H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Mary Hamilton.** *Kentucky Folktales: Revealing Stories, Truths, and Outright Lies.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 219 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3600-4.

**Reviewed by** John T. Becker (Texas Tech University)

**Published on** H-Kentucky (April, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Richard C. Smoot (Bluegrass Community and Technical College)

Containing twenty-seven stories, *Kentucky Folktales* is the latest book by Mary Hamilton, a professional storyteller from Frankfort, Kentucky. She is a prolific writer, storyteller (since 1983), and educator, who has traveled and recorded her stories widely. Despite the title, not all of the entries have a Kentucky storyline connection. Hamiltonâs criteria for inclusion in this book are that the story is clearly about Kentucky or that she collected the story in the Bluegrass State. She gathered the vast majority of her Kentucky stories in eastern Kentucky, where people still practice the ancient art of storytelling. Hamilton also made good use of the Southern Appalachian Archives, located at Berea College, in Berea, Kentucky, which has an extensive folklore collection, including manuscripts of stories and audio reproductions.

The stories, divided into five chapters, fall into three categories: scary stories, folktales, and personal remembrances. Although the scary stories (âHaunts, Frights, and Creepy Talesâ) are entertaining, they are unnecessarily gruesome in a book geared toward children. In these stories a great many children are killed, some by their parents. Readers will have to determine if this chapter is appropriate for children.

Storytelling, to Hamilton, contains three elements: the story, the teller, and the audience. The same story is never told the same way twice, because good storytellers interact with their audience and no two audiences are the same. Storytellers change their stories according to an audienceâs mood, knowledge of the story, and other factors. This analysis alone, found in the introduction, will make the book valuable to most historians. If Hamilton is correct, in that most storytellers do not even attempt to retell their stories word for word over time, what does that say about oral history, religious or cultural documents that started life orally, or stories told in family gatherings?

Hamiltonâs stories are geared to a young audience, and are arranged with a young audience in mind, written in the language that Hamilton uses to tell her own stories. This is not surprising since she has a background in education and elementary librarianship. Some stories are written in a distinctive regional dialect, which is entertaining to read and must be fun to hear. Hamilton states that many stories âchangeâ when they are listened to, after having first read them. A good storyteller can breathe life into an otherwise dull story.

A commentary follows every story and the stories are footnoted as well. A bibliography and index are found at

the end of the book. The commentaries are filled with Hamiltonâs experiences from her Kentucky childhood, travels, and life as a storyteller. Also included in the commentaries are, in some cases, different versions of a story, the storyâs collectors, and its origins. Some stories included in her book have over fifty variants and are found all over the world. In one revealing narrative concerning the storytellerâs art, Hamilton describes how she âbuiltâ a story by making changes to fit a new location (Indiana, not Kentucky); performed historical research to add important facts to the story; and conducted some interviews with local people to add local color to her story. Somehow through all of the changes and additions the basic elements of the story remained the same.

In the commentary following the story âThe Open Grave,â Hamilton explains how she changes the ending to fit her audience and their reactions. Another story that has many variants is âThe Enormous Bearâ with eight different versions listed, all from eastern Kentucky informants. Although collected in the same area and over the same time period as âThe Open Grave,â the characters, action, and ending vary widely. Most readers will find Hamiltonâs commentary on âLittle Ripen Pearâ intriguing, which includes a chart of ten variants of her story. Most of the versions come from eastern Kentucky (eight out of ten) and were collected between 1949 and 1956. For a short time period and small geographical location the stories vary a great deal, while the main elements of the story remain the same.

Hamilton uses the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) system of tale typing and she explains why its use is important to storytellers. Readers who are not familiar with story types or motifs will appreciate her explanation. The ATU system, created by Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne (1910), revised by American folklorist Stith Thompson (1932-37), and updated again by Hans-Jorg Uther (2004), organizes stories by type or motif. Thus storytellers can find a story in which they are interested by its classification in the ATU system, and can find variants of the story, some of which have international motifs. âReading multiple variants often provides me with more insight into a story than I can glean from any single version,â Hamilton writes (p. 196). The ATU organizes the folktales into broad categories that are further subdivided.

What can historians learn from *Kentucky Folktales*? Besides being the âthe traditional knowledge of a culture,â folklore can add flavor and emotion to an otherwise dry and humorless historical prose. But caution should be used, both by historians and folklorists, in that there is a strong possibility, which storytellers will be the first to admit, to improvise history in order to preserve the core veracity of a tale.

One small quibble about this otherwise charming and useful book requires mention. In the story âThe Princess Who Could Not Cry,â Hamilton pitches her opinion of the Affordable Health Care Act, which is only tangentially connected to the story. Although skillfully done, her concern for something as current as the national health care debate seems to this reviewer as a very strange discussion to find in a book of folktales. Perhaps its inclusion is one of the differences between historians and folklorists.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-kentucky

**Citation:** John T. Becker. Review of Hamilton, Mary, *Kentucky Folktales: Revealing Stories, Truths, and Outright Lies.* H-Kentucky, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38234

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.