

Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture.
By Bill Ellis. (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Pp. xii + 271, ISBN 0-8131-2289-9)

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The thesis of this book is that religion and magic, which are often assumed to be in opposition to each other, actually complement each other in useful ways. Bill Ellis asserts that magic allows individuals more direct and active access to the “mythic realm” than religion (7). He perceives that the personal experience inherent in magical practice balances the solidity and fixity of institutionalized religion. This book is, to a large extent, an exploration of the interaction between magical practices and religion.

Ellis argues that the practice of magic, even when not done seriously, is inherently a form of resistance to mainstream “power structures” and that this is why there is often so much opposition to magic (6). It is also why teenagers, especially young women, are, in Ellis’ view, likely to be involved with magic. A significant part of *Lucifer Ascending*, in fact, deals with the magical games engaged in by teenagers and younger children. Ellis deals with such practices in an even-handed way, acknowledging both that participants get something useful out of them and that there is some potential for problems, such as anxiety that continues after a game is over or the commission of crimes (vandalism, for instance) during legend trips.

Ellis’ work also addresses magical practices and contexts more typically associated with adults, including rabbit’s feet, chain letters, and published collections of spells and other magical material. In addition, he discusses the Welsh Revival, a Christian religious revival that was influenced by spiritualism, and the impact that this movement continues to have on some forms of Christianity.

Scholars will find this book interesting for a number of reasons. Since Ellis’ work draws on material from folklore archives and collections of folklore, his discussion of magical games and practices is based largely on people’s actual experience of them. The section on mirror gazing incorporates previous research on the experiential aspects of this practice. Scholars interested in the underlying mechanisms by which magical practices work and their social and psychological functions may be particularly interested in these aspects of *Lucifer Ascending*.

There has been some scholarly interest in reflexivity in recent years. In particular, as Ellis notes in this book’s predecessor, *Raising the Devil*,

David Hufford suggests that a stance of religious neutrality in academic work is, in Ellis' phrase, "misleading" (xi). In both books, Ellis briefly discusses his personal religious beliefs, as part of the context of his work. In *Lucifer Ascending*, he also describes the somewhat negative reactions of reviewers to this portion of *Raising the Devil*. This material is likely to appeal to scholars interested in belief or religion. For scholars considering revealing their own religious affiliation in the context of discussion of a controversial religious topic, this material may be personally relevant.

One particularly interesting aspect of both this book and its predecessor, *Raising the Devil*, is their exploration of some of the connections between occult practices (especially spiritualism) and fundamentalist Christianity. While many occultists and fundamentalist Christians may prefer not to acknowledge these connections, they are important to a full understanding of the movements involved.

Lucifer Ascending also addresses gender issues. In his discussions of, in particular, the dumb supper, mirror gazing, the Ouija board, and the Welsh revival, Ellis analyses occult practices as a way of critiquing, parodying, and occasionally outright rebelling against traditional gender roles. For instance, he notes that use of the Ouija board often involves interaction with personalities who are misogynist and use obscene language. These beings, however, are often effectively dealt with when a woman addresses them in an aggressive and equally obscene way. Ellis suggests that this can be and often is "satisfying" for those women, while also acknowledging that interaction of this sort may be problematic for "women with deeply seated fears of domination" (196).

The overall organisation of the book is quite good. The main themes are very clearly set out and addressed early in the work. Some of Ellis' key terms are also defined early and the definitions themselves are very nicely done. Ellis does a particularly impressive job with the term "legend"; he pulls together quite adequately in two paragraphs the complex discourse among folklorists about the nature of legend and produces a useful statement about what a legend is and how it functions. Likewise, his definition of the troublesome term "fetish" is very clear and useful.

The book is very thoroughly researched. Unfortunately, the quality of the editing does not match the quality of the research. Editing problems have resulted in some minor organisational problems and occasional confusion. For instance, in two different places, Ellis asks "What is a

fetish.” and the answers to the question are fairly similar in content and phrasing (18, 49). Other editing problems are relatively minor, but still potentially confusing. For instance, while discussing the word “fetish,” Ellis asserts that “originally” it was used with a particular meaning in a particular context, but then goes on to give a previous use and to discuss cognates and earlier forms of the word (51). The number of problems of this type in the book, while not outrageous, does seem to be higher than one would usually expect in a text of this length. Since the overall organisation of this book is quite good, however, Ellis’ main ideas are, despite these problems, reasonably easy to follow. Confusing discussion is limited to relatively unimportant points.

Overall, despite some minor problems, this is a good book that is likely to be of significant use to scholars and of interest to many general readers. It takes a complex, nuanced, and balanced look at topics that are currently highly loaded in our culture and draws some interesting conclusions.

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Reference

Ellis, Bill. 2000. *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

A Heritage of Light. By Loris S. Russell. (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2002. Pp. xiii+344, photos, ISBN 0-8020-3765-8)

When *A Heritage of Light* first appeared in 1968, it might have seemed to come from an unusual source. Loris Russell’s background was largely in the fields of geology and palaeontology, with his work in Canada’s Badlands culminating in the book *Dinosaur Hunting in Western Canada*. His interest in Canadian folklore and material culture took flight in the late 1950s when he was Acting Director of Human History at the National Museum of Canada, and this interest eventually came to focus on lamps and lighting. Even after he returned to the field of life sciences, his interest in lighting continued to grow in his own time and resulted in significant research, a sizable collection of lamps and this book, which has just recently been republished with a new forward by Janet Holmes.