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## Review of *Folklore from Kansas: Customs, Beliefs, and Superstitions* By William E. Koch

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mented by sex, age, urban-rural orientation of the informant, and the year the item was collected. I am delighted that this impressive corpus has been made available to us. There is no question but that scholars will long be grateful to Koch for his effort.

Now, anyone who reads book reviews regularly knows that when a review begins with a paragraph like that, the next one begins with a gloomy "However, . . ." Such must be the case, here, too. One should emphasize the importance of the collection, but its weaknesses cannot go unchallenged. While there are few major problems, they lie at the heart of the book and therefore damage the entire structure.

To begin, the book is a pure ethnography, and it is as dull as most item-oriented ethnographies are. No one can spend years and years studying something as varied, complex, curious, and attractive as the folk belief of the plains, as Bill Koch has done, without some personal involvement. But where are his conclusions, impressions, intuitions, and interpretations? No one works with such material without developing some sense of order or direction, meaning or texture; yet there is no hint of that here. The gaps are all the more distressing because Bill Koch is a passionate and personable human being. However there is little of the author in these pages. It is as though someone else had worked in his files. For example, the age of the informant is of far less value in Kansas than the ethnic origin of the informant. The location of the item in Kansas is far more important than the date of the collecting. Yet it is the numbers that are recorded rather than the human dimension of the material.

An echo of the impersonal treatment of the data can be seen in the subtitle—*Customs, Beliefs, and Superstitions*. Superstition is pejorative. No one admits to having superstitions. *They* have superstitions; *we* have beliefs. The use of the word is not fair to the informants and can be a special handicap for the reader, since it casts a constant sense of falsehood over the material. But those who work with traditional belief know that a good part of

*Folklore from Kansas: Customs, Beliefs, and Superstitions*. By William E. Koch. Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980. Illustrations, tables, appendix. xvii + 467 pp. \$20.00.

The labor that Bill Koch has put into this volume is heroic. For those of us who study the plains, it is truly a valuable contribution. There are more than five thousand items, maps, tables, charts, and an astonishing inventory of collectors and informants. Each item is docu-

our sophisticated pharmacopoeia has come from such "superstitions" and that there are many such items that may yet find their way into medical journals as discoveries.

Perhaps it is the hint of superiority that has led to such a superficial treatment of the data. There seems to be an assumption that none of this stuff will work anyway, so why be serious about its description? To my mind, it is not only unprofessional but downright dangerous to list a cure as "Use white gas to prevent blood poisoning" (item #1527). Does one ingest it, apply it to the wound, inhale it, or serve it up as a propitiatory sacrifice? Item #1455 tells us, "You can rub warts off with a penny," but it does not tell us *how* to rub off warts with a penny.

Years ago the field of folklore moved from an item-oriented methodology to a concern with context and later process. These important advances are ignored in this collec-

tion. This book suggests that once one has the *thing* in hand—the custom, belief, or "superstition"—the work is over. A gesture is made, albeit in the wrong direction, toward context, but there is not the slightest hint of process. More lamentably still, the fourth step—meaning—is totally ignored.

The lapse is all the more lamentable because Koch is so eminently capable of sensing and communicating those meanings. Assembling five thousand items is no small task, but it could have been done with questionnaires and a storage system; the humanistic extrapolations missing here are of incalculable value. Belief is the product and producer of the human mind; it can only be interpreted by the mind. In this collection we are denied that perspective of the author, who knows it most intimately.

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