

**Dan YASHINSKY (collector), *Taies for an Unknown City*,
(Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990,
pp. 265, \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-7735-0786-8)**

Ranald Thurgood

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relevance for new studies of folk literature that extend beyond an examination of traditional public space (male) genres and include a feminine voice and imagery.

Diane TYE
Mount Allison University
Sackville, New Brunswick

Dan YASHINSKY (collector), *Tales for an Unknown City*, (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990, pp. 265, \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-7735-0786-8)

A popular movement involving formal public storytelling has developed throughout the western world in recent years. North American participants refer to it as a "storytelling revival," and it consists largely of highly literate, middle-class people, the majority of whom do not feel that they were raised in storytelling backgrounds. Though they talk about informal performance at home among family and friends, their central venue is the formal presentation to an audience. This movement has generated a great number of professionals and semi-professionals; traditional tellers are usually unrecognized or ignored, with notable exceptions. In Canada, these include representatives of minority cultures such as Native peoples and the Gaelic storyteller Joe Neil MacNeil.

Storytelling revivalists are united by a love of stories and desire to give them life through oral telling. A group in Toronto with a fluctuating membership has gathered at "One Thousand and One Friday Nights of Storytelling" since 1978 without missing a single Friday, according to their tradition. Dan Yashinsky, a founder and important influence on the movement in Toronto, has compiled *Tales for an Unknown City*, a sampling from the rich and varied selection which he has heard at these Friday nights. Yashinsky states that his purpose is to "make a record of this community of city-dwelling storytellers" (10). Those involved in "One Thousand and One Friday Nights of Storytelling" comprise a folk group with its own oral traditions, much as engineering students or firefighters do. However, the group is part of a larger subculture involved in storytelling internationally and its storytelling style is influenced more by written than by oral culture. *Tales for an Unknown City* documents some of the types of stories told as part of a storytelling movement, far removed from the traditional Canadian storytelling found in such popular sources as Joan Finnegan's books or *Cape Breton's Magazine*.

This entertaining compilation contains sixty stories by thirty-four storytellers: traditional folktales, personal reminiscences, new English translations of old stories from other languages, and composed fiction. Ted Potochniak's Ukrainian tales framed with a Canadian immigrant setting ("Death and Baba Tsganka" 32-40, "Ukrainian Fish Stories" 40-49), Micheal Wex's story of a Jewish tailor who will not satisfy his wife ("A Miracle on Friday" 236-242), and John MacLeod's Ojibway story of a battle between tricksters ("The Shivering Tree" 243-254) stand out as delightful, well-crafted tales. Although the book is meant for a general audience, folklorists will find it valuable for its multicultural accounts of Canadian life (e.g. Arbing 29-31, Potochniak 32-48, Andrew 71-77, Keeshig-Tobias 78-82) and for the many texts taken from oral tradition rather than literary sources (e.g. Yashinsky 13-15, Lottridge 15-20, Nissenson 25-27, Gordezky 199-202, Strickland 212-216, MacLeod 243-254). The book also provides a record of what types of narratives are being told in formal storytelling circles in Toronto and where the tellers get their material.

However, a folklorist reading *Tales for an Unknown City* would immediately realize that much of its content does not come from oral tradition. For example, Connie Clement's "Martha" (56-67) and Celia Lottridge's "The New Legend of Sam Peppard" (91-99) are pieces of historical fiction based on true events, full of description and detailed information about characters who are not central to the stories. Clement also provides complex psychological motivations for her characters. Both stories appear to be uninfluenced by oral traditional storytelling.

Two of the striking characteristics of the Torontonians involved in "One Thousand and One Nights" are their high degree of literacy and their orientation towards books as sources for material. Storytellers continually discuss collections of tales and books on methods of storytelling. The newsletter, *Appleseed*, regularly has a column on sources — invariably books. Many tellers compose their own works on paper or rewrite folktales before telling them. Though many of the stories in *Tales for an Unknown City* are obviously traditional in origin, the reader cannot help but be impressed by the high quality of writing coming from individuals oriented toward the spoken word.

In compiling *Tales*, Yashinsky was faced with the problem of how to present oral language in a manner which provides enjoyable reading for a general audience. Rather than tape recording the stories and then deciding how they should be edited, Yashinsky asked the storytellers to write down their narratives. He admits this is an "odd request" as "our one rule [at Friday Nights]... has always been that every story must be told from memory, not read aloud" (10). The fact that the contributors responded so favorably to this method emphasizes the non-oral orientation of the group.

A great deal is lost when oral story is written, as Yashinsky readily admits. The gestures, tone of voice, and dramatic pauses which are as much a part of the

storytelling event as the words are necessarily absent. Yet a great deal more has been lost by having the tellers write their stories rather than transcribe recordings of their live performances. The quality of the stories in the book varies according to the storytellers' abilities as writers. Mariella Bertelli and Martha Goertzen speak English as a second language; unfortunately their writing abilities in English do not match their excellent oral storytelling. Awkward sentence structure and grammatical errors are not particularly noticeable in performance and perhaps even enhance their storytelling but weaken their printed versions. Such features would be excusable in verbatim transcripts but in written stories seem like bad editing. Carol McGirr and Marvyne Jenoff, both fine writers, told "Nestled on the Edge" (49-53) and "A Lesson in Resuscitation" (28-29) at the 1991 Toronto Festival of Storytelling. In both cases the live version was much longer than the version in the book. Some writers (e.g. Potochniak 32-48 & 146-155, Gelcer 83-90, and Kane 141-145) are able to stay truer to their oral texts in their writing but perhaps this indicates that there is less variation in their performances. A number of tellers use words and phrases from other languages in their stories (e.g. Potochniak 32-48 & 146-155, Lewis 100-103, Bertelli 116-122, Grace 169-173, Peringer 223-231, Stevens 232-235, Wex 236-243). This works well in oral telling where the sound of the language enriches the story and expressions and gestures convey the meaning. But unless non-English words are used sparingly and skillfully in a written story, they distract the reader. Potochniak, Lewis, Wex and Stevens use them effectively (although Wex fails to explain what a *kugel* is — a vital element in his story), but the others use too many and do not make their meanings clear. Such usage does not succeed in a literary work.

Another problem with the book is the fact that Yashinsky calls himself a collector rather than an editor or compiler. In both academic and storytelling circles, people generally understand a collector to be someone who seeks out storytellers and records their performances. Asking tellers (many of whom get their stories from books) to write their stories down and send them to a compiler would not be considered collecting by most folklorists' standards. A perusal of collections of folktales did not provide one instance of the word "collector" being used to describe anyone other than a fieldworker. This may appear to be a minor point that does not reflect on the value of the book. However, if editors and compilers start calling themselves collectors, readers will have difficulty distinguishing between fieldwork collections and anthologies of previously collected stories.

Whatever its faults, *Tales for an Unknown City* is thoroughly entertaining. It gives a sampling of the great wealth and variety of stories told at "One Thousand and One Friday Nights" and suggests why these evenings — with the added

element of live performance — are different from most popular entertainment and have drawn audiences and unpaid performers for thirteen years.

Ronald THURGOOD
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Barry BRUMMETT, *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*
(Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1991, xxiii + 220,
ISBN 0-81730-0156-5).

In *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, the author reconsiders the traditional definitions of and approaches to rhetoric, and undertakes a reorientation of the field which would include many previously ignored aspects of contemporary popular culture. To accomplish this, the book is divided into two sections. In the first section, the author offers the reader a critical evaluation of past and more recent theoretical perspectives on rhetoric, points out their failings, and offers what he considers viable and necessary modifications to make these theories compatible with his view of culture. The second section consists of a series of four case studies demonstrating how contemporary media forms and contents permit individuals to find personal relevance through the negotiation of meaning within a context of the individual-medium interface.

The basis for Brummett's conceptualization of rhetoric is the recognition that the role of verbal, extended, reasoned discourses, once the predominant form of public expression, has been supplanted by a multitude of expressive forms which constitute popular and mass mediated culture. Because of this modification in the communicative environment in which the majority of people lives, Brummett inverts the previous analytic equation and assigns priority to what a message *does* (i.e. what social function it performs), as opposed to what forms messages take. This notion will sound quite familiar to those folklorists who have long espoused the primacy of function over genre or text. In the author's view, popular culture is not "composed of 'readable objects'.... [because] "to speak of reading a text, even of reading it in different ways, presumes that there is a text that is already written. [The author argues] that what people do when confronting