

**THE APPLE DOESN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE:
AN INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS**

Wolfgang Mieder. Proverbs. A Handbook. Westport & Connecticut & London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004 (reprinted 2011). 304 pp.

Proverbs are in the sphere of interest of the general public as well as scholars specializing in various fields: folklorists, linguists, psychologists and social scientist, to name but a few. Proverbs can be discussed and studied in many ways. Wolfgang Mieder's book *Proverbs. A Handbook* serves as a fairly wide perspective to proverbs in various contexts. The book primarily offers an overview of Anglo-American paremiology. It focuses on the period from the beginning of the 17th century until today. The presented case material is mostly connected to the American continent. The book mainly comprises the author's previous publications and articles beginning from the 1970s. The first mentioned article dates from 1971 and is entitled 'Behold the Proverbs of a People': A Florilegium of Proverbs in Carl Sandburg's Poem *Good Morning America*, and was initially published in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*.

In the introduction the author highlights his motives for writing this book and making a handbook of it. He expresses his gratitude to three earlier scholars and their works: Richard Chenevix Trench (1807–1886) and his book *On the Lessons in Proverbs*, published in 1853; F. Edward Hulme's (1841–1909) *Proverb Lore: Being a Historical Study of the Similarities, Contrasts, Topics, Meaning, and Other Facets of Proverbs, Truisms, and Pithy Sayings, as Explained by the Peoples of Many Lands and Times* (1902), and Archie Taylor's (1890–1973) *The Proverb* from 1934. However, as the author points out, even the newest one of these volumes is 75 years old. After reprinting Taylor's book in 1985, some 50 years after the initial publication, it was the time for "a fresh look at proverbs", as Mieder says. The author himself situates this handbook somewhere between Taylor's scholarly oriented volume and Trench's and Hulme's publications meant for a wider readership. Mieder writes: "My book is intended for the educated general reader with emphasis on Anglo-American proverbs in English-language context."

As the name implies, the book contains articles focusing on proverbs. The book is divided into four sections, each of which further comprises two or three subsections and several chapters. The first section is titled *Definition and Classification*. This section could be regarded as the most interesting one in this handbook. Those who are familiar with proverbs and paremiology are sure to have some expectations for this chapter with its bibliography. However, it is very difficult to be relatively short and provide an exhaustive account of the phenomenon called 'proverb'. This part of the book deals with the definitions of the proverb. As the author points out very clearly, it is not an easy task to define the proverb. Possibilities for doing this are endless. The second part of the first section deals with various classification systems. This part might have been one of the most difficult ones to write. On the one hand, it has to be clear and simple enough to be meant not only for experts. On the other hand, it ought to be quite informative for students and scholars to get the possibility to go on with paremiological studies. In

each case, the author takes part in the discourse considering the research focusing on proverbs or the research using proverbs as material. It has to be accepted.

The second section is named *Examples and Texts*. The first subsection consists of six case studies by which the author wants to illustrate the ways in which proverbs have been connected with history and actions. The case descriptions are abbreviated and this means that the context information is quite incomplete and the reader has no possibilities to evaluate the studies without going deeper into Mieder's 50 original articles. The author calls the second part "a small florilegium of foreign, American, regional, and ethnic proverbs". For the reader this part of the second section might serve as an enjoyable way to find out about the lives of proverbs – or it might seem to be a slightly nebulous collection and the meaning of this part might seem to be inaccessible. One thing that could have been discussed more is the question of what is regarded as American tradition. Native Americans did not speak English. People as well as languages came or were brought (or sent) here from other continents – Europe, Africa and Asia; the new settlers spoke many languages and represented various cultures as well as subcultures, and brought their own traditions and proverbs with them. "The Anglo-American, English proverb" was created from this background. As the author mentions when introducing the proverb lore of American minorities, it is not easy to decide which groups were the most essential ones. This section represents the two main areas in Mieder's scholarly activities quite well. As the first part of this section shows, he has done a huge number of detailed proverb studies, which have also involved comparative paremiology, connecting folkloristics and linguistics as can be seen later on.

The third section is named *Scholarship and Approaches*. The author draws attention to three categories of paremiology both in the past, present and future. In the first part of this section, the book gives an overview of the existing paremiological journals, essay collections and bibliographies. In the second part the reader learns something about proverb collections and in the third one the 21st century is combined with proverbs and various contexts. The last part includes 12 chapters, each of them focusing on some special features of paremiological research or diverse surroundings, for example paremiological minimum, proverbs as art, proverbs in popular culture and so on.

The fourth section of the book is entitled *Contexts*. As the author focuses on literature and some considerable people's literary works, some other title could have been more informative. The first part includes proverbs connected with literary works, especially with political writings. Two of them date back to the 18th century, two to the 19th century and two are from the 20th century. The proverbs of considerable persons are of primary importance here. Even if this kind of information were interesting, the reader would expect to be guided to some problematic nature of proverbs. The second subsection treats proverbs as messages in various, mainly contemporary contexts.

Actually *Bibliography* is the fifth section. It is the last one but not the least from the reader's point of view. It is hardly all-encompassing but easy to start with. A more comprehensive bibliography of paremiological articles and publications can be found in another Mieder's double-barrelled publication from 2009, *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter).

As to the proverb in the title of this review, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree", it is one of those proverbs that is often understood as an authentic American proverb. However, according to Mieder, the proverb has come to America from Germany.

In *Proverbs. A Handbook* the author underlines the continuities between oral and written modes and connects proverbs of the past, present and future. He sees proverbs as part of culture and, as such, also reflections of all those conceptions, phenomena and visions being valid in society. However, he does not count them as part of the nation's mythical past. Proverbs can be found in today's lifestyle and in urban contexts, for example, in newspaper columns and advertisements; proverbs are also used in graffiti and cartoons. Even if economy, culture and techniques have changed and caused some changes in performance contexts, the tradition is still alive.

Although the book under discussion introduces proverbs in one linguistic and cultural area, all the ideas can be found and the methods applied anywhere. In this way, the book is an interesting source of information not only for Anglo-American English-language orientated scholars. When writing about international proverb collections, the author expresses his respect also for two Estonian paremiological scholars, Arvo Krikmann and Ingrid Sarv when he discusses the national Estonian proverb collection, *Eesti vanasõnad*.

It is difficult to say with certainty whether Wolfgang Mieder's *Proverb. A Handbook* is an "easy-to-read" and "for-everybody" or a scientific book. Written by one of the best-known authorities on proverbs, the book gives a comprehensive overview of proverbs to students, the general public as well as academic readers. The volume fulfils the needs for a semi-popular handbook of proverbs. The book contains the author's articles written from different research perspectives and sheds light on various aspects of proverbs. For proverb scholars specializing in folkloristics, linguistics and many other disciplines, this handbook is a good one to start with when looking for sources of information. The book is informative and the text is well readable, which makes it very suitable for people interested in proverbs. The book is beneficial also to scholars that do not specialize in paremiology. The book can be recommended to anyone interested in proverbs, no matter in what language the main interest lies.

I hope that the next handbook will be compiled for scholars. It should contain, in addition to concentrating on fascinating proverbs, some more references to the contexts with a complete bibliography. I also hope that Wolfgang Mieder will continue publishing for the general public, as he has a nice and readable writing style and people do love proverbs!

The author of the *Proverbs. A Handbook*, Wolfgang Mieder, is Professor of German and Folklore at the University of Vermont, USA. Since 1984 he has been the editor of *Proverbium, Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, dedicated to the variety to be found in international research focusing on proverbs. *Proverbium* has become an indispensable tool for today's research as it covers all research areas. The author's home page with the list of his publications is available at <http://www.uvm.edu/~grdept/?Page=WolfgangMieder.php>.

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