

Journal of Folklore and Education Book Reviews

THE ART OF RELEVANCE



NINA SIMON

The Art of Relevance, by Nina Simon. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2016, 196 pp.

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Nina Simon's newest work, *The Art of Relevance*, provides an approachable and accessible look at the topic of relevance and its importance to the work and livelihood of nonprofits. Although best known for her work in museums, Simon uses her latest book to consider relevance not only in museums but also in the wide variety of nonprofits whose efforts can be affected by relevance or the lack thereof.

Simon defines a relevant experience or organization as one that "gives you new information, it adds meaning to your life, it makes a difference to you" (29). This simple and compelling definition is used in conjunction with a "though-the-door" analogy to guide the book: You must get people to your door, but you must also get them into the room to truly engage with your nonprofit. And getting people through the door and into the room is just the beginning; the thing happening in that room has to be "brilliant" (55) and relevant to compel the user/visitor/patron to come back and partake again. Being relevant isn't a marketing campaign alone, it is about making honest and true connections to your constituents, colleagues, and community; it is about meeting them where they are and providing what *they* need and want, not what *you think* they need or want.

Relevance is an oft-discussed topic by those who create and conduct programs or lead

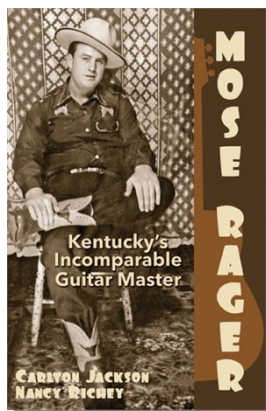
nonprofits, and this book is a welcome addition to that conversation. It encourages the reader to articulate the needs and wants of both the organization and those being served to ensure they are in alignment.

One of the book's strengths is the ease with which the reader can approach it—it doesn't take hours to get through a single chapter because the writing is clear and concise. The chapters are broken into many subsections—each clearly labeled—that address the topic at hand and illustrate the point using anecdotes directly from the nonprofit world.

While also being a strength of the book, the nonacademic nature may be frustrating for some readers. Simon briefly mentions the work of Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber to help guide her definition of relevance, but she doesn't specify which of their pieces influenced her definition. A quick Internet search reveals such information, but the lack of citations in the book could be considered detrimental by those looking for academic information on the topic of relevance. There were opportunities throughout to insert academic research to enrich the text further and make it a greater resource for students and academics in the nonprofit world. Simon is a strong, no-nonsense writer and her style would have kept it approachable and functional even with these additions.

Taken as a whole, this book is useful for those who work in the nonprofit world. The examples and anecdotes encourage the reader to stop and

ask the questions that really need to be asked but might be otherwise glossed over in the rush to do the things that need to be done.



Mose Rager: Kentucky's Incomparable Guitar Master, by Carlton Jackson and Nancy Richey. Morley: Acclaim Press, 2016, Cloth, 157 pp., illus.

Greg Reish

Greg Reish is Director of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University as well as a record producer, author, and performer.

One of the most distinctive, celebrated, and influential country guitar styles of the 20th century is the so-called “thumbpicking” that emerged from Muhlenberg and its neighboring counties of western Kentucky. A regional style rooted in the ragtime fingerpicking of early 20th-century African American guitarists and genteel parlor styles of the Victorian era, Western Kentucky thumbpicking offers a lively and virtuosic approach that intertwines syncopated melody and a steady, driving bass line played with the right thumb. The style became an essential part of mid-century commercial country in the hands of such superstars as Merle Travis and Chet Atkins and continues to flourish today. It is also frequently cited as an important, if indirect, influence in other popular styles, particularly through the Everly Brothers’ father Ike Everly and bluesman Arnold Shultz, one of the formative influences on the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe. But despite their widely acknowledged importance, relatively little is known about seminal thumbpickers like Everly, Shultz, and Muhlenberg County pioneers Kennedy Jones and Mose Rager.

The late Carlton Jackson, Distinguished Professor at Western Kentucky University, collaborated with one of his former students, Nancy Richey, now also a faculty member at

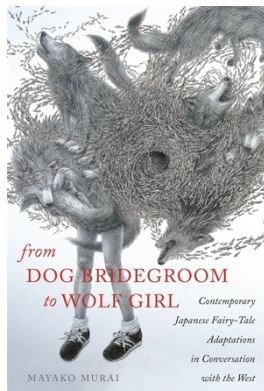
WKU, to offer a corrective in *Mose Rager: Kentucky's Incomparable Guitar Master*. A slim and easily readable book, it offers a mere 74 pages of text in its main body, organized chronologically into ten chapters, plus a foreword by contemporary thumbpicking master Eddie Pennington, a generous helping of wonderful photographs (some never before published), a bibliography, endnotes, and an index.

In this short biographical portrait, Jackson and Richey paint a compelling picture of Rager as an extraordinarily talented musician who struggled with the darker side of life as a professional musician, which he ultimately chose to renounce in favor of community, church, and family. A native and lifetime resident of Drakesboro, Kentucky, in Muhlenberg County, Rager is presented as a working man and active local musician, balancing his job in the coal mines with a willingness to play “where anyone would listen, most of the time with a borrowed guitar” (40). The authors enhance our knowledge of Rager’s musical associates, the other pioneers of thumbpicking that influenced him and with whom he played, like Shultz, Everly, and Jones. The discussion in the first half of the book constitutes an illuminating case study of the

fluid boundaries between folk and popular music, between amateurism and professionalism, in the mid-South during the Great Depression. From 1943 to 1948 Rager played to national audiences from the stage of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville and on the road, touring with distinguished country artists Grandpa Jones, Ernest Tubb, and Curly Fox and Texas Ruby.

In the 1950s, however, Rager made the decision to give up this career to return home to his family and to avoid the temptations of drinking. It was a life-changing religious reawakening that Jackson and Richey take pains to explain and justify. In the process, the authors do at times cross over into their own evangelism, as when they provide a series of quotations from contemporary Christian authors without any hard evidence that Rager had read them (99), and when theological principles are presented as essential truths with no supporting citations (103). A similar religiosity seems to frame the book's subsequent section, which describes Rager's rediscovery by Archie Green and other luminaries of the folk revival as the "miracle" of Rager "resurrected" (104–105).

Despite its shortcomings and overall brevity, *Mose Rager: Kentucky's Incomparable Guitar Master* will prove valuable to anyone interested in the history of vernacular guitar styles or the celebrated music of Western Kentucky. As a biography co-written by a historian and a librarian, it includes practically no substantive discussion of the music itself; those looking for analytical explanation of the workings of Rager's complex style will have to continue to rely on published instructional materials by Eddie Pennington, Tommy Flint, and others. Jackson and Richey have, however, provided a much-needed portrait of this little-known but influential musician. Moreover, they have done a fine job of placing Rager within his communal context, giving that part of his life story as much attention as his professional years. The book could prove useful in a classroom or other pedagogical situation thanks to its accessibility and its compelling description of a talented man caught between the potentially destructive forces of the country music industry and the stability of family and home.



From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl: Contemporary Japanese Fairy-Tale Adaptations in Conversation with the West, by Mayako Murai. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015, 192 pp., illus.

Katharine Schramm

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For those of us struggling to investigate issues of locally specific readings of cross cultural media and how they reflect and respond to multicultural influences, Mayako Murai's monograph on contemporary fairy tale

adaptations provides a model as well as a compelling exploration of four major Japanese contemporary artists—Tawada Yōko, Ogawa Yōko, Yanagi Miwa, and Kōnoike Tomo—whose works range from the literary to the multimedia.

All her analysis draws on intertextual readings of Japanese and Western genre conventions, multiple forms of Japanese and Western literary analysis, and reader reception.

Part of Murai's goal is to employ post-structuralist and feminist fairy tale criticism to deal with some of the most influential figures in Japanese fairy tale scholarship, in particular the Japanese psychologist Kawai Hayao. Murai works to de-essentialize his generalizations of East and West as well as those of gender, referring back to popular psychoanalytic and depth approaches to move beyond them to see additional interpretive possibilities.

Indeed, one of the really valuable aspects of Murai's work is its insight into contemporary folkloristic, literary, and gender theorization occurring in contemporary Japan, which is very much in dialogue with Western fairy tale scholarship. However, not only do the theorists converse with one another—some retellings are explicitly in dialogue with theoretical interpretive frameworks.

In brief summary of the literary artists introduced, Murai explores the work of author Tawada Yōko, whose novella *The Bridegroom Was a Dog* upends genre expectations both for Western animal bridegroom tales as well as Japanese animal bridegroom tales. Next, Murai discusses Ogawa Yōko, whose story "The Ring Finger" and novel *Hotel Iris* become a reinterpretation of the Bluebeard tale type, where the "forbidden chamber" results in the heroines' liberation, even transforming one of them into Bluebeard herself.

In the chapters on photographic and multimedia visual art, Murai begins with Yanagi Miwa, whose *My Grandmothers and Fairy Tale* photo series contrast old and young women in ways that demonstrate that the gender-typed fairy tale categories of old and young, good and evil, and beautiful and ugly, are not so easily separated. Murai finishes her exploration of visual art with Kōnoike Tomoko, whose multimedia pieces incorporates the motif of wolves and girls in many different forms, exploring and challenging the assumptions buried in the overly familiar Red Riding Hood fairy tale, as well as forcing viewers to leave the gallery and go into the forest to "imagine and feel what lies beyond the anthropocentric understanding of the world" (139).

From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl demonstrates how to read various forms of media in cross cultural environments, especially where one culture is unequally influenced by the other, creating an ever-more-dense network of interpretive possibilities that adds to the work rather than takes away from it. This slender, attractive book would be an excellent addition to a classroom, graduate or advanced undergraduate, where the discussion of culture and cross cultural interpretation comes to the fore. The introductory chapter alone on the historical background and influences on various forms of fairy tale scholarship and the many retellings within Japan is worth inclusion in any regional studies class looking at folk or fairy tales, related literature, or folkloristics. An essential for any class on literary folklore genres, this book would also be of interest to gender and women's studies, contemporary and comparative literature, and contemporary art criticism and art history.

Note from the Editors: *In this issue we introduce a review section where readers from different fields can find interdisciplinary resources of interest. We welcome Thomas Grant Richardson as Review Editor. Thomas is an independent folklorist and ethnomusicologist based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Most recently he was the Curator of Education and Outreach at the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol, TN/VA. To submit publications, media products, and web-based materials for possible review, contact him at tgrantrichardson@gmail.com.*