

Patricia Leavy. *Iconic Events: Media, Politics and Power in Retelling History.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. 199 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7391-1520-6.



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In *Iconic Events: Media, Politics and Power in Retelling History*, sociologist Patricia Leavy examines the process by which historical moments become "iconic" and defines the media's role within that process. In doing so, Leavy focuses on media coverage and discourse surrounding such varied events as the sinking of the *Titanic* (1912), the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. fires (1911), the Columbine High School shootings (1999), the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001, and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (1941).

The book's central argument is that the American press not only plays a major role in deciding which events become staples in collective memory, but it influences how these events are interpreted and constructs "very particular and limited narratives" about the events based on simplified mythical concepts (p. 2).

But the events chosen for discussion have little in common, other than the thread of catastrophe that runs through each and their status as "iconic," which Leavy defines as an event that undergoes "intense initial interpretive practices" but also becomes "mythic within the culture through

its appropriation into other political or social discourses" and "eventual use within commercial culture" (pp. 4-5). The implication of the idea is that "iconic" events are those that have received substantial press attention in their own times, with meanings eventually co-opted by special interest groups, and with narratives that become re-told in a wide variety of entertainment media.

The book is organized, chapter by chapter, to illustrate that process. The book begins with a chapter discussing collective memory and the role the press plays in constructing it. It also briefly lays out the process model employed in the construction of events as "iconic." First, an event occurs, and media coverage of that event overshadows all other events occurring at the same time. Second, in the days, weeks, and years that follow the initial event, special interest groups co-opt the narrative of the event in order to construct meanings from it that bolster the groups' overall public positions. And finally, narratives of the event are reconstructed through commercial culture in such a way as to make them both commodities and myths. The events chosen for study here, the

book says, were chosen precisely because they had been elevated to mythic status in popular culture.

The second chapter offers brief historical sketches, drawn from a wide pool of scholarship, for each of the specific moments in history that the book illustrates, drawing on historical record and showing where the record differs from the perception of the event in popular culture. Significantly, though, it does not attempt to revise or assert new impressions of that history, but simply lays out the basic, accepted narrative that accompanies each of the disparate events chosen for study in an attempt to ground readers in their history. This chapter's primary purpose is to provide readers with an accurate timeline of the events in order to make sense of the analysis that follows.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters follow the process identified by the book in explaining how these simple historical moments became "iconic." Chapter 3 examines the press coverage of each event on the day it occurred and for the two weeks following, showing how each event was represented through the news media. Chapter 4 demonstrates how special interest groups usurped these representations and used them for their own ends at the time the events occurred. For example, the book shows how women's suffrage became a key issue in coverage devoted to the sinking of the *Titanic*. Should women have allowed themselves to be rescued before the men? The questioning of naval chivalry evolved into a discussion about women's value to society and whether the women on board the *Titanic* should have offered their places to the important men on board. Chapter 5 extends this argument to the third stage of the process, showing how the narratives of each of the events chosen for study were told, portrayed, and commodified through popular media, including film and television.

Finally, chapter 6 makes the most important points about the nature of so-called iconic events and the press's role in making them "iconic" by

employing exhaustive coverage at the time of the event. It also presents an intriguing model for thinking about this process, showing three interpretative phases: (1) the initial interpretive phase, which includes press and state responses, political uses, and popular culture adaptations; (2) myth construction, showing the meta-narrative of the event with mythical concepts that develop, become appropriated and translated into other agendas, and are later reduced; and (3) the effect of interpretation, as shown through the represented event, the representational event, and the reinsertion of the event into commercial culture. This model presents scholars with a framework for thinking about how events become "iconic," and it deserves attention and future research.

The strengths of the book can be found primarily in the research surrounding the sinking of the *Titanic*. Indeed, the compelling narrative of that particular event, together with the fascinating discussion of how that event was used by varied political groups to attack and/or defend women's suffrage, makes for absorbing reading. The preponderance of material from popular culture surrounding the *Titanic* also provides readers with the strongest evidence of the process identified in the book. This is likely because the event happened nearly a hundred years ago, and time, in this case, was an asset in exploring how such an event is constructed, deconstructed, and retold through varied media outlets, up to and including the narratives connected to the 1997 film *Titanic*.

The other examples in the book are less compelling, though, in part because time has not yet provided such evidence. The shootings at Columbine High School and the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center occurred within the last ten years, and the evidence and examples related to those events are thinnest here.

The wide disparity in the types of events chosen for discussion also frustrates readers who expect to see some specific similarity in individual case studies, compiled for the purposes of uncov-

ering new paradigms. While underlying tragedy marks all events, each remains distinctly different, and readers are left to wonder if catastrophe might be a contributing factor to the process model. Would an event that was not catastrophic go through the same stages? Or does an event require catastrophe to become "iconic"? The book does not address those questions, which need exploration.

Still, the idea behind this work, and the first steps uncovered here regarding the process by which the press, special interest groups and entertainment media make events "iconic," show merit and are worthy of further discussion, especially for scholars whose work focuses on collective memory and the press's role in constructing such memory.

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