



BOOK REVIEW:

Jennifer Eastman Attebery. *As Legend Has It: History, Heritage, and the Construction of Swedish American Identity*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. 218 pages. ISBN: 978-0299344702. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.6557180>.

Heritage and memory are defining aspects of the history of migration. They are significant for individual migrants transitioning to a new homeland, but they are also a crucial feature of how their descendants make sense of migratory pasts. Jennifer Attebery's book *As Legend Has It* is a welcome contribution to this area of study. Focusing on heritage-making in Swedish American ethnic communities, it adds significantly to a relatively small body of scholarship on the cultural memory—broadly defined—of Scandinavian American history and relations.

Attebery is professor emerita of English specializing in folklore, and the study combines her expertise in literary analysis, Swedish American ethnicity, and empirical studies of folklife history. Structured across seven chapters with a preface, a substantial introduction, and a coda, the book offers analyses of historical legends told in Swedish American local histories from the West and Midwest, produced between the 1890s and the 2020s. The bulk of the sixty-one local histories surveyed are from the late twentieth century. Thirty-three of these include historical legends, and they form the empirical foundation of the book. These are histories that originated in oral storytelling, and, through publication by individual writers and editors or by joint committees, received textual form.

The first chapter delineates the phenomenon of historical legend, a “particular kind of storytelling” used in “explaining the history of a community” (ix). Historical legends are informally circulated narratives that are “told as true” (29). Although they can be mediated in many different ways, they are always set in the past and have what Attebery calls “an emic generic quality” (19); they are told from the point of view of individual migrants and their descendants. Attebery situates her study in relation to the genre of local history writing, and to a broader US discussion about heritage, taking a point of departure in current debates and conflicts over memories of slavery, the Civil War, and Indigenous dispossession.

Attebery has three aims with the book: to “better understand how American ethnic groups claiming whiteness have employed historical legend and local history writing”; to “better understand historical legend as a subgenre of legend”; and to “better understand one context for historical legend in America, vernacular local history writing” (15). As reflected in these aims, the thrust of the book is the theoretical study of a selected narrative phenomenon within ethnic history writing. Although the aims serve an overarching goal of creating a greater understanding of the role of legends for Swedish Americans historically and today, this contextual approach to legend studies is less pronounced in the book.

Chapter two digs into the specifics of Swedish American local history writing. Attebery emphasizes the generic patterns in local histories common in the United States such as local geography and accounts of settler-Indigenous contact. The chapter's analysis is focused on three "sample histories" produced through different means: one authored by a committee, one written by a single author, and one compiled by a single editor. The histories were produced in 1983, 1972, and 2008, respectively, though the dating of the publication does not appear to have been a key reason for its selection. Within each local history, Attebery identifies moments where writers and editors "break into their text with historical legends that dramatize, reinforce, or extend the narrative message" (45). The legends highlight themes such as the overcoming of hardships, entrepreneurial success, and the importance of religion, foodstuffs, and entertainment.

The methodology of reading historical legends embedded in local history writing is analyzed in chapter three. It focuses on a set of features such as "the transition from local history to storytelling," "the linkage among stories," the "underlying points" of the narratives, and the use of "motifs" and "tableau scenes" (57–60). The chapter continues the analysis of the selected local histories studied in chapter two—thus favoring in-depth analysis of a limited number of texts—showing ways in which stories about immigrant experiences are brought temporally into the present, making narratives about local history feel relatable.

The most interesting part of the book, from my point of view, is chapter four, which is devoted to content analysis. It is the chapter that most immediately connects to broader scholarship on US ethnic and immigration history. Attebery focuses on historical legends' relation to time and place and highlights a set of narrative patterns across the corpus. One observation is that very

few legends deal with events in Sweden. Instead, they are predominantly about the passage to North America and the place of arrival: these are narratives about transcontinental relocations, destination stories with a focus on "place-building experiences" (96), and narratives about next generations. Of these, the place-building narratives were most common, indicating the significance of making sense of life in a new environment and the creation of new societies and social orders through settlement. Within these narratives, stories about Native American encounters are prevalent.

Subsequent chapters explore in analytical depth the long-term community importance of historical legends. Chapter five investigates rhetorical strategies used by selected communities about shared pasts, and chapter six studies "ostensive behavior," or the acting out and acting on, such stories. These chapters demonstrate the way that historical legends are used to embody settler colonial experiences, placing readers in a past landscape and thus underlining for future generations the precarity and achievements of their ancestors. The final empirical examination, in chapter seven, analyzes how historical legends can serve as vehicles of contemporary critique. By allowing for discomfort and uncertainty, some legends can offer alternative perspectives and ask questions that open for imagining different futures.

As Legend Has It offers compelling close readings of historical legends. Its theoretically informed empirical analyses make it a valuable resource for scholars of US ethnic history generally and Swedish American history specifically. At the same time, it is somewhat difficult to evaluate what the legends tell us more exactly about Swedish American heritage in historical perspective. (Here it is worth pointing out that I come to this reading as a historian, and not as a folklorist.) The social, cultural, and political contexts within

which the legends and local histories were written down or expressed are not systematically accounted for. As a result, the historical legends seem to float rather freely in time. For example, having discussed a legend published in 1957, Attebery writes that “[a]pproaching immigrant narratives through the lens of ostension refines one’s sense of how storytelling is useful to storytellers, in this case the immigrants” (145). There is a temporal conflation here, in that legends may have originated among first-generation immigrants, but they were written into local histories many decades or a century later by descendants of immigrants. There are few discussions about why certain legends were framed the way they were, or the consequences and meaning of them at given historical moments.

Although Attebery does consider the issue of context theoretically, few contextual explanations are offered explicitly that help us understand the broader social and cultural significance of legend (re)telling. Given the rich empirical analysis, there are many materials and exciting insights to build on—perhaps, one can hope, in an article waiting to be written. A thicker contextualization of the legends, and an analytical acknowledgement of their role and influence in the US heritage landscape, has the potential to show how historical legends link up with the social and political climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This, though, is the view from a reader who read the book with great appreciation. It should be taken as a testament to the usefulness of Attebery’s study, and a belief that this will remain an important volume in the growing scholarship on heritage and memory in Swedish American history.

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