

Review of Kay, Jon. 2016. *Folk Art and Aging - Life-Story Objects and Their Makers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 131 pp. 41 colour photographs. Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN (hc.) 9780253022066, (E-pub) 9780253022165. \$ 60.00.

David P. Stephens

Volume 82-83, 2015–2016

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr82_83br05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

0000-0000 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stephens, D. P. (2015). Review of [Review of Kay, Jon. 2016. *Folk Art and Aging - Life-Story Objects and Their Makers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 131 pp. 41 colour photographs. Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN (hc.) 9780253022066, (E-pub) 9780253022165. \$ 60.00.] *Material Culture Review*, 82-83, 224–225.

DAVID P. STEPHENS

Review of

Kay, Jon. 2016. *Folk Art and Aging - Life-Story Objects and Their Makers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

131 pp. 41 colour photographs. Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN (hc.) 9780253022066, (E-pub) 9780253022165. \$ 60.00.

Curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, and Professor of Practice and Director of Traditional Arts Indiana in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University are professional titles associated with author Jon Kay, whose 2016 book introduces the reader to the ways in which life-story objects and the personal narratives of the senior makers meld together in social and cultural settings which are significant and meaningful to each of the individual makers, as well as others in their communities.

In five engaging chapters, bookended by an introduction and conclusion, Kay presents a glimpse into the life and times of five unique, spirited individuals, “folk artists,” who might also be described, in a broad and perhaps clinical sense, as aged, aging, seniors, retirees, etc. While the advanced age of the individuals is a common thread, they also share the satisfaction of being proud makers of life-story objects.

Kay’s research, as presented within the text of the book, focuses primarily on the male perspective; rug hooker Marian Sykes is the only female. Also, First Nations and African American makers/artists were not granted chapters in the book despite the fact that, clearly, numerous forms of vibrant and significant life-story objects exist within these communities and others which are not represented. While Kay’s reason for choosing to focus only on these particular five artists is clear, there is no doubt that his book leaves open the opportunity for other scholars and researchers to model aspects of his research for similar scholarly inquiries and explorations further afield. In the context of his introduction, Kay does reference African-American self-taught artist, Joe Casey of South Bend Indiana. Kay draws attention to Joe’s painted scenes from his youth growing up in Missouri (5). While such a book cannot possibly be all things to all people,

I truly feel that the book would have been richer had representatives from these communities and others been given the same degree of consideration as those presented by Kay.

Nonetheless, the research is significant and Kay manages to portray the uniqueness and character of each maker by sharing intimate and personal details of their lives, families, careers, aspects of their health and, of course, their art, viewed up close and personal through the finely focused lens of the sensitive academic researcher. That unique focus is clear in that Kay’s long-term ethnographic research is close to home, thus, the shared geographic and cultural underpinnings allow him to draw from that which is in his own backyard, in terms of fieldwork, research, and presentation.

In his introduction, Kay describes his visit to the Indiana State Fairgrounds where he engages with eighty-nine-year old state fair volunteer and steam engine enthusiast Harold Stark, a retired mechanical engineer and machinist who enjoys the repair, maintenance, preservation, and presentation of old farm implements and his passion for his homemade, hand-built, half size steam engine (1). Although Stark is not one of the five artists central to the book, it is clear that Kay utilizes him and his passion and drive to bring forth the premise of his research: that elder makers pursue their passions in an effort to make, utilize, and/or share their individual life-objects in terms of reflection, to recall days gone by, days of their youth, to harken back to simpler times, and to share these objects and the narratives with others who wish to engage and form connections in terms of family, membership, community, kinship, etc.—basically, to feel connected and relevant to others through the sharing of their creative passions.

The introduction includes reference to other life-story object makers, including Amish rag-rug

maker John Bontrager, who began his craft following the death of his wife and his retirement from farming. His craft serves to supplement the artist's income and it also allows him to engage with others as he provides demonstrations of his craft at the centre for the Traditional Arts, in Shipshewana, Indiana. Kay also introduces retired machinist and minister Eli Jackson whose hand crafted banjos and dulcimers provide him with the opportunity to reflect on the pride of instrument-makers who came before him, in a traditional sense, and to connect with the days of his youth and share a significant aspect of his Appalachian cultural heritage with an attentive and appreciative audience, as he works on his instruments, talks about the craft, and shares intimate stories about his childhood community during the Great Depression (4).

Kay presents his case studies through the devotion of a chapter to each of the senior life-story object makers, thus allowing socially and culturally placed expressions of each maker and their craft to stand alone, while contributing collectively to the whole, with each serving a strong and significant role, as an integral part of the essence of his interesting research.

Each chapter contains clear, crisp colour images of the makers and select examples of their life-story objects. Kay also allows the individual voice of each artist to be heard, unedited, through the generous use of direct quotes which creates a sense of intimacy, allowing the reader to feel as if they are engaging directly with the artist. Thus, the artists' powerful, personal narratives of loss, suffering, hardship, and adversity are evident, as well as the sense of community and belonging.

Through these five chapters, Kay introduces the reader to: Bob Taylor, retired pattern maker whose hobby-level interest in memory carvings initially allowed him to consider carving as a means of continuing on, to find a new creative pursuit once he decided to retire from his job; Gustav Potthoff, orphan, prisoner of war, and survivor of the death camps of Burma-Thailand, whose memory paintings help him to share the horrors he experienced, while reflecting on the fragility of life; Marian Sykes, former child resident of the Angel Guardian Orphanage in Chicago, retired worker and loving mother, now pursuing rug hooking through the utilization of repurposed materials; John Schoolman, walking-

stick maker and hiking enthusiast, whose brightly coloured walking sticks or canes reflect on his interest in hiking and his desire to share aspects of stories as presented directly on the canes; and, Milan Opiacich, Serbian-American instrument maker and community keeper of history, and oral storyteller (111).

Folk Art and Aging presents elder creativity as expressed through life-story objects as a refreshing alternative to the stigma so often attached to beliefs regarding elders through traditional and somewhat outdated senior-centric research methodologies, recreation practices, art therapies, social gerontology, and literature. All too often, aging is regarded merely as an end-of-life period, and therefore those within that age-defined category are often treated in a somewhat condescending manner, as if lumped into one clinical entity, with similar needs and aspirations. Kay presents case studies which clearly stand as counter to such narrow thinking and generalizations regarding seniors and their abilities to interact in, and contribute to, their communities and society. Each of the five individuals presented display passion, drive, determination, pride of workmanship, and a realistic sense of their genuine contributions to others through the making and sharing of their life-story objects and the unique and interesting narratives which spring forth from experience gained through a lifetime of living.

Kay fleshes out the notion that, although these individuals are aged, they might also be viewed as being in a unique developmental stage in terms of the pursuit of their own personal creative endeavours. Thus Kay's research is not limited to the field of material culture, but rather it crosses boundaries and disciplines and can be utilized in reference to narrative pedagogy, research and clinical applications in areas and disciplines including, but not limited to, social gerontology, nursing, social work, recreation, and art therapy, as well as being of interest to the non-academic and those not central to clinical practice, to family members and others who have a keen interest in aging and how those at that unique and creative developmental stage might enrich others through their creative contributions.