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MennoFolk: Mennonite and Amish Folk Traditions (review)

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ideology and gender politics, especially in its relationship to the classical Jewish languages and the majority tongues that surrounded and overlapped its territory.

Although Katz painstakingly charts the history of speakers of Yiddish and provides an excellent framework for understanding how the language emerged and grew, he is rather parsimonious with the details of how the language itself changed over time and distance. He delves into this subject most deeply in the chapter "Genesis," in which he shows not only how historical analysis of word variants and grammar allows for a rough estimate of the place and time of the language's origin but also how newly arrived Jewish immigrants from southern Europe and the Near East to Germany acclimated to the environment, playfully assigning biblical names to the European territories in which they found themselves. (Ashkenaz, the name given to Germany and later to all of Yiddishland, comes from the Book of Jeremiah.) Then again, Katz is clearly concerned primarily with elucidating the social contexts of Yiddish rather than linguistic nuts and bolts. As a professional linguist, Katz has covered the technical details of Yiddish in depth in many previous publications.

The final chapter of the book addresses the most controversial aspect of Yiddish: its future. Katz treats this topic with admirable clarity and honesty, and he states unapologetically what Yiddish enthusiasts consider, to put it gently, to be a bitter pill to swallow: the linguistic and demographic evidence suggests that, outside of academia, the world of secular Yiddish is doomed to die a natural death, albeit one tragically hastened by the Holocaust and Stalin's purges. The future of Yiddish lies with the Hasidic sects for whom the language has always been their native tongue and an important literary vehicle. Katz makes the claim that Yiddish as a living language cannot exist without its speakers maintaining intimate contact with the world of traditional Jewish scholarship and its associated classical languages—what he summarizes as the "trilingualism of old Ashkenaz" (p. 56)—as well as retaining a privileged place in the home and in daily life. As he observes, even the most radical leftist Yiddish writers were steeped in traditional learning before breaking with religion. Without

the classical teaching, Katz argues, too many of the nuanced expressions of Hebrew or Aramaic derivation lose their psychosocial significance and disappear from the lexicon. Likewise, without pride of place in ordinary communication, Yiddish will gradually cede ground to the host languages that surround it in every community. In short, Yiddish cannot long survive outside of a Jewish community that largely keeps to itself and uses Yiddish in at least some aspects of daily life. Katz therefore ends with a call for linguists to focus seriously upon the living language of the Hasidim, even as masters of secular Yiddish literature offer a few last pearls of their craft for us to appreciate.

MennoFolk: Mennonite and Amish Folk Traditions. By Ervin Beck. (Scottsdale, NY: Herald Press, 2004. Pp. 231, foreword, preface, 47 photographs and illustrations, notes, suggested readings, credits.)

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The forty-sixth addition to the Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History book series published by Herald Press, Ervin Beck's *MennoFolk: Mennonite and Amish Folk Traditions* demonstrates that Mennonites and Amish constitute a religious faith with folk traditions that can be traced to the Anabaptists in Europe in the sixteenth century. The nine chapters cover diverse traditional genres such as ethnic slurs, origin tales and beliefs, trickster tales, urban legends, protest songs, material culture, and festival. The author was an English professor at Goshen College from 1967 to 2003 and is considered to be an insider of the Mennonite and Amish culture.

Beck's purpose for writing this book is to make both Mennonites and interested non-Mennonites more aware of the group's cultural traditions. These traditions have been learned by word of mouth or customary example and have been transmitted to succeeding generations of Mennonites. They involve both long-established materials and creative variants, and they express feelings, ideas, and values that are im-

portant for the individuals who pass them on in informal performance venues and also for the community that unselfconsciously sponsors them (pp. 18–9). The study does not only focus on narrative. As the Mennonites and Amish are famous for their conscientious objection to war, there is a chapter on protest songs. Glass paintings of flowers, birds, and butterflies with moral statements are a common genre of folk art in the culture, and Beck provides an examination of this kind of cultural production. Almost every Mennonite home has a family record book, and genealogy is a vigorous form of historical memory practiced within the community, including the maintenance of detailed birth, marriage, and death records. The Relief Sale Festival is a folk festival, not a fair, organized by the Mennonites and for the Mennonites. Beyond these genres, this is, most importantly, a book of countless tales. It shows how individual stories can be retold in differing versions with various understandings and interpretations, and it also explores humorous narratives.

In sum, Beck's *MennoFolk* is an interesting introduction to the Mennonite folk culture through stories and other traditions. The language used in the book is plain and clear, and the concepts conveyed are easy to grasp. If a picture is worth a thousand words, the generous inclusion of photographs and illustrations in the book has definitely aided my understanding of the Mennonites' uniqueness as a people. Finally, this study is recommended to all who want to gain a general knowledge of Mennonite religious and folk traditions from an insider's perspective.

Bodies: Sex, Violence, Disease, and Death in Contemporary Legend. By Gillian Bennett. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005. Pp. x + 313, preface, key texts, references, afterword, index.)

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When we consider the 1960s, our attention cannot help but be drawn to urban and contemporary legends. This decade has taken on the connotations of revolution, rock and roll, sex,

hippies, and feminism, all jostling in the final and fateful confrontation of tradition and modernity. Here, fairies and monsters are replaced by aliens and hook-handed killers, and myth and folktale are replaced by news and history—but legend continues to partake of both. This is, perhaps, legend's central problematic. In her marvelously accessible but scholarly style, Gillian Bennett goes straight to the heart of this problematic, "the cultural clash of discordant categories and concepts" (p. xv). She reminds us that one of the key facts about the legend is that it is difficult to define. Legends are marked by their longevity, geographical spread, style, the multiplicity of audio and visual media through which they are disseminated, and the recurrence of specific details or motifs. Avoiding the cartographic pedantry (that is, the historical-geographical or Finnish method) of definition and delimitation, Bennett points out that legend is not a scientific term and, as such, it has no real referent. Legend can be superstition, relic, delusion, and curiosity, or it can be cool, new, sexy, urban, and teenaged. In the unfolding reassessments of the discipline, legend has been deconstructed or at least "declassified"—the distinction between reality and legend is no longer considered to be clear-cut. Contemporary legend, itself an orphan of the 1960s, has in many ways become an exemplar of the contemporary life of the discipline.

Bennett's *Bodies*, therefore, is about folklore as much as it is about contemporary legend. In her encyclopedic detail and analysis, Bennett draws attention away from the supposed novelty of the genre to broader generalizations about the discipline. Following Paul Klee's approach to painting, Bennett takes "a line for a walk," exploring thematically the evolving shape and form of six particular legend case studies from their early variants to their contemporary inflections (p. xv). Here the shape-shifting element of story is exemplified. Story is information, entertainment, strategy, news, gossip, rumor, warning, lesson, joke, photocopy, graffiti, fallacy, or political commentary—in short, a palimpsest of life. As a popular poetics of interpretation, legends may be better understood within contemporary discursive paradigms or contexts. They are a kind of social,