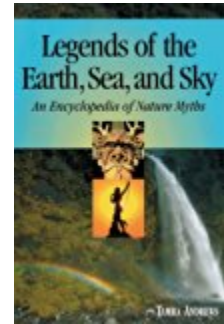


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tamra Andrews. *Legends of the Earth, Sea, and Sky: An Encyclopedia of Nature Myths*. Santa Barbara, Cal. and Oxford, England: ABC-CLIO, 1998. xiv + 322 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87436-963-2.

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When I first read a brief announcement of this book in *Parabola*, it sounded too good to be true—a convenient, one-volume encyclopedia of the world’s nature myths? What a boon that would be to folklorists, storytellers, and anyone else interested in the ways that various cultures have invested meaning in the natural world around them, or applied lessons learned “in the wild” to human society. Unfortunately, as my mother told me long ago, if something seems too good to be true, it all too often is.

Which is not to say that this is a bad book, provided one approaches it with appropriately limited expectations. Andrews writes in her preface that she has “limit[ed] the scope of the encyclopedia to a discussion of natural phenomena, and specifically to nonliving phenomena, such as wind, clouds, meteors, and tides. . . . The types of entries in the encyclopedia include natural forces, gods and goddesses of natural forces, and broad geographical areas” (p. vii). Myths from cultures with monotheistic religions are also excluded, because these philosophies “rely on the existence of one being with total control over natural forces” (p. viii) rather than on a multiplicity of gods and goddesses controlling various aspects of the environment.

The book’s subtitle, “An Encyclopedia of Nature Myths,” led me to expect a far broader range of coverage than the book actually provides. For instance, I had hoped for brief sketches of myths about different animals from different culture areas; however, animal myths are covered here only if Andrews believes they relate in some way to nonliving phenomena. For instance, while there is no entry for “Wolves,” there is one for “Birds,” because they “appeared in myths as symbols of celestial power”

(p. 27).

Each entry begins with several paragraphs, or in many cases a full page, of description that gives an extended discussion of myths related to the term, the gist of which is summarized for quick reference in the first sentence. Often Andrews retells one or more relevant myths in sketch form in this section. At the end of the entry, two to three references (very rarely more than that) are cited, and a list of related terms is provided in a “See also” section. Many black and white halftones illustrate the entries; there is usually at least one halftone every five pages or so.

For instance, the entry for “Thunder and Thunder Gods” is roughly a page long. Beginning by stating that “Thunder is evidence of sky power” (p. 240), Andrews proceeds to describe how “the ancients” held two seemingly contradictory sets of beliefs about thunder. On the one hand, “the sky gods used their weapons in anger,” hurling thunderbolts to punish misdeeds, but on the other, “with rumbling noise and sailing lightning bolts, they heralded the coming of spring and the rains” (p. 240). Because of this fertility aspect of thunder, which often arrived with the nourishing rains in the spring, many cultures saw their thunder gods as benevolent beings: “The Iroquois considered their thunder god, Hino, benevolent. With his companion, Oshadagea, the dew eagle, he brought moisture back to the earth. In India, Parjanya, a rain and thunder deity who preceded Indra, was also considered benevolent, and so were the dragons of Chinese and Japanese myths” (p. 241). But Zeus and Perun, high gods of the Slavic and ancient Greek pantheons, respectively, demonstrated the destructive power of thunder when they hurled their thunderbolts crashing down

to the earth below.

Andrews then moves from a discussion of thunder gods to myths about the origins of the sound of the thunder itself, which various cultures heard as “the bellowing of a ram, the howling of a dog, or the hissing of worms or serpents in the beak of Raven” (p. 241). She closes by noting the associations of thunder with trees, both because thunder made the leaves rustle, and because the thunderbolts often hit the trees, striking fire from them just as people kindled fire from wood in their hearths.

In the course of the entry on “Thunder,” Andrews retells several myths, my favorite being this explanation of why thunderbolts hit trees:

According to the Thompson River Indians of North America, Thunder asked Mosquito why he was so fat, and Mosquito replied that he sucked on trees. He didn’t want to admit that he really sucked on people, because he didn’t want thunder to eat up all the people and deny him of his prey. Mosquito’s plan worked, and his story explained why thunder now shoots trees instead of people“ (p. 241).

Two references are listed at the end of the entry for “Thunder and Thunder Gods,” and then the reader is referred to the following terms under the “See also” section: Hammers, Lightning, Meteors and Meteorites, Perun/Perkunas, Rain and Rain Gods, Storms and Tempests, Thor, Thunderbirds, Zeus.

Legends of the Earth, Sea, and Sky contains hundreds of such entries; I can’t tell you exactly how many, because a count is not provided, nor is there a master list of terms or even a Table of Contents. There is a useful Subject Index, which lists both terms and major subjects mentioned within the entries (for instance, “Mosquito” is listed in the subject index, even though there is no separate entry for it in the text, because it is mentioned under the entry for “Thunder”), and a Culture Index, which lists terms by geographical area. A Bibliography is included, though it is only eight pages long, which seems rather skimpy for “an encyclopedia of nature myths.” The “Appendix: Guide to Primary Sources” displays a similar lack of depth; for instance, instead of listing the major folklore collections for the myths and legends of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, the appendix simply refers the reader “to the entries for each geographical area in Mircea Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion*” (p. 279).

Although it may seem perverse to delve into just one entry from an encyclopedia in such detail, the listing

for “Thunder” highlights many important aspects of this book. First and foremost, one is struck by the clear and concise writing style, and the frequently quite colorful language—“rumbling noise and sailing lightning bolts” (p. 240), for example—that makes the book quite pleasant to read. In fact, I think the writing style is accessible and interesting enough to capture the attention of even grade-school children (at least briefly!). The geographic and cultural breadth of coverage is also amply demonstrated; this entry include gods and myths from ancient Greece, the Iroquois, India, China, Japan, Slavic peoples, and Norway, and other descriptions provide references to beliefs from Oceania and Africa as well.

“Thunder” also showcases Andrews’s special knowledge of celestial lore. She is a former research librarian with the McDonald Observatory and the Astronomy Department of the University of Texas at Austin, and frequently contributed pieces about star and sky lore to the “Star Date” public broadcasting show and magazine produced at the observatory. Thus, it makes sense that entries on the constellations and other celestial bodies are some of the best in this encyclopedia.

On the other hand, the listing for “Thunder” also displays the irritating lack of consistency in cross-references that recurs throughout the book. While the reader is directed to several entries for specific thunder gods (e.g. Thor and Zeus), the entry for “Illapa,” the Incan thunder god (p. 113), is not mentioned. Under the entry for “Serpents and Snakes” (p. 210), the Mesoamerican feathered serpent and major deity Quetzalcoatl is not listed in either the description or the “See also” section, even though the encyclopedia does contain an entry for “Quetzalcoatl” (pp. 185-86), and so on.

Perhaps the most dismaying aspects of this encyclopedia from the points of view of a scholar wishing to use it as a starting point for research or a storyteller wanting to look up the original of a tale mentioned in it are the reference citation style and the paucity of references overall. In the “Thunder” section, for instance, a storyteller might wish to look up an original version of the tale of how Mosquito tricked Thunder. But because the references are listed in a group at the end of the entry, rather than singly after the myth to which they relate, one must look up each reference and try to guess which one the tale in question came from. Because only two references are listed at the end of this section, and one of them is specific to classical thunder myths, process of elimination would lead one to suspect the Mosquito tale comes from the other, a monograph. But even here one

encounters further frustration, because the page number references to where the tale might be found in the monograph are not listed, which would mean one would have to hope the book in question had a good index.

As mentioned above, most entries contain no more than two or three references. Perhaps the publisher placed this limitation on the author to save space, but it is no favor to those wishing to use this book for research. It also leads to some puzzling omissions. To take just one example, the entry for “Serpents and Snakes” does not cite, and Andrews’s bibliography does not include, Balaji Mundkur’s 1983 book *The Cult of the Serpent: An Interdisciplinary Survey of its Manifestations and Origins* (Albany: State University of New York Press), which is a major publication for those interested in snake lore.

Just a cursory check of several references in my library turned up one that was cited incorrectly in Andrews’s bibliography: the citation for *The Sacred Paw: The Bear in Nature, Myth, and Literature* omits the name of one of the two coauthors (Paul Shepard is listed as sole author, even though Barry Sanders coauthored the book). A minor error, perhaps, but it leads me to suspect there may be other errors in the citations as well.

There are also some troubling omissions in the entries themselves. Again taking “Serpents and Snakes” as an example, in addition to not mentioning myths of Quetzalcoatl in this section, Andrews also does not discuss tiesnakes or uktenas, which are important snake-like monsters in the lore of several southeastern Native American tribes. She also doesn’t include myths about the ouroboros (“tail-devouring”) serpent, a concept which probably originated with the Phoenicians.[1]

So where does this leave us? On the one hand, *Legends of the Earth, Sea, and Sky* is a well-written and very approachable encyclopedia of myths about nonliving natural phenomena. Even the most experienced folklorist will probably find something new here, and there is plenty of material for storytellers to work with. On the other hand, the incomplete and frustrating use of references, and almost complete lack of citations for primary sources, limit the work’s usefulness to scholars (while primary source texts are listed for areas outside of Africa,

Oceania, and the Americas, complete citations are not given, and no specific editions are recommended).

All in all, I would recommend this book for public and school libraries through the high school level, and for individuals wishing a broad but not particularly deep or comprehensive overview of nature myths from a wide variety of cultures. ABC-CLIO is primarily a reference publisher, and the high price of this book—\$65.00—also will limit its accessibility to individuals with limited means.

What I would dearly love to see, though, is a *comprehensive* encyclopedia of nature myths about both living creatures and nonliving phenomena, complete with detailed references keyed to each myth or god/goddess or creature mentioned, and perhaps to audio files of storytellers performing key myths. Obviously this would be a considerably more daunting undertaking, probably requiring the labor of many hands, and perhaps better suited to publication on the world wide web rather than in book form. But it would be enormously useful to scholars, storytellers, and the general public alike.

Note

[1]. K. P. Aravaanan writes that “the Phoenicians considered the serpents in the form of swallowing its tail, as the symbol of their God of heaven Taaut” (p. 37 in *The Serpent Cult*, 1988). Philo of Byblos, who lived around the first and second centuries A.D., alludes to the ouroboros serpent in his *Phoenician History* (which he claimed was a translation of the works of Sanchuniathon, composed in the second half of the second millennium B.C.; see mention of the snake that “consumes itself” at 815:7). Macrobius, a compiler of earlier scholarship who lived in the fourth century A.D., also links the ouroboros serpent and Phoenician religious belief in his *Saturnalia* (1, 9, 12: “hinc et Phoenices in sacris imaginem eius exprimentes draconem finxerunt in orbem redactum caudamque suam devorantem, ut appareat mundum ex se ipso ali et in se revolvi”).

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