

Petr Janeček. *Spring Man: A Belief Legend between Folklore and Popular Culture* (Studies in Folklore and Ethnology: Traditions, Practices, and Identities). Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022. List of Figures. Notes. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. xiv+228. \$100.00 (hardback). \$45.00 (e-book). ISBN 978-1-66691-375-0. (hardback). ISBN 978-1-66691-376-7 (e-book).

Petr Janeček's *Spring Man: A Belief Legend between Folklore and Popular Culture* is a comprehensive study of an urban folklore character from his appearance in 1919 in Bohemia to his current form in popular culture as a symbol of Czech nationalism, the working class, and social activism. Janeček covers the origins, appearances, behaviors, and functions of Spring Man [Czech, *pérák*] who appeared in legends largely in urban areas throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Janeček maintains that the idea of the Spring Man of folklore as a WWII resistance fighter arose from post-war literature and ideologically based scholarship and creative work and that Spring Man was morally ambiguous rather than heroic. While tales about Spring Man as a resistance fighter exist, far more common are tales in which he terrorizes the populace or attacks women. The one consistent characteristic in the tales is Spring Man's ability to escape, usually by leaping away.

The reader is introduced to Spring Man in three vignettes intended to show the metamorphosis of Spring Man from monster to hero. The first, set in Prague in 1945 during the German Protectorate period, describes a boy returning home at night who sees a "dark figure... bounding down from the hill's crest with unnaturally high leaps" (1). The boy recognizes him because of his appearance: dressed in black and masked, and, most importantly, wearing shoes with springs in the soles. Frightened because he has heard stories about Spring Man's attacks on innocent people, the boy crouches next to his gate. As Spring Man passes the terrified boy, he grimaces at him and lets out a sound like the "bark of a rutting deer" (2). The second vignette describes the 1965 screening of the animated film *Spring Man and the SS* (1946). Children and teens are enthralled by the film and create games featuring the Czech superhero fighting the Nazis or attempt to mimic him by attaching springs to their shoes. The third vignette depicts a 2015 social action by an anonymous person purporting to be Spring Man, who criticizes the Czech nation for hypocrisy in commemorating Auschwitz while ignoring the former concentration camp in Lety which was the location of a pig farm at the time of the action. Janeček provides these vignettes as snapshots of the transformation of an urban legend into a principled superhero.

The book's first chapter provides personal accounts and newspaper reports about Spring Man from 1919 through the 1970s. These legends first appeared in the mining and laboring regions of Bohemia and proliferated throughout Protectorate-era Czech lands during the later years of WWII. Many of the tales were collected by Janeček and his colleagues from informants who were children at the time the legends and rumors about Spring Man were circulating. Chapter Two covers the history of Spring Man and similar characters that appeared in

Poland, Germany, and Slovakia throughout the twentieth century. Janeček considers Spring Man to be a manifestation of a migrating legend about “prowling ghosts” (64), the best known of which is the folkloric character Spring-heeled Jack of Victorian England. In addition to their uncanny ability to escape, another commonality among tales about Spring Man and similar beings is that they arise primarily in urban, working-class areas. In the third chapter Janeček addresses the psychological and social functions of these tales. He argues that one reason tales about Spring Man were so popular was because of Spring Man’s insolubility in his transgression of “fixed cultural categories” (142). By retelling the rumors and legends about Spring Man, people attempted to reconcile Spring Man’s paradoxical nature of being both human and demonic and both positive and negative, while also reacting to the difficult times in which they were living. In the final chapter, Janeček describes Spring Man’s metamorphosis from urban folkloric demon to a figure in popular culture. Creative works featuring Spring Man produced after WWII were influential in this metamorphosis, including the animated film *Spring Man and the SS* (1946). Spring Man has been increasingly commodified since that time, turning into a heroic character in comics, films, and theater. However, Janeček sees the most current iteration of Spring Man—the social activist—as something of a return to the earlier ambiguous figure.

The story of Spring Man and his subsequent metamorphosis is fascinating. Janeček extensively researched the topic, providing convincing evidence of the complexity of Spring Man, whose current manifestations as a heroic figure in popular culture conceals the negative aspects of the original folklore. He argues persuasively that Spring Man loses his ambiguous liminal nature when taken from the oral tradition and developed into the anti-Nazi resistance fighter of the 1946 film. The legends Janeček and his colleagues gathered from informants who remember Spring Man from their childhood are also of value. Much similar information has been lost over time.

This book would have benefited from more careful editing. Besides missing or misused words, the syntax is sometimes cumbersome and ungrammatical. I also found some of the theorizing in Chapter Three distracting, particularly the inclusion of monster theory, which was only partially applied and in an abbreviated form.

Nonetheless, this does not decrease the value of the work which will be of use to scholars of popular culture, cultural studies, East European history and culture, and folklore, particularly urban legends. The book is broadly researched with citations from theories of folklore, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Spring Man is a significant figure in Czech folkloric, literary, and popular culture and merits scholarly attention just for that, but the present work also provides a template for similar works.

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