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Published on H-War (August, 2022)

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In *Re-Living the American Frontier: Western Fandoms, Reenactment, and Historical Hobbyists in Germany and America Since 1900*, historian Nancy Reagin takes the reader on a journey into two historical fan communities based in the aesthetics and history of the American West. These communities are the German Western fandom, beginning with the writings of Karl May and continuing into a wealth of clubs dedicated to role-playing personas of cowboys and Indians, and the fandom around Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* series and their preservation of Wilder’s homesites. Reagin is a professor of European history and gender studies at Pace University in New York City. She has written multiple books on German women’s roles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as several journal articles about links between history and fan studies, including several about German Western fandom.

Reagin argues that fandoms, in particular historical fandom, change with the flow of time. Using the examples of the German Western and the *Little House* fandoms, she charts the origins of both groups and follows them through major social and political changes over the course of the twentieth century. She follows both East and West German fandoms—how they started and the activities that fans undertook in their clubs, from making costumes and props for their cowboy and Indian personas to producing plays of favorite stories from May’s books. The *Little House* fandom, while younger than the German Western one, nevertheless saw many changes in its social and political reality in the mid-to-late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It largely focused on the preservation of Wilder’s family homesites in the American Midwest but also produced costumes and took part in period handicrafts such as butter making and quilting. Both fandoms had to contend with major changes spurred by the American Indian Movement as it reexamined many facets of American history, especially the frontier; this reexamination did not leave the fandoms untouched. As the author writes about the subsequent vectors of those fandoms as she closes out the introduction, “This book explores the places they went” (p. 16), and oh, did they.

The book intentionally offers itself as a model for collaborative works between the disciplines of history and fan studies. Reagin writes, “[This book] demonstrat[es] ... what we can learn by us-
ing historical methods and sources to study fan communities over a longer period of time,” expla-
ning that much of the work on fandoms only explores the present or recent past (p. 6). This book's attempt to break that mold is, as Regain puts it, “the most important contribution this study tries to offer.”

Reagin drew on her academic training as a historian for her archival research and consulta-
tion of other works in the field. However, as is laid out in the introduction, she uses the scholarly methods from a large array of disciplines. She also makes use of fieldwork and interviews at both fan sites and with members of the fan communities. In her notes, she writes about this process, specifically citing Kristina Busse’s "The Ethics of Studying Online Fandom" in reference to her policy in interviews and the option of anonymity for interviewees if desired.[1] This combination of sources and gathering methods is effective in keeping the narrative academic while including information from the participants themselves about what they do and, often, why they do it.

Reagin does well to make the book accessible to a broad audience, providing fan studies terms and context in the introduction. The writing is accessible, keeping in mind the book's broad audi-
ence. While a basic understanding of American and German history will undoubtedly improve the experience, the author dutifully includes historical context for the events and ideas referenced. This is most clear in the first chapter with Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis and in chapter 3 concerning Germany’s split into East and West.

Headings are placed throughout the chapter to keep the reader engaged and to establish a more specific topic for the following paragraphs. It makes for a wonderful device and evades the pit-
falls of overuse, with some chapters not needing to be subdivided in the same manner as others. For example, chapter 2 has no subheadings and chapter 4 has seven. These headings allow the book to flow while keeping the reader keyed in to the particular part of the topic being discussed.

The book is laid out sensibly, with the intro-
duction and the first chapter establishing the play-
ers—German Western fans and Wilder fans—as well as some fan studies terminology and history, with special attention to historical fan communit-
ies. There is also a brief explanation of Turner's frontier thesis and how it and other works like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show affected perceptions of the American West. The book then goes on to Karl May and the associated German fandoms (chapters 2 and 3) before engaging with Wilder fans (chapter 4). One could wish for more discus-
sion on Wilder's works and their fans as the book seems in some ways to be more about the German Western fandoms, even in chapters 1 and 5. The book then delves into responses to changing times and political realities (chapter 5), before conclud-
ing with a discussion of recent developments in the fandoms discussed in the book.

The book includes thirteen photos and illustra-
tions and two maps by cartographer Bill Nel-
son. The German photos are largely courtesy of the Karl May Museum Archives. The images showing club members in their costumes give visual context to the author's writing on the detail of the costumes. They also can be used to better imagine Indianist and cowboy role-players in the rest of the book. The map of East and West Germany in chapter 3 succinctly shows the reader the discon-
nect that fans on both sides of the new border felt as locations and events important to the fandom were now on different sides of the Iron Curtain. The Little House pictures are helpful in setting the scene of the many homestead sites that the author describes in the American Midwest. The map charting the sites discussed gives the reader a sense of the region as well as the distance that fans travel on the fan pilgrimage route.

While the work largely utilizes archival docu-
ments, interviews, and other primary sources, with much of the German material being sourced
from the Karl May Museum Archive and translated by Reagin, the book does not shy away from other academic works. This can be seen in the references to Glenn Penny’s 2013 book, *Kindred by Choice*, and Anita Clair Fellman’s 2008 publication, *Little House, Long Shadow* (among others) in the German and Wilder sections respectively. That said, Reagin herself points out that “little scholarly work has been done on historically focused fan communities” (p. 5). The book is especially valuable for its discussions of German Western fandom because, unlike many of the works listed in the notes, it covers German Indianists in the broader context of German Western fandom and not as a historical anomaly.

Reagin’s work is a perfect illustration of how historical and fan study methodology can be intertwined to produce a thought-provoking and valuable work. Whether read by an expert or a novice, its argumentation is convincing and thorough, and its concepts are interesting and worthy of further study. It can be hoped that *Re-Imagining the American Frontier* will be a trendsetter in joint historical and fan studies works and not an outlier.

Note


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

**Citation:** Patrick Dempsey. Review of Reagin, Nancy Ruth. *Re-living the American Frontier: Western Fandoms, Reenactment, and Historical Hobbyists in Germany and America Since 1900*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2022.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57488

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