

RESPONSE: ON FOLKLORE BOOK REVIEWS

I agree that recent folklore book reviews (discussed in the FOLKLORE FORUM, II, 4 editorial) have sometimes been shockingly late, bland, and telegraphic. And you are so right about the "little short of outrageous" treatment accorded new books and reprints in certain journals. But when you tend to equate "adequate" with "lengthy" and "major" with "discursive" reviews, we part company. In a scholarly field like ours where something approaching 200 new book-length publications arrive annually for review, and where quarterly journals survive on subsidies, and indexed abstracts offer the only hope of staying anywhere near up-to-date, we need longer reviews about as much as John Henry needed the steam drill or Jesse James needed Robert Ford. Lord, Lord! ---any book review editor who doesn't dedicate himself to standing firm between reviewers' wordiness and readers' real needs is little short of a dirty little coward.

The review article is one thing (more an article than a review) and the genuinely intellectually meaty book review is another. The folklore journal that reserves space for the former will usually have to drop the latter, as JFI does. An abstracts journal and a booknotes column help to bridge the gap between ideal and reality. It may well be that others will see merit in your proposal for a new AFS journal of book reviews, but I can see only a disastrous invasion of verbiage resulting if you unleash reviewers upon books and allow them an open-ended format.

The review of Linda Dégh's Folktales and Society carried in the same issue of the FORUM (pp. 109-114, single spaced) should be a warning. It's a prime example of in-depth verbosity wherein the author proceeds to ineffectually discuss EVERYTHING. He is rather too extensive and quite inclined to general summary, and he's relatively insignificantly wordy. Any good editor would be able to whack that piece down to about two pages, except that the author should do it himself as penance.

I amused myself on a plane ride the other day by counting the generalized, repetitious, and imprecise language in that review. The author of the book is referred to as "the author" thirty-three times, and she usually "proceeds to" or "hastens to" do things. The favorite qualifier is "rather," with "relatively," "certain," "reasonably," etc. appearing as variants. There is a lot of self-conscious stuffing in the style, phrases like "while mentioning footnotes, we should also mention that" and "It is interesting to observe that," and especially "almost completely free from typographical errors (only two were noted)." Infinitives are awkwardly split, "amount" is used where "number" is meant, and clichés like "utmost importance," "overwhelming majority," "various phenomena," and "decided example" clog the style. Patterns of phrasing like "succinctly, yet thoroughly" and "brief, but more than adequate" pile words on words with no gain in meaning.

Your reviewer has obviously read the book thoroughly and thoughtfully. He has important things to say about it, and the book itself the close attention of all folktales scholars and most general folklorists as well. Thus, an adequate review is absolutely required in any serious folklore journal. But it is only the wealthy (or mimeographed?) journals that can afford to give a reviewer his head this way. I hope you won't take this as a hint that the FORUM should be converted to a review jour-

at a Bloomington party, was told that two girls from Bennington, Mass., called the European number and were told, "You're on the right track." They haven't been seen since. The Beatles paradise is supposedly on a Greek island. One publication reported that the London directory has no such number, another that an irate old lady answered.

Mrs. MacLaughlin informs us that Toad Hall, a Bloomington furniture and fixtures boutique, had a run on black light bulbs and in fact sold out their entire stock. This in connection with the need to examine one album cover in black light (?) for clues. Her informants told her that the song lyrics "roller coaster" and "silver hammer" refer to the fact that McCartney died from drug use.

Robert J. Adams generated a lively discussion in his large (c. 300 students) Introductory Folklore class and garnered a bulky file of short "texts." Charles Boiles also collected material in one of his folklore classes. At Eastern New Mexico University Rosin Jordan questioned her students about the story. They had heard the rumor but there seems to have been no mass interest on that campus.

Our thanks to Mrs. MacLaughlin, Mr. Adams, Professor Jördan and Mr. Ivey for giving us information. Mr. William Clements, Senior Archivist at the I.U. Folklore Archives informs us that some articles are on file there.

RESPONSE: ON FOLKLORE BOOK REVIEWS (Cont'd. from p. 166)

nal; you do too many other things too well for that. As for the certain other journals, they'll just have to learn to try harder.

Jan Harold Brunvand
Book Review Editor, JAF
Department of English
University of Utah

TWO LETTERS THAT NEVER GOT PUBLISHED (Cont'd. from p. 164)

evolved in England throughout the nineteenth century as a result of personal and intellectual relationships and influences. Of none of this does the reviewer speak, while he goes on about Easter eggs. Again, he says that Professor Dorson fails to remark on the relationship of European colonialism to folklore theory, when Chapter XI, "The Overseas Folklorists," begins with just this obvious point. He follows the assumption, too common among social scientists, that theories of the past are of interest only if they point to currently fashionable ideas.

The reasons for the hostility to folklore so evident in this essay in themselves form a curious chapter in the history of folklore studies. Part of the reasons lie in the misconceptions attached to the word "folklore"; part lie in the disdain of entrenched disciplines toward an outsider. If there were chairs of folklore in British universities, the great tradition of English folklore studies could be maintained without interference from sniggering anthropologists or meddling Yanks.

Richard M. Dorson
Folklore Institute
Indiana University