived at an appropriate time in the future. These storytellers do feel a sort of cultural responsibility (7–9, 195–96, 201–206).

For most of the storytellers, the childhood experience of listening to older people who told traditional narratives in their home villages has been crucial to the constitution of their identity as storytellers (2, 20–21, 38, 129, 170, 191). Also, the conflict between the traditional past and the much more technologically advanced and globalized present is important for that purpose (21).

Another important issue concerning the author's research is the presentation of the storytellers' own philosophical views on the reasons for keeping their storytelling traditions alive, even in the environment of a culture different from the origin of the tale (24, 49).

The circumstances in which the storytellers and the author communicated are always described (3, 20, 38, 80, and 128), and these descriptions provide a reflexive context for the stories and the author's interpretations.

An exception within this selection of professional storytellers is Lela Kiana Oman, the Inupiat woman who preserved stories in textual form and sometimes performed them purely for herself. It seems that the author had some difficulties in encouraging her to talk or recognize the special role of a storyteller. The stories she tells are not only those she remembered from her childhood but also those she heard from people she met throughout her life. At the same time, Lela is aware that scholars have used her stories without her permission for many years. So we can observe how this presents a problem: who owns a traditional culture? Lela's attitude towards storytelling is not simple or declarative. Furthermore, she appears to act more naturally than the other storytellers appearing in the book.

In general we can see that despite the remarkable uniqueness of each storyteller's personal tradition, there are significant commonalities in the interpretations of storytelling. Is this meant to mean that the storytelling tradition is somehow universal or do we simply get this impression because the author applies a similar interpretational style to each case?

From the concluding discussion we learn that the semi-acculturation (which may occur for any reason) of a talented individual can activate traditional storytelling skills, thus allowing this practice to be put into a totally new cross-cultural context. The selection of ten storytellers from different areas of the world makes it tricky to recognize any general trends. This "group" is too small for adequate cross-cultural comparison. We can observe a series of case studies that are unique in some way yet are connected to each other by the storytellers' enthusiasm for their respective culture and the author's sensible empathy.

Art LEETE  
University of Tartu  
Estonia