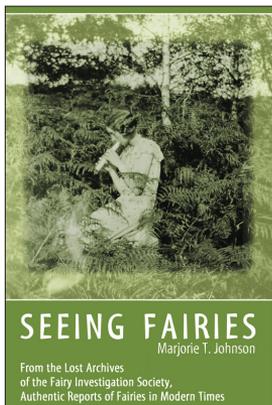


## BOOK REVIEWS

### SEEING SEERS: AN EDUCATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FAIRY BELIEFS



**Marjorie T. Johnson.** *Seeing Fairies: From the Lost Archives of the Fairy Investigation Society, Authentic Reports of Fairies in Modern Times.* Edited by Simon Young. San Antonio: Anomalist Books, 2014. 363 pp.

As anyone with an interest in British fairy-lore will know, fairies were often characterised as mischievous, malicious, even malevolent beings. Their general portrayal in pre-industrial popular belief is of a race of supernatural creatures whose favourite pastime was to cause trouble, even harm and death, for the fearful ‘folk’ of the British Isles. These, however, are not the creatures we are presented with in Marjorie Johnson’s *Seeing Fairies*.

*Seeing Fairies* is what its title suggests: a collection of fairy sightings – more than four hundred of them in fact, making this one of the densest records of fairy encounters ever compiled, rivalling Walter Evans-Wentz’s 1911 *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Counties* and Janet Bord’s 1997 *Fairies: Real Encounters with Little People*. A myriad of memorates and anecdotes are recounted by the late Marjorie Johnson, whose eagerness to share her own personal experiences, opinions, and emotions fosters a sense of informal familiarity between writer and reader. This makes me reluctant to refer to her simply as Johnson, so forgive this break from academic tradition.

It took Marjorie, a lawyer’s secretary from Nottingham, from 1955 to 1996 to write up her collection of memorates. She gathered her material primarily from the Fairy Investigation Society (FIS), which was founded in 1927 by Bernard Sleight and Quentin Craufurd. It is Craufurd who fondly pens the foreword to *Seeing Fairies*; a retired naval scientist, Craufurd claimed to have communicated with fairies via radio. His foreword reproduces conversations he purportedly shared with them – conversations which sparked his decision to found the FIS, a society which, in its heyday, boasted a host of colourful, upper middle class individuals as its members, who met periodically to discuss spiritualism and fairy sightings.

Marjorie, who claimed to have frequently encountered fairies throughout her life and thus dubbed herself a ‘fairy seer’, was secretary of the FIS by 1950, and in that role she received numerous letters recounting fairy sightings worldwide. She kept a record of these letters and, long after she stepped down as secretary, continued to gather material for a book. Sadly she did not live to see it enter print in Britain; it was three years after her death, in 2014, that *Seeing Fairies* was finally published in English, thanks to the work of editor Simon Young, a British historian with an interest in fairy lore.

Young (commendably) stays as faithful to Marjorie’s original manuscript as possible, choosing not to rectify the structural problems of the piece. Despite being divided into

seventeen thematic chapters – ranging from ‘Nature Spirits in Gardens and the Countryside’ to ‘Angels and Angel Music’ – *Seeing Fairies* would have benefited from further subdivisions. It might also have benefited from a re-structuring; Marjorie recounts the anecdotes of fairy sightings in an order that is neither chronological nor geographical. This results (as is candidly admitted by Young) in a rather random, turbid, and plethoric sequence of examples, which could have been aided by subtitles and the addition of an index.

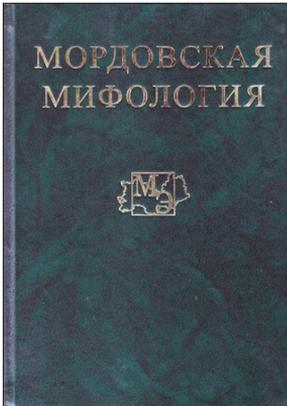
Structural issues aside, however, *Seeing Fairies* offers a fascinating insight into modern British fairy belief, so enthusiastically recounted by Marjorie. Her writing style is straightforward but meticulously detailed; she introduces each informant by title, name, and place of residence, before providing an exact date and often time (sometimes as specific as 2:30 am) for the informant’s fairy encounter. She then presents the memorate, either by paraphrasing or quoting directly from correspondences with them. Her writing is also rather (forgive the sanctimonious quotation marks) “scientific”, peppered with terms characteristic of spiritualism and parapsychic research: ‘astral projection’, ‘ectoplasm’, ‘electrical ethers’, ‘cosmic space’, ‘vibratory rate of atoms’, and so on. However, these terms are interspersed throughout such fantastical accounts that *Seeing Fairies* proves to be a peculiar mix of erudition and whimsy.

The fairies portrayed by Marjorie and her contributors are not of the same ilk as those malicious creatures of pre-industrial folk belief; at the most, they are distant relatives. Some misbehaviour is recounted (e.g., fairies leading people astray, or hiding possessions) but these activities are generally harmless, more mischief than malevolence, and on the whole Marjorie’s fairies are more akin to – indeed, may have set the precedent for – the benevolent, saccharine creatures of modern popular culture. As nature spirits, they help plants to grow and fruits to ripen; they tend to flowers and protect trees; they aid animals and even, occasionally, humans. There is something sweetly pastoral about these descriptions: fairies who frequent fairy markets, push wheelbarrows, go lamb-riding, and on hot summer days sit on toadstools in the shade of turnip rows and partridge-watch for pleasure. And such descriptions are so vividly and meticulously detailed – everything from the fairies’ heights and the materials of their clothes, to their odours (some apparently smell of fungus) and the sounds they make – that the reader can easily imagine experiencing the encounter themselves.

It is not, however, just the benevolent nature of these fairies that may seem unfamiliar to the reader, but their modernity. A lot of Marjorie’s anecdotes come from the 1950s and 1960s, but some are as late as the 1970s, 80s and 90s, and it is novel, for those familiar with the work of Evans-Wentz, for example, to read of fairy encounters that involve cars, trains, planes, bus depots, the wireless, television sets, washing machines, dishwashers, etc. Such fairy stories seem incongruous in industrial and post-industrial contexts. However, the relative modernity of these sources makes them more, rather than less, interesting. Taken as a primary source, *Seeing Fairies* provides remarkable insight into the mutability of fairies by demonstrating how perceptions of them change over the centuries. The fact that Marjorie seemed to believe wholeheartedly in the authenticity of the accounts she relayed does not detract from the value of this book as an academic resource. If anything, it greatly increases it, demonstrating the extent to which fairy-beliefs survived deep into – and probably beyond – the 20th century.

Ceri Houlbrook

## MILESTONE IN THE STUDY OF MORDVINIAN MYTHOLOGY



***Mordovskaia mifologija. Entsiklopediia I. A-K.*** Saransk: Nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut gumanitarnykh nauk pri Pravitel'stve Respubliki Mordoviia. 2013. 484 pp. In Russian.

In 2013, the first volume (484 pp.) of the encyclopaedia of Mordvinian mythology covering references A to K was published in Saransk. This volume published by the Mordvinian Institute for the Humanities is the third academic treatment of mythology that has come out during the past three decades. This number is impressive, and even larger nations cannot compete with it, not to mention middle-sized or small ethnic groups. The number of the Mordvins (Moksha, Erzya, Shoksha) in the Republic of Mordovia is 331,000 people, and along with the diaspora compatriots it amounts to over a million. The preparation of mythology volumes started with the Finno-Ugric joint project *Mythologia Uralica* (Hoppál 2011), which has, one way or another, influenced all the participants, including the works of T. Deviatkina, N. Mokshin and N. Yurchenkova, who partook in the first meeting in Joensuu, Finland.

The earlier editions represented the views of one author, who also wrote the introduction and articles for the mythology dictionary (Deviatkina 1998; Mokshin 2004). Tatiana Deviatkina's volume is based on poetic and religious folklore, descriptions of rituals, and ethnographic printed word. The articles present terminology in Erzian and Mokshan, and their regional peculiarities. Mythology treatment by a Mokshan researcher is presented in Mokshan, Russian, English, Arabic and French. Nikolai Mokshin's approach is more centred on ethnography/ethnology; yet, publication in Russian also guarantees a wider readership.

The new edition is the most voluminous of the three, a complex reference book. Under the editorship of V. Yurchenkov and I. Zubov, the authors have compiled a collection of encyclopaedic articles covering different fields of concepts, types of folklore, religion, ritual phenomena, and mythology. The encyclopaedia differs from the former ones by its general philosophical foundation. The principles of the approach have been formulated by V. Yurchenkov and N. Yurchenkova (2013: 6–16), who point to mythology as an entirety that influences culture and is in a dialogue with it. Accordingly, the introduction discusses mythology as a worldview, and ritual practices related to it, which are expressed in different mediums. Mythology is also characterised as a source of creation and science, its reflection in different arts and its impact on creative handwriting. Relationships between mythology and science discuss collection, publication and research, identifying different tendencies (descriptive, reconstructive and detailed analyses period).

Entries cover a wide range of notions: general concepts of morals, ethics and religion (e.g. *good and evil, wealth*), ethnography (e.g. *house, sauna*), rituals, and folklore. The articles dwell upon the calendar system and holidays, deities and demonology, as well as concepts of mythology (e.g. *tree of life, tree of death*). Under family rituals the authors discuss cases that have received little attention so far, including relationships between mythology and customs related to children. The last entry covers rituals and beliefs associated with the first bath of the newborn, taking into sauna, putting into the cradle,

up to the rituals related to cutting hair and uniting the community. Children's folklore and their role in rituals have been emphasised in several articles, for instance, cross-references to calendar rituals. This is a nice innovation, especially considering the fact that in the past one hundred years part of the rituals have had a symbolic connection to children, been oriented on them or constitute a part of children's folklore.

The subject thesaurus is based on symbolism in the religious system and culture. As the thesaurus itself will be published in the next volume, I can only share my general impression that articles have been presented for symbolic items, plants, animals, persons, temporal and calendrical phenomena, significant topographical centres, as well as (ritual) acts and practices. Information directly related to mythological creatures and myths is presented as part of a major whole.

The authors also show interest in filtering out invariable messages and connecting different code systems (cf. Tolstoi & Tolstaia 2013). The treatment of rituals in a religious context (one of the special features of the volume) is inherent in Russian folkloristics and associated with long-term theoretical tradition (V. Propp 1963; Baiburin 1983; Tolstoi 2013; etc.).

A considerable number of articles introduce the activity of folklore collectors and researchers. The volume presents biographies, fields of interests and research areas, followed by bibliography with more important researches. In the case of collectors, the collection areas and recorded species have been specified. The articles written in this key provide information about the person's contribution to cultural processes, which is often multifaceted. For instance, ethnomusicologist Nikolai Boiarkin (b. 1947) has, in addition to his widely known research, composed music based on folklore; he is also a conductor and active member of specialty organisations, as well as participant in the activity of scientific organisations.

Viktor Danilov (1942–2002) spent most of his adult life in Estonia, collecting Mordvinian folklore, performing folksongs, introducing and advocating folk culture. The article dwells upon the folklore he collected, his participation in the folk ensemble *Hellero*, and other facts about him.

A voluminous series of articles discusses the relationships between professional arts and myths. In addition to the review article on fine arts and myths, the encyclopaedia presents individual articles on ethno-artists, including wood sculptors, depictees of ethno-futuristic mythical world, etc.

The articles in the encyclopaedia are illustrated with historic documentary photographs, which with their narratives and details constitute a great complement to subject articles. In addition, the volume includes numerous samples of various art styles, in some cases even several reproductions per article. The illustrative side is powerful and leaves the impression of an art album or a visual overview with different styles, schools and typical techniques.

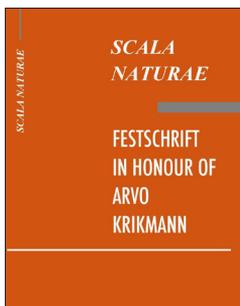
The complex whole covering different topics in alphabetical order is convenient for the user. It is not a bad idea to include the articles of scientific and cultural-historic importance (folklorists, folklore collectors, artists engaged in ethno-art, etc.) in the main part of the dictionary, considering how lazy the readers of today are. The volume provides an overview of mythology and religion, the role of Mordvinian researchers and artists in the process of culture creation, as well as the reflection of myths in the works of art and culture. The work done to present mythology and religion is remarkable, and the reader is looking forward to the next volume.

Mare Kõiva

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## PUBLICATIONS ON THE OCCASION OF ARVO KRIKMANN'S 75TH JUBILEE



*Scala naturae: Festschrift in Honour of Arvo Krikmann*. Compiled and edited by Anneli Baran, Liisi Laineste, Piret Voolaid. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, 2014. 442 pp.

The volume in English, dedicated to academician Arvo Krikmann, includes writings from his long-term colleagues from Europe and outside (North America, Australia), for whom he has been a good colleague, supervisor and tutor.

The contributions from 29 authors result from the academic encounters with the work published by the jubilarian during his long-term career. The collection starts with shorter tributes,

but especially noteworthy is Wolfgang Mieder's selection of his cordial correspondence with the jubilarian from the years 1993–2013. All the longer research articles can be categorised under two main topics – short forms of folklore (mainly proverbs) and humour – and they represent varied methodological approaches to the main subjects.

The publication of the collection was supported by the institutional research grant IUT22-5 and the Cultural Endowment of Estonia.

***Antropologicheskii Forum (Anthropological Forum)*  
No. 21, 2014. 392 pp. In Russian.**

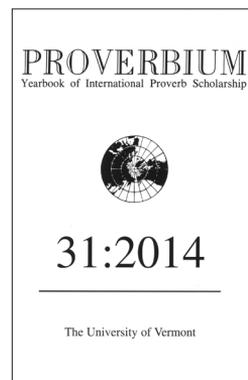
The 21st issue of the Russian scientific journal *Antropologicheskii Forum* ([http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/06/2014\\_21](http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/06/2014_21)) contains a chapter with a collection of articles on short forms and humour, titled *O znamenakh, drakonakh i anekdotakh* ('About flags, dragons, and anecdotes') as a tri-bute to Arvo Krikmann. The chapter starts with Alexandra Arkhipova and Nikita Petrov's joint article *Malye zhanry – bol'shomu uchenomu* ('Short forms to a great researcher'), which is directly based on Arvo Krikmann's research. Sergei Neklyudov's article discusses the functions of mythological images of the dragon in sayings and myths. A new topic is introduced by Nikita Petrov's folkloric treatment of the possibilities to remember the colours of the Russian flag. Two voluminous articles concern academic collections of humour about two contemporary dictators. Material for both Alexandra Arkhipova and Manolo Alejándrez's article about political humour associated with Fidel Castro, and Anastasia Astapova's article about anecdotes on Alaksandr Łukashenka, was collected in Cuba and Belorussia, respectively, and both articles apply the methods elaborated by the jubilarian.



***Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, Vol. 31, 2014. 532 pp.**

Under the editorship of Wolfgang Mieder, the University of Vermont has published a special issue (31:2014) of *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, which traditionally includes proverb studies, as well as a longer introductory writing by Wolfgang Mieder about Arvo Krikmann and the bibliography of his 50 most important paremiological and paremiographical researches from the years 1967–2013.

The yearbook contains 17 articles dedicated to proverbs, the first of which is *Mosaic or Jigsaw? Publishing an Article from Estonia in the "West", 30 Years Ago, When Circumstances Were Quite Different from Today*, by Peter Grzybek, professor of Slavistics at Graz University, giving an overview of the correspondence between the author and Arvo Krikmann from April to November 1984. This correspondence started when Peter Grzybek, who at the time worked at Ruhr University Bochum, Germany, turned to Krikmann with a request to contribute to a special issue of the journal *Kodikas/Code: Ars semiotica*, which was dedicated to the memory of Grigori Permyakov, who had passed away in November 1983 (the article by Krikmann, *1001 Frage zur logischen Struktur der Sprichwörter*, was published in the special issue in the same year). The correspondence and six handwritten or typed letters as examples give us an idea of the scholarly communication of the period, bringing back to the memory traditions of the pre-information technology era and explaining the nature (censorship and control mechanisms) of the Soviet and Western scholarly communication separated by the 'iron curtain'.



Piret Voolaid