

Kanigel, Robert. *Hearing Homer's Song: The Brief Life and Big Idea of Milman Parry*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021. Notes. Index. 336 pp. \$28.95 (cloth). ISBN 8-2094-5255-0-978.

In his biographies of figures like Frederick Winslow Taylor, Jane Jacobs, and Srinivasa Ramanujan, Robert Kanigel has proven to have an intellectual love affair with unconventional academics, especially those who come from unlikely backgrounds and offer revolutionary contributions to intellectual society. This is a suitable description of his latest subject, Milman Parry (1902-1935), the classicist, Homeric scholar, and founder of what has come to be known as the oral-formulaic theory. Despite his humble roots, at the time of his death at age 33, Parry was an assistant professor at Harvard and the man who had made irrelevant the centuries-old Homeric Question. Like Kanigel's prior subjects, Parry is a figure who looms large in a particular scholarly sphere but is basically unknown outside of it. He is thus perfectly suited to the author's skill for translating the complexity and significance of ground-breaking ideas to lay audiences. *Hearing Homer's Song* is no exception, proving equal parts introductory university lecture, gripping family drama, murder mystery, and travel adventure novel.

To understand Parry and bring him to life in this text, Kanigel has consulted every academic article, graduate thesis, biographical snippet, interview, obituary, and piece of correspondence written by or directly about Parry and his family. He has also interviewed living relatives and consulted important contemporary scholars to grasp the nuances and intricacies of Parry's personal and professional lives. These disparate threads are woven together on every page, revealing the care the author has taken to step into Parry's life as best as anyone can from such a temporal distance (what a pity that Parry's first true biography must come 86 years after his death). This is heady work! And yet, *Hearing Homer's Song* offers a brisk and lively narrative that carries the reader through a series of short, riveting, and digestible chapters.

Chapters 1-2 serve as an introduction, presenting Parry, along with his protégé and later champion, Albert B. Lord. Kanigel tempts readers with the highlights of Parry's biography, making the case for why the story is worth telling and explaining how he first became interested in it. Chapters 3-8 bring us back to Parry's childhood and early life in California, starting with his family background and early education, and following through his undergraduate years at Berkeley where he married his wife, Marian Thanhouser, joined a bohemian campus element led by anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, and fathered his first child, Marian. This section concludes the completion of Parry's MA thesis (1923) wherein he first highlighted the basic foundation of the theory that would undergird his academic career. Chapters 9-16 find the Parrys in Paris where the young scholar refined his theoretical ideas and defended his two PhD theses (1928) at the Sorbonne. We learn of his relationships with his academic advisors and witness his introduction to Matija Murko whose work inevitably led Parry to test his theories in Yugoslavia. Paris also brings the birth of Parry's son, Adam. Chapters 17-21 travel with the family back to the USA where Parry taught at Drake before

assuming a post at Harvard. There, he formulates his plan for a field trip to test his theories in an ethnographic context, while his busy work life, and a current of anti-Semitism among his colleagues continue to exacerbate marital problems that arose in France. Chapters 22-25 outline Parry's two field trips to Yugoslavia in 1933 and 1934-35. Readers bounce over bumpy roads in the scholar's Ford sedan as he, Albert Lord, and their guide and interpreter Nikola Vujnović recruit Yugoslav bards. Taken to various local hotels, the singers exclaimed their epic songs into the bespoke recording device Parry had commissioned for the expedition, etching heroic tales of thousands of verse-lines onto the 3,500 aluminum records still held at Harvard today. This section culminates in the discovery of the Moslem singer Avdo Međedović, who proved to Parry and Lord that exceptional artists of Homer's caliber could still be produced in a traditional milieu. Finally, Chapters 26-27 cover Parry's senseless end in a California hotel room in 1935 and the rumors that surrounded it, before providing a final assessment of the scholar's legacy.

Parry's story cannot be told without also covering some of the life of Albert Lord, who almost single-handedly turned Parry's epiphany into a field of research that infiltrated and revolutionized a number of disciplines. Lord is depicted sympathetically and shines through many chapters, especially in Kanigel's discussion of how honor-bound he felt to finish Parry's work, even if the responsibility initially overwhelmed him. The book also offers one final gift: a smattering of commentary about Parry's research from David Bynum, once Albert Lord's heir apparent, who has been absent from academic engagement for more than a decade due to Parkinson's disease. Bynum died in June 2021, and Kanigel is one of the last people to have engaged with him before his death. These few insights are welcome echoes of a once familiar voice now lost.

For all the research that has gone into this book, the few errors and oversights that made it into the final print are overwhelmingly contained in the sections pertaining to Parry's Yugoslav research. Unfortunately, it seems that none of the scholars consulted on this material were given the task of reading the final proof of the text. There are abundant typographical errors: the letters *č* and *ć* are often mistaken, *č* and *š* have their carons inverted to circumflexes, etc. There are also morphological and spelling errors: *opanaci* [traditional peasant shoes] appearing in the accusative rather than the nominative (182), or the word *paše* [Pashas] rendered as *pase* and *pas* (191). One also finds odd stylistic choices, such as anglicizing and Latinizing heroic names in epic song titles (184), only to later offer others in their original forms (188). Finally, there are a series of lacunae and errors in content: The town of Udbina is referred to as a country (212); the wax cylinder recordings made by Parry's predecessor Matija Murko seem to have eluded Kanigel's attention (179, 184); and Croatia's Dalmatian hinterland is consistently ignored as a region where epic singing was practiced and where singers were recorded by both Parry and Murko (4, 129, 160, 177, 178, 180). These problems will only bother the specialist, though, and are largely superficial in view of the target audience of the book (for an academic assessment of Parry's

research, see the 1971 introduction to his collected works penned by his son Adam).

Parry's short life was storied and dramatic enough to make for an engaging page-turner, but his research into the formulaic utterances that allow epic singers to craft their songs is not exactly bestselling non-fiction. Despite the family drama detailed here and the vivid descriptions of various cities in the early part of the twentieth century, Parry's theoretical revelation and his single-minded marriage to it are the real subjects of this story. It is a testament to Kanigel's writing that he has been able to pay due homage to Parry's theory without letting its explication impede his narrative. This book will captivate and engage an audience unfamiliar with Parry's work—perhaps classicists and folklorists will receive a new wave of students—while also filling in many small biographical gaps for those who are more familiar with Parry's professional than his private life.

Dorian Jurić
University of Ottawa
Gatineau, Quebec, Canada
djuric@uottawa.ca