lore. Motif Z197.5.1′ recurs frequently among women for whom public declaration of intimate physical attributes promotes self-worth, and parts of the tale’s plot are also comparable with a new tale-type, HeS: 917′: ‘Innocent (Chaste) Man Slandered as Seducer (Rapist): Subsequently Vindicated’ (El-Shamy, Tales Arab Women Tell, 1999; cf. Wickett 39, 133 and 214, n. 6).

Prominent motifs in the tale about the birth of Abū Zayd (P230.0.2.1′: ‘Importance of having a son (male child)’, P230.0.1.1′: ‘Misery of childlessness (person weeps)’, T570.2′: ‘Characteristics of newborn are due to mother’s craving’, and Z143.4′: ‘Blackness as symbol of (physical) strength’) overlap with another new tale-type designating the epic-romance in general, HeS 513D′: ‘The Tribal Hero (Abū Zayd, ‘Antara, etc.) and his Companion(s)’, and motif L113.1.8′: ‘Black man (black-slave) in “white” nation (tribe) as hero’. Thus, seeking a match for ‘Azīza’s aggressive seductive tactics in the behaviour of the Sumerian goddess Inanna (41–42 and 134) or the Egyptian princess Zulaykhā (xiv and 39), although interesting, is not the most logical place to begin searching for the informant’s possible sources. The literature provided for motif T55 (forthputting woman) would have led to eleven occurrences in The Thousand and One Nights alone, of which one is titled ‘Azīza and ‘Azīz’, while another tells of a maiden who abducts her reluctant beloved, imprisons, and tortures him.

In Wickett’s view, what is exceptional about ‘Azīza and Yūnis is that the rāwī ‘has created a tale that presents an allegory of the female body as the ripe fruits of a tree, and the necklace as its embodiment’ (134). She concludes that the tale demonstrates the ‘creativity accorded to poets and, at the same time, [bears] evidence of the repertoire of formulas and descriptors available to the epic singers’ (216, n. 23). In light of the data provided by other unapplied research approaches (e.g. typology, cognitive systems, performance, folkloric behaviour), we may ask: has the rāwī ‘created’ a tale, or only a performance of an established text?

Typology is one of the untapped research resources in Wickett’s work, especially for establishing an item’s traditionality. She identifies a single case (the eye of the Egyptian god Re as dragon-slayer and releaser of impounded waters) in terms of the motif system, although she confuses the source (86). She states: “This motif was catalogued by Stith Thompson (The Folktale … 1946) in his Motif Index [1955–58] as “B11.7.1” . . . Other related motifs include B11.10 “Sacrifice of a human being to a dragon” and S263.3 “Person sacrificed to water spirit to secure water supply”” (220, n. 26). Actually, none of these motifs appears in Thompson, nor in Aarne-Thompson’s tale-type, ‘The Dragon Slayer’ (1962). They were first given in El-Shamy (Folktales of Egypt, 1980). However, Uther parenthetically adds these motifs to his revised type-catalogue (2004), while the data Wickett gives on St George and its exorcistic connections (134) are virtually identical with those given in El-Shamy’s Folktales of Egypt, 1980. It should be noted that al-Khiḍr is neither one of the ‘aqṬāb (‘arch-pillars’ of the cosmos), nor involved in exorcism, as Wickett infers (94).

These drawbacks, among others dealing with esoteric designations of genres, beliefs, and so on, seem to characterize the currently polarized scholarship in folklore. Setting them aside, Seers, Saints and Sinners is an original, serious, and creative work with a great deal to offer especially in the field of folk poetry and Coptic lore. It is a valuable and welcome contribution to folklore studies and related fields.

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This first book by Moira Marsh also is the first book-length treatment of practical jokes, which according to the author ‘deserve study because they are a truly vernacular, unofficial, or “folk” arena for creative play’ (1). In her Introduction, Marsh briefly reviews the lack of interest in (even the disparagement of) the practical joke among humour scholars because practical joking has been considered too unsophisticated, cruel, and aggressive for serious study. She contends,
however, that the funniness and appropriateness of practical joking can be determined only by examining ‘how jokes behave in the wild’ (4); that is, by studying them in specific social and physical contexts. Through interviews with forty-two informants in Bloomington, Indiana (1986–88) and in Wellington, New Zealand (2005), and by drawing on published sources, North American folklore archives, YouTube videos, and personal experiences, in eleven chapters she examines ‘the creativity, humoroussness, and social significance of vernacular practical joking’ (5). She argues that the performance style of practical jokes, like that of verbal jokes, is influenced by individual personalities and local joking aesthetics, which determine how practical jokes are received and what makes them funny or not in particular settings. Local joking aesthetics are formed by social class, occupational and regional settings, and the local group’s joking history, as well as by individual personalities.

Influenced throughout the book by Erving Goffman’s work on frame analysis, Marsh defines the practical joke as ‘a scripted, unilateral play performance involving two opposed parties—trickster and target—with the goal of incorporating the target into play without his or her knowledge, permission, or both’ (12). After briefly reviewing previous attempts to categorize practical jokes, she proposes five kinds of practical jokes based on their ‘objective characteristics that are available for analytical observation’ (21): put-ons, fool’s errands, kick-me pranks, booby traps, and stunts. Put-ons are passive in that they usually pop up spontaneously in everyday discourse and only briefly contain the target—just requiring the target’s acknowledgment of belief in such things as the fictional jackalope. The fool’s errand, on the other hand, requires misguided action on the part of the target, who, for example, not only is led to believe that there is such a thing as a non-existent left-handed crescent wrench, but is convinced to fetch one. Kick-me pranks, such as a sign stuck to the target’s back, require neither acknowledgement nor action by the target, who ‘is unwittingly made into a performer for a hidden audience’ (26). Booby traps, if successful, surprise the target, ‘with the intention of causing loss of composure’ (26); they may or may not be unpleasant, and include a variety of practical jokes from goosing an unsuspecting target to short-sheeting the target’s bed. Stunts include public pranks like computer hacking, which surprise collective and anonymous targets rather than a specific target.

Subsequent chapters question the morality of verbal and practical jokes, investigate the social function of practical jokes, explore the role of practical jokes in weddings and initiations, consider public practical jokes, notably media April Fool’s Day pranks, and introduce a few practical jokers, comparing their joking aesthetics and the role of practical jokes in their lives.

One of the best features of Practically Joking is the author’s examination of the relationship of practical jokes to other genres of folklore: personal experience narratives, legends, verbal jokes, rites of passage, initiation rituals, and calendar customs. For instance, Marsh notes that practical jokes often are replayed in narrative forms, usually local stories (memorates), and in detail she examines first-person accounts of a particular fool’s errand told by the trickster, target, and onlookers. Sometimes practical jokes, such as those about the snipe hunt, are shared through migratory tales in the form of belief legends or comic tall tales. In comparing and contrasting legends, verbal jokes, and practical jokes, Marsh departs from solid ethnography and ventures into philosophy, speculating that both legends and tall tales, like practical jokes, explore ‘epistemological limits’ (56). Legends, she claims, attempt to understand received truths by opposing them, provoking debate, and raising questions. Verbal jokes construct ‘an alternative to reality that is briefly inserted into reality, a finite, bounded domain within which we may experience incongruity, absurdity, even chaos in an enjoyable way’ (56). While legends try to understand ‘these domains’, jokes ‘tame them so that they may be safely enjoyed for their own sake’. Practical jokes, in contrast, ‘promise epistemological certainty, positing a clear distinction between truth/reality and untruth/absurdity, and mocking those who confuse them’ (56).

As Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein point out in their book on understanding philosophy through jokes (Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar . . . [2007]), ‘[P]hilosophy and jokes proceed from the same impulse: to confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our worlds upside down, and to ferret out hidden, often uncomfortable, truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the gagster calls a zinger’ (2). Thus, Marsh appears to be on the right track in dealing with
the epistemology, morality, and aesthetics of practical joking, though her brand of performance studies emphasizing forms of interaction is more sociological than philosophical. Occasionally she flirts with existentialism, but that is only a fling. Her orientation basically is performative sociology, which actually works very well in her comprehensive treatment of pranks. Marsh shows that the practical joke most certainly is a form of folk play, if not folk art, that demands serious study—not simply to defend it or to disparage it, but to understand the genre’s role in culture, the psychology of the trickster, the feelings of the target, and the relations between the trickster and target. She has gone a long way in accomplishing these things, but her real contribution to the study of folklore, popular culture, and humour is the texts and contexts of a variety of practical jokes that she collected for around thirty years and put together in a single book.

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In this smartly presented account of death and funeral customs amongst the people of the Arkansas Ozarks, author Abby Burnett documents commonly observed death and dying, grief, and mourning customs during the period c. 1850–1950.

One of the greatest challenges of writing about funeral customs is how most effectively to structure one’s material. While presenting customs and beliefs in sequential order undoubtedly facilitates an imaginative engagement with historical lived experience, the danger of such an approach is that a potentially rich reservoir of material becomes reduced to simple description. Burnett’s solution to this dilemma is to devote her first nine chapters to taking the reader on an essentially narrative journey from ‘keeping death at bay’ through the deathbed, laying out, and the funeral itself. The annual commemorative custom known as ‘Decoration Day’, when the cemetery would be tidied and the graves then decorated with flowers and other tokens, is also covered, implying the continuing post-mortem presence of the dead in community life.

A further three, more thematically oriented chapters then address ‘Childbirth, Children and Death’, ‘Disenfranchised Death’, and the beginnings of the undertaking business in the Ozark region. Cremation is afforded a very brief treatment in just one page in the final chapter. A short concluding chapter emphasizes the differences between death and funerals ‘then and now’, just about navigating the sometimes tricky borderland between historical scholarship and cozy nostalgia.

Throughout Gone to the Grave, Burnett displays a humane, common-sense approach to her subject, successfully resisting any temptation to sensationalize. Nor, however, does she flinch when necessary from the practical realities of death, dying, and dealing with the dead, whether through matter-of-fact description or the well-chosen black-and-white images of coffins, gravestones, and other funeralia which are situated at regular intervals within the text.

Due to the predominantly narrative structure and tone of this book, those with a specialist academic interest in the topic may find its lack of in-depth analytical framework frustrating. This effect is compounded by the relatively informal writing style, revealing Burnett’s background in journalism. Furthermore, there is a want of contextual information. Although some basic background and a rudimentary map are provided in the Preface, Burnett—perhaps because she herself has lived in the area (xii)—tends rather to assume her readers’ familiarity with the geography and history of the Ozarks.

These are, however, largely the grumbles of an academic historian, who, in fairness to Burnett, is probably not her intended audience for this particular book. Rather, the book appears mainly to be aimed at the interested general reader, who will find much to stimulate their curiosity about,