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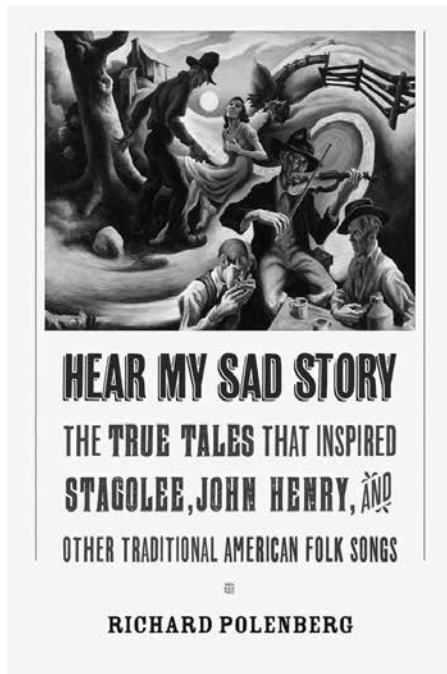
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Sad Characters of American Folk Songs

BY FRIEDA TOTH

Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales that Inspired Stagolee, John Henry, and Other Traditional American Folk Songs By Richard Polenberg, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015, 304 pages, 6.1 x 9.3 in., 57 images, ISBN: 978-1-5017-0002-6. Hardcover \$26.00



People love “true stories” behind pop culture. Every day we see the headlines on MSN or *USA Today* about what this or that celebrity is really like. I was therefore delighted when *Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales That Inspired Stagolee, John Henry, and Other Traditional American Folk Songs* by Richard Polenberg came into my hands. It took a long time. When I tried to obtain this book from my library, all copies were out, so I put it on reserve; there were 92 people ahead of me.

Having grown up reading Alan Lomax, I thought I knew the true stories, and that much of *Hear My Sad Story* would be review. But Lomax, as good as he was, relied a great deal on oral history and less on research, whereas Polenberg went at his research like a dachshund after a rat.

Polenberg starts with “St. Louis Blues,” which is, according to him, “one of the most-often recorded songs of the first half of the twentieth century” (9). This seems a poor start for a book about folk songs since we know who wrote it, and that he was a trained musician, the antithesis of “folk.” However, its status as “folk” is redeemed by its ubiquitousness. Following this logic, Polenberg can include other songs whose origins we know. Polenberg organizes thematically, so that if you are just interested in railroad songs, or just highwaymen, you can skip to that chapter.

The true stories behind “Omie Wise,” “Tom Dooley,” and “The Titanic” are more than poignant. They are really depressing. If we believe Polenberg’s research (and I tend to), Omie Wise was not an innocent teen seduced and discarded, but a woman in her 20s, who, if not exactly sophisticated, was at least savvy enough to secure child support for her two previous children before John Lewis got to know her. Tom Dooley was an unfunny version of Tom Lehrer’s “I Got It from Agnes.” Dula (his real name) bedded three female cousins, one married, and succeeded in giving the clap to an untallied number of people as a result. Stories that have been edited and set to music to become beautifully tragic turn out to be just nasty, or even stupid. Casey Jones was something of a hot dog, with a number of speed infractions on his record, before the fatal and completely avoidable crash. Poor Delia was a 14-year-old who maintained she never went to bed with anyone, completely at odds with Cash’s song.

When I got to Casey Jones, my heart broke. My hero had a safety infraction record? Naturally, I Googled this, hoping to prove Polenberg wrong. I failed.

It’s upsetting how many folk songs owe their existence to bad healthcare. Delia probably would not have died of her wound today, Tom Dula could have gotten

himself some antibiotics, and let’s not even get into contraceptives.

One of the saddest stories was that of Frankie (of “Frankie and Johnny” fame). In real life she not only was able to successfully claim self-defense for killing her abusive teenaged boyfriend, the judge was so sympathetic he gave her gun back. That sounds like a happy ending, but folk songs—the Twitter storm of the day—had the last word. Frankie became notorious through the much more spicy story in the song—this ruined her life; she could go nowhere without people “recognizing” her as THAT Frankie. But when she sued for damages, the fact that the story didn’t exactly match her life was used against her, and she not only lost, but had to pay court costs.

Although it would increase the cost and change the format, this book would be better with a CD. Even if you have good knowledge of folk songs, you may not be familiar with the versions used by Polenberg. I had waited for this book for so long that I jumped into reading the stories without reading about who the author was. I do like Polenberg’s writing, which is so progressive, so liberal, that I was well into the book, certain that the author was a black woman or man before I realized the writer was a white guy. It is refreshing to read a folk song book that makes no excuses for the abuse of blacks, of women, of the impoverished.

Read this book to feel smarter; now you know. Don’t read it to feel good, as the stories are sad. You’ll feel better about yourself after absorbing the knowledge, but you won’t feel good.

Excellent index, great suggestions for further reading, a surprising number of photos make this a valuable addition to your folk library. ▼

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