



Book Review of Attebery,  
Jennifer Eastman  
2023. *As Legend Has It:  
History, Heritage, and the  
Construction of Swedish  
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Madison: University of  
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**BOOK REVIEW**

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What role does storytelling play in local history writing? We historians all have our explanations for why history matters and how the writing of history contributes to an understanding of both the past and the present. However, the telling of stories is not exclusive to historians—rather, it is a central feature of human life and an important element in the construction(s) of shared heritage. In *As Legend Has It: History, Heritage, and the Construction of Swedish American Identity*, Jennifer Eastman Attebery focuses her attention on the uses of historical legend in Swedish American local community history. Attebery is Professor Emerita of English at Idaho State University and has devoted her career to Swedish American folklore and cultural identity. In this book, Attebery employs a large corpus of Swedish American local histories in an effort to shift focus from the identity-construction of the elite to what she terms the ‘every-day’ making of community history and heritage.

It quickly becomes clear that *As Legend Has It* is as much a theoretical contribution to the critical study of local histories as it is a history of Swedish American heritage-making. The overarching aim of the book is to show how historical legends function to place Swedish Americans in a broader context of American history and to study how these legends contribute to the making of cultural heritage. In other words, Attebery’s contribution is both empirical and theoretical. Empirical in the employment of a large number of local, mostly rural, history writings as source material, and theoretical in viewing local histories as powerful sources for understanding ‘the cultural work of heritage’ (p. 15).

The book is divided into an introduction, seven theoretical and empirical chapters, and a ‘coda’—alluding to the analytical term for the final part of a complete narrative structure. Theoretical and empirical discussions are overlapping throughout the book, and Attebery seamlessly moves between contexts and concepts. The introductory chapter sets the scene by discussing the power of heritage-making, exemplified in contemporary struggles over history. In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, Attebery shows how historical legends embedded in local history writing give life to local histories and thus help to create a sense of shared heritage. Read as ‘texts within texts,’ the

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historical legends provide a window into the cultural and value assumptions within the community that are chronicled. Chapter 4 provides a thematic overview of the contents of the 279 narratives identified in the 33 local histories that are used. Here, Attebery shows that the most common themes deal with the act of making unfamiliar *spaces* into familiar *places* and the process of rooting in both first- and second-generation immigrant legends. Themes that rarely or never occur in the material are those that concern female aspects of immigrant experience, and neither are business activities, workers in workshops, or meetings in social organizations depicted. One of the more recurring themes is the immigrants' positions in the westering movement, or as settler-colonizers, and their encounters with the environment as well as the interaction with Indigenous peoples. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, Attebery makes her most important claims. First, through the lens of rhetoric, she argues that many of the legends use an embodying language to place the readers in the point of view of the characters. They let the readers see the environment and experience the chain of events from a first-person perspective. Further, Attebery emphasizes the tendency of legends to articulate how safe homes and places are constructed in the midst of wild and dangerous nature. Employing the analytical concept of ostension—meaning the way in which narratives can influence behavior—Attebery shows how historical legends connect the actions of ancestors to the beliefs and values in the imagined community, arguing that legends can provide scripts for future action. In Chapter 7, the question of whether critical history is possible within local history writing is addressed. By highlighting the traces of critique presented through the rarely occurring judgmental and humorous narratives, Attebery's answer is affirmative. Through such stories, community norms can be questioned and changed.

In relation to the vast amount of source material used and to the engaging analysis and results, *As Legend Has It* is an impressively compact book: 174 pages, excluding notes, references, and index. Readers who enjoy legends and storytelling will not be disappointed, as the source material is frequently quoted. As a historian, however, I sometimes wish for more historical contextualization of the specific legends used as examples. Perhaps it is the double aim of covering a large empirical corpus and providing in-depth analysis in such a compressed format that compromises the anchoring of the stories in spatiality and chronology. A separate listing of the source material could have helped the reader navigate more easily among the empirical examples. Just as Attebery argues about historical legends presupposing an insider audience, *As Legend Has It* is thus primarily directed to those already familiar with the history of Scandinavian immigration to North America.

One of the most important contributions is the close analysis of how Swedish American historical legends have depicted encounters with Indigenous peoples. Here, Attebery's research can be placed in a broader trend of relating the Swedish American settling and westward movement in a settler-colonial and ethno-racial context (e.g., [Blanck 2014](#); [Fur 2014](#)). One of these legends from Lindsborg, from a volume published in 2010, tells about a group of American Indians who approached a Swedish American homestead family and threatened the youngest boy with a knife. The story holds that the mother offered them all the food they wanted, whereupon the man with the knife lowered it and laughed. Accepting only a portion of that which was offered, the group rode away, smiling and waving to the family. Attebery places this narrative in a larger body of legends about how encounters with Indigenous people presented an initial threat, which was in one way or another deflected by the Swedish Americans. It is through the careful analysis of how these legends are narrated and structured that Attebery is able

to show how ideas of settler-colonial and racial superiority, and Indigenous inferiority, have been a crucial element in Swedish American heritage-making.

A similar theme that is brilliantly highlighted is the making of *spaces* into *places*: narratives of how Swedish Americans occupied uninhabited land, turning it into a home. As Attebery shows, these narratives stand in an interesting tension in relation to the encounters between Swedish Americans and American Indians. The process of making space into place is also expressed in how the built environment, like houses, churches, and barns, in legends become places of shelter from the whimsical and dangerous space of the prairie. The theme occurs in almost half of the analyzed historical writings, and Attebery recurringly proves that Swedish American heritage-making has long depicted the process of migration as a settling of previously unoccupied land: excluding Indigenous populations from the land, even while depicting several kinds of encounters.

Attebery admits that the choice of source material is largely concerned with rural Swedish American settlements and communities, thus limiting the study to a rural context. I believe that including Swedish American historical writings from urban areas, such as Chicago, Minneapolis, or New York, would probably expand or alter the conclusions in exciting ways. How would aspects of entrepreneurial and political success or failure be presented in such narratives? How would discourses of racial differences be articulated in those accounts? In an urban setting, other economic and political dynamics dictate the processes of heritage-making in immigrant communities during the 19th and 20th centuries. Applying the theories of folkloristics to the biographies and historical writings of urban Swedish Americans would also open up the discussion of several conflicting Swedish American identities.

Such questions may go beyond the scope of Attebery's study, but *As Legend Has It* certainly is a great example of how personal, family, and community history can reveal how broader discourses and ideas underpin the making of local heritage. Simultaneously, it shows how heritage-making is in constant emergence, revealing how the past is always used for present purposes. The specialized focus on the rural Swedish American case makes the book's conclusions somewhat difficult to generalize and may primarily appeal to readers interested in how heritage is constructed in a settler-immigrant group. The greatest contribution is instead found in Attebery's innovative use of folklorist theory in analyzing this process. To conclude, Attebery's impressive work should definitely be on the reading list of all folklorists and historians interested in how cultural heritage is constructed.


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