

well set out in the chapter 'Men of Bronze (U.S., 1980) and Liberators (U.S., 1992): Black American Soldiers in Two World Wars'. The discussion of the controversies aroused by these films serves as a timely warning of the power of the moving image over (and next to) the written word.

The chapters within this volume elucidate a number of films, most of which are about World War II in some respect. (The exceptions are *All Quiet on the Western Front*, [U.S.A. 1930] and the documentary *Men of Bronze* [U.S.A. 1980].) The discussions tend to centre, firstly, on the various films' production histories and/or intentions, and, secondly, upon their content. In the latter regard, the concentration inclines upon the manner in which the content (dramatic and narrative, visual and aural) relate to cultural memory and perception of World War II.

The fictional films chosen for analysis have all been produced, with one exception, before 1962. The documentaries discussed have all been produced since 1980. This seems to imply that World War II has ceased to make claims on the popular memory, or that popular memory of World War II is firmly established, a claim which can be confirmed by the dearth of World War II war films made by Hollywood in the past twenty years (only *Memphis Belle* [USA 1990] stands out). Thus it is not coincidental that the chapters that deal with documentary (and even the most casual viewer of SBS will be aware of just how World War II fascinates the documentarist) choose those films which question the very divergences between 'official' memory and personal memory, films which challenge particular interpretations of history. It is not quite as apparent that the same 'privilege' is extended to fictional film, although the chapter, 'Ivan's Childhood (USSR, 1962) and *Come and See* (USSR, 1985): Post-Stalinist Cinema and the Myth of World War II' is salutary in this regard.

The shift that World War II on film has taken from fictional representation to documentary reproduction that the chronological dichotomy of the book implies complicates rather than simplifies the relationship of film and history and the historian's place in that relationship. This addition to the past decade's expanding bibliography of works that address the area of film and history provides, via 'case studies', a range of accessible responses to that situation. It also provides useful insights into a small group of significant films. The editors' perceptive concluding chapter does rather take the moral high ground and come down in favour of academic history at the expense of popular culture. Popular culture, one suspects, will prevail. It is perhaps appropriate that it should but the vigilance demonstrated within the pages of this book is anything but misplaced.

Neil Rattigan

Gale, Steven H., *West African Folktales*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1995. Pp. xx + 203. ISBN 0-8442-5812-1 (paper). \$US 14.95.

Gale, Steven H., *West African Folktales: Instructor's Manual*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1995. Pp. 56. ISBN 0-8442-5814-8 (paper).

Folktales are a wonderful means of providing entertainment on one level, and of sustaining and perpetuating core belief systems, morality and appropriate behaviour on another. In cultures that rely largely on oral transmission, the repertoire of folktales is vast, rich and varied. This small sampling from 15 West African countries offered by Gale provides much evidence of that richness.

There is no doubt that Western literature, art, dance, theatre and music have their heritage in folk traditions and today many are harking back to these simple truths and uncluttered

expressions not so much for nostalgic indulgence, but in search of guidelines for ways of living that are more in accord with the natural world and to rebuild a relationship with it. There is still a great need in our times of disenchantment with the shallowness of fast food, entertainment and easy 'fixes' to answer the timeless questions of who we are, why we are here, and what we should do. Looking to the folklore of other traditions can be valuable in helping and turning us to reassess and rediscover the importance of our own folklore.

West African Folktales comprises some 42 folktales from the countries of Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The bulk of the tales come from Liberia where Gale was engaged as Fulbright Professor at the University of Liberia in 1973-74. He began collecting these tales as the result of an initiative by his students to compare themes in their own folklore with that of Western texts such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick*. The 23 Liberian folktales were gathered and translated into English by his students. [Editor. It may be noted that a similar field exercise, to collect tales known to a (peer) group of young adults, was conducted in compiling the Chinese collection reviewed elsewhere in this journal.] The remaining tales were, we have to assume, collected on his travels through West Africa. Gale also assisted editorially with translations into acceptable English and rewrote sections that suffered from less than ideal expression.



He encouraged his students to discuss and analyse the folktales and so we are spared some of the heady literary theory regarding oral literature that frames modern collections. There are teased out a number of recurrent themes and particular characteristics. These analyses are what we would expect of folktales, that is, the language is that of the vernacular, and the themes were:

... concerned with (a) greed; (b) pride; (c) a lack of faith...; (d) untrustworthiness; and (e) historical narratives... (p. xvii),

and there is a broad division between animal and human stories, and a lack of local detail.

Beyond these generalizations, the stories are completely African in their content, style and sensibility. In this respect we should be wary of seeing such a small and skewed sample as a way of interpreting African culture and of drawing conclusions about African cosmologies. The stories, as they are presented in this text, are intended to stand on their own as 'literary' works, though there is some difficulty with such a concept, too, for they are separated from their cultural context and particularly from the performance aspect of the telling of them.

It is all too easy for us to miss the significance of some of the apparently minor players and circumstances. For example, an extensive set of moral tales from Ghana are based around Anansi the spider, an anthropomorphic manifestation of wisdom and cunning. Anansi appears quite undistinguished in one of the tales from Ghana. Likewise, the cockroach, *Kakalika*, although not referred to in this text, is regarded with some respect in Ghana as an industrious, opportunistic and resourceful worker. Therefore, one can but wonder at the significance of the people, animals, places and gods in the stories provided here in the absence of appropriate background information. Beyond a certain point, the deep meanings of these tales are lost on us.



Certainly, Gale is aware of the shortcomings of such a collection and makes some effort to spell these out. He refrains from making excessive claims by stating that his purpose in presenting this set of folktales

is to provide an opportunity for readers to be exposed in an enjoyable way to the folktales of West Africa and through these tales come to learn something about the West African peoples and their cultures. (p. xx).

While he is successful in providing a valuable addition to that purpose, it should be noted that the book, by design or accident, leans heavily towards the North American college textbook genre and is in danger of being lost among the countless other resources. More positively, it should however be particularly interesting for those African-Americans seeking tangible connections with mother Africa.

The stories are grouped according to their country of origin and organised alphabetically. This is certainly helpful when quickly looking for items according to geography. The folktales themselves are entertaining and would be particularly engaging for young children as well as the adult reader — I especially enjoyed the Nigerian tale 'The Creation of the Universe'. They vary in length from one to eight pages and can therefore be selected according to the age of one's listening audience. The main book is an uncluttered collection with short 'Afterword' and 'About the Author sections'. The 'Afterword' provides an interesting insight into Liberian history and politics, suggesting further that it is aimed at an African-American audience.

The accompanying *Instructor's Manual*, while a curious mix of pedagogy and

information, is an essential complement to the folktales if they are to be more than mere light reading. It suggests ways of using the main text in the classroom to raise interest and questions under the broad headings of Genre, Folktales and Literature, Africa, Cultural Issues, and Language, as well as providing a number of suggestions for writing assignments. In the following section, a series of questions — with some explanations — are provided for each story. An example from the Nigerian creationist tale is linked to:

2. *Why do you think this tale shows the gods disagreeing and demonstrating various weaknesses? Answers may vary. The disagreements and weaknesses make the gods more approachable; they also help to explain why the world is imperfect.* (pp. 17-18)

Such a question could give some university students cause for concern, although admittedly, these questions are suggested as a means of stimulating discussion.

A short thumbnail sketch of each of the West African countries represented is included. This geographical information is listed under the headings: Population, Geography, Government, Economy, Finance, Transport, Communications, Health, Education, Literacy, and History. As something of a bonus, Gale lists 12 West African recipes, detailing preparation and offers suggestions of how to incorporate some of the other senses in the learning experience. Included here are snippets of cultural information and a short list of Cook Books — which I will certainly follow up.

A most valuable ending to this cultural odyssey is the 'Bibliography' which he has organised into the following sections: African Folktales, Collections; Africa: General Studies; Africa: Literary Studies; and an informal list of journals, papers, biographies and critiques. A small index would have been useful, and perhaps suggested thematic groupings would be similarly helpful.

Nonetheless, despite its confessed limitations, *West African Folktales* is a worthy addition to any folklorist's library and is highly recommended to any reader wishing to expand their insight into and (comparative) knowledge of folktales and folklore. I also advise, as cultural therapy, to gather a group of children to recount some of these tales with appropriate theatrics.

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