

Michael Kinsella. *Legend-Tripping Online: Supernatural Folklore and the Search for Ong's Hat*. 2011. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 211pp + appendices, notes, and index. ISBN: 978-1-60473-983-1 (hardcover)

Reading Michael Kinsella's *Legend-Tripping Online* is in many ways a lot like how I imagine the experiences described in the book itself to be: following a number of disparate, intriguing threads down different paths, each of which draws the reader closer to the hidden, unified truth presented at the end of the journey. While the eventual payoff may remain in doubt for the participants in the Incunabula phenomenon that the book describes, readers of Kinsella's work will undoubtedly feel rewarded for their efforts at the end. This book successfully ties a number of seemingly unrelated subjects together in order to analyze its subject matter, and it is a pleasure to finally reach the integrated conclusions.

The first four chapters of Kinsella's book set the stage for the last five. Chapter 1, "Legends and Legend Ecologies" is a solid overview of legend scholarship that opens with historical and relatable examples of legends for those new to the subject. Moving from legends in general to legends of the supernatural specifically, this chapter provides one of the best brief and readable introductions to legend scholarship that I've come across.

Chapter 2, "The Performance of Legend-Tripping," opens with a detailed case study of a typical legend-trip, Kinsella's own visit to the Waverly Hills Sanitarium with a group of ghost hunters. This chapter becomes crucial in later sections of the book, where the audience's familiarity with the minutia of Kinsella's and his companions' experiences form the base upon which many connections and comparisons are drawn. Like the first chapter, this is an excellent explanation of and introduction to the concept at hand. Kinsella then moves from his experiences at Waverly Hills to some seemingly disparate subjects, first considering legend-trips in the distant past, then mediated legend trips (such as those with Ouija boards), and then finally technologically-mediated legend-trips. The pacing is a bit slow, especially as

readers realize that they have yet to hear much about the titular subject of the book (Ong's Hat), but there is a clear sense that Kinsella is building toward something both complex and intriguing.

Chapter 3 continues the sense of anticipation; more diverse subjects are presented, including frank discussions of past and present magical practices, the fascinating and useful concept of "interpretative drift," technological mediums, spirit photography, occult software, and cyberspace as a manifestation of the noosphere, a "hypothetical, emergent, transhuman consciousness" (54). Chapter 4, "Conjuring Tales," introduces the topic of occult texts and begins slowly drawing the threads together. It is here that Kinsella's multifaceted point begins to emerge: "Similar to legends that promote legend-tripping activities, occult texts portray magical practices as effective for inciting extraordinary experiences" (57). Kinsella brings in the idea of "designed traditions," too—fictional literary works that are adopted into both folk tradition and occult practice (he lists as examples the works of H.P. Lovecraft and the Rosicrucian Manifestos)—along with alternate reality games (ARGs), "open-ended gaming narratives that utilize transmedia story-telling and unite the ideas and actions of both players and game designers into an unfolding production" (60). As diverse as the subjects seem to be growing at this point, the unification is imminent; Kinsella tells us that ARGs, occult texts and magical practices, and, of course, legend-tripping, are all "world-making venues that invite participants to ... perform belief in worlds of plausibility to which the community gives breadth, coherence, and a sense of the real" (63). He also touches on 'zine culture and on the phenomenon of mail art, tying both to the concept of hypertext—items that promote collaborative networks among diverse populations. Right when readers may find themselves wondering just how many additional subjects can possibly be included in this one book, Kinsella brings it all together.

Chapter 5 introduces readers to the main subject at hand: Ong's Hat and the Incunabula Papers. It is here that the necessity of the step-by-step deliberation of

the previous four chapters becomes evident. The Incunabula Papers are a set of documents that appeared in the late 1980s (and emerged online in the late 1990s) and that purport to describe a number of past happenings, blurring the line between fact and fiction. They are comprised of two documents, a brochure entitled “Ong’s Hat: Gateway to the Dimensions! A Full Color Brochure for the Institute of Chaos Studies and the Moorish Science Ashram in Ong’s Hat, New Jersey,” and a bibliographic list entitled “Incunabula: A Catalog of Rare Books, Manuscripts & Curiosa—Conspiracy Theory, Frontier Science & Alternative Worlds”. The Incunabula papers clearly (and intentionally) defy categorization; the readers’ newfound knowledge of ARGs, ‘zines, mail art, culture jammers, designed traditions, occult practices, interpretive drift, and legend-trips is suddenly extremely useful.

Chapter 6, “Journey into Uncanny Territory,” moves from an explanation of the documents themselves into a description of how users have interacted with the materials, both in frames of belief and of skepticism. We see concrete examples of the process Kinsella has been piecing together throughout the book: the way that online participants use interaction with a narrative to prime themselves to experience manifestations of that same narrative. Chapters 7 and 8, “Contact with the Supernatural” and “Intense Discussion and the Processing of Events,” respectively, move through the stages of a traditional legend-trip, using elements of the Incunabula phenomenon as illustrations. Kinsella’s emphasis on shared interpretation and the synthesis of ideas helps to solidify the idea of legend-trips as ostensive, performative acts within a greater complex of narrative and personal experience, even when found in digital settings.

Chapter 9, the conclusion, describes the end of the phenomenon (though it’s clear that a renewal is possible at any time, if not already occurring), noting that the multidimensional model presented in the Incunabula Papers had been appropriated by corporations for marketing purposes, much to the dismay of many participants.

Readers are left with the abstract implications of this study: that as an aid to the creation, sharing, and recording of ostensive performances, technology can serve to highlight how “reciprocity between experience and tradition” can result in the construction of the supernatural.

Following the concluding chapter there are three appendices that include the Incunabula Papers in their entirety, for readers whose interest has been piqued. On the whole, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in digital folk culture or supernatural legends. Any book that finds a way to incorporate the phrase “quantum folk metaphysics” (110) is bound to be a fun read, and Kinsella manages to make his study innovative and thought-provoking as well as entertaining, clearly explaining many core concepts of folklore studies while pushing those same concepts toward new and fascinating applications.

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