

## Book Reviews

*The Folkloric Art*. Ian William Sewell. Edmonton, AB: Qual Institute Press, 1998, 312 pages.

Reviewed by David W. Jardine, University of Calgary

*Just the Medicine I Needed*

It is only when the effort to understand what is said as true *fails* that we understand it as "his opinion." (Gadamer 1989, p. 264)

We might reformulate Gadamer's words to say "It is only when the effort to understand what is said as true fails that we understand it as 'her story.'" Too often in the world of educational discourse "the folkloric art"—the art that makes it more than simply self-annunciation—has been psychopathologized out of existence. The idea of "stories" has become weakened by becoming, rather than earthly places (*ecos*) of great healings where we all might meet and commiserate about this difficult profession of ours, rather psychological places that have no hale beyond the pathos of tellers' breath. To paraphrase Hillman and Ventura (1993), we've had what seems like 100 years of teachers' stories, and the world of teaching is often getting worse because we have kept our healing to ourselves. Rather than ushering us into questions of the ecological well-being of the disciplines we are entrusted to teach or the earthly well-being of our children and our fellow teachers and the ancestral ghosts that inhabit all of this, some stories remain quite literally pathetic: clearly important for the teller to have told, but difficult to listen to without a bit of a cringe.

So when I first glanced at this book, I hesitated, as you can well imagine. But I come here to these pages with great news: this book is often a beautiful thing, a place of great earthly healing. It is, in many of its tucked-away corners, true.

*The Folkloric Art* draws us out beyond the personal into a world where I might meet other persons and have my own face read back to me in ways I could have not imagined, ways more generous and sustaining than I have the personal strength to understand or maintain alone. Listen to the author's descriptions of his own work:

Storytelling as both a metaphoric and pedagogic bridge, storytelling as a meaningful orality in a student soundscape, storytelling as the medicine of coyote laughter, and storytelling as a life-giving intergenerational conversation. We are the Ancestors. We are the fiction of the story and the fact of its telling. It is our own footprints we most discover on the undiscovered island of our days. Our ordinary and daily tellings are the celebrations of our kind.

Sewell's work shares the weakness of my own work: it is occasionally bombastic, overextended, pretentious, calling, as my own work sometimes does, for a good scrubbing by the adjective police. However, he can often

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David Jardine is a professor in the Faculty of Education.

weave a multitude of voices together in sometimes masterful, sometimes breathtaking ways. This book is full of the words of Native elders, teachers, storytellers, and children, and sometimes, wonderfully, it is hard to tell who is who, because the weave is on behalf of something stronger and more necessary than such isolating, literally self-satisfying identification.

But there is another set of voices here that needs noting.

Here there are bears and moose and coyotes. There are rivers here, and patient, longstanding trees and soils, and these are all invoked as familiars that help keep honest the human voice, that help remind the human voice of its humus, its humiliating shit-and-piss ordinariness. The human voice and its stories are placed back into the embrace of an earth that prevents their psycho-pathetic self-isolation.

What a relief! Breathing room beyond the asphyxia of the personal.

One final point that seems to invert totally the whole logic of this review but in fact does nothing of the kind: part of the hermeneutic tradition suggests that understanding begins only when something addresses me, calls me squarely and by name into some claim I cannot avoid. A story becomes telling and not simply told only when it has your name on it, only when, as elders teach us, this story, boy, is not *mine* but *for you*. You are the reason Coyote showed up, you are the reason these soils have patiently waited all these years with their tellings. But here the personal arrives as the point of the telling(ness) of the story rather than as its "authorial" origin. The power of the story lies not in its teller, but in its telling(ness).

This book has arrived, as do all gifts, in a spookily timely fashion in my own life. It is just the medicine I needed. Ian, how did you know? And, of course, you didn't. Who knew was that hilarious storyteller Moose in his blue-hide rocker that makes up this book's colorful frontispiece. And just listen to the citation below it, remembering the dark and bone-cracking Alberta winter: "The best storyteller is the one who lets you live if the weather is bad and you are hungry."

Buy this book, but watch out! It just might already have your name in it.

#### References

- Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method*. New York: Continuum Books.  
 Hillman, J., & Ventura, M. (1993). *We've had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world's getting worse*. New York: HarperCollins.

#### *A Visual Narrative Concerning Curriculum, Girls, Photography Etc.*

Hedy Bach. Edmonton, AB: Qual Institute Press, 1998, 247 pages.

Reviewed by Wanda Hurren, University of Regina

Hedy Bach combines photography, conversation, and story in her study of the intersections of experience and the evaded in the (curricular) lives of four schoolgirls. *A Visual Narrative Concerning Curriculum, Girls, Photography Etc.* is a

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Wanda Hurren is an assistant professor teaching and researching in social studies education at the University of Regina. Among her interests is the exploration of alternative forms of research and embodied knowledge within curriculum theory/practice.