
Book Review

Helen A. Berger and Douglas Ezzy, *Teenage Witches: Magical Youth and the Search for Self* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), xviii + 278 pp., \$23.95 (pbk), ISBN: 0-8135-4021-6.

Sociologists Helen A. Berger and Douglas Ezzy provide a behind-the-scenes look into an often poorly dramatized and excessively fictionalized world in their book, *Teenage Witches: Magical Youth and the Search for the Self*. The book is arranged into seven chapters that are interspersed with eight different vignettes, representing interview responses to one or both of the authors. The data presented in the book was collected through a series of 90 participant interviews in three countries, some lasting up to two hours (p. xv). The study claims to be the first of its kind to investigate the lives of teenage witches/wiccans (both researchers and participants used these terms [p. 26]) in three countries: the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. All participants were native English speakers, and neither of the researchers claims to be witches themselves (p. xvi).

Readers encounter the most valuable part of the book when the ethnographic material comes through in the form of the voices of the research participants. Readers will appreciate learning more about the role of the Internet in these young people's lives, both as a means of connection to other practitioners and as a means of gaining membership. The decentralized nature of the religion enables young people to turn the resulting disconnection into an advantage, supplying them with as much anonymity or solitude as desired in their religious practice. This reader liked learning about the seriousness of the young people's religious practices as well as their different means of joining and participating in the religion.

It is in keeping with feminist (and other) ethnographic research methods for researchers to disclose their preconceptions. In this case, that these authors began their study expecting to find 'a group of primarily young women superficially involved in spell casting, particularly love spells, having been drawn to Witchcraft by the mass media', reveals some of their preconceived notions of gender, their attitudes toward non-mainstream religions, and their potential for trivializing young people (p. 24). But Berger and Ezzy correct their assumptions, stating that they 'found highly spiritual self-reflective young women and men' (p. 24).

In the chapter, 'The Goddess is Alive: Feminism and Environmentalism', the authors present their conclusions regarding the role of feminism in the pagan practices of the participants, any possible connections between goddess worship and feminism, and the prevalence of environmentalism. Berger and Ezzy conclude that environmentalism, or environmental awareness, is often a consequence of the deep connection to nature and the use of natural symbols by practitioners (p. 192). The authors suggest that the attitudes toward nature found in practitioners are not necessarily directly informed by the religion in a political sense. In other words,

Berger and Ezzy claim that the participants in general do not identify as activists, despite their predominantly 'positive orientation toward environmentalism' (p. 197). Their analysis in this regard is interesting and insightful, but readers of this journal may be disappointed by the brevity with which the authors engage in discussing the nature aspect of the religion as less than ten percent of the book directly engages with these ideas.

The bulk of that chapter is devoted to a discussion of feminism and its connection to the participants interviewed. Unfortunately, the authors did not take their analysis of the participants responses far enough. Instead, Berger and Ezzy accepted claims by teenagers regarding their connection to feminism at face value, citing that sixteen US, ten British, and nine Australian interviewees described themselves as 'feminist' (p. 176), later claiming that 'most of the young witches eschew the label "feminism"' (p. 180). As a university instructor of women and gender studies courses, I often find that claiming a label, be it 'feminist', or 'republican', or 'democrat' has more to do with students' family culture and media representations than a deep understanding of what those affiliations mean. Berger and Ezzy did not analyze participant responses to identify feminist leanings nor did they report asking respondents for their definition of feminism. They reported that 40% of participants identified explicitly with feminism and that a consistent thread of gender equity was present among the responses, but then argued that participants were generally not feminist. This disconnect suggests to me the possibility of a lack of cohesion in the authors' argument, perhaps related to the way the text production in the co-authorship was divided.

Another possible explanation for the lack of deep analysis might be a need for a more complex and intersectional definition of feminism. The authors acknowledge the essentialism possible in some forms of goddess worship in an interesting tracing of religious scholarship on the history of goddess worship as it relates to feminist movements. But there is an occasional conflation of biological sex with gender stereotypes, as when the researchers suggest that more Australian interviewees might have claimed the title of feminism if they had been interviewed by the female instead of the male in the author team (p. 176). The way feminism is handled results in what feels like a chapter of a dissertation—a collection of observations, woven with some review of literature, but without the deep analysis necessary to offer critical insights into the ways in which feminism informs and/or is a product of these witches' practices.

Ultimately, this book provides an interesting window into the attitudes and thoughts of current, young witches. The use of ethnographic research methods provides the reader with access to the voices of the participants, albeit in a mediated form. Likewise, connections between feminism, environmentalism, and pagan religious practice are examined, and the authors rely on their research to offer some new arguments related to those connections.

Michelle Trim
English Department
University of New Haven
mtrim@newhaven.edu