
Kristin M. McAndrews. *Wrangling Women: Humor and Gender in the American West*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006. 175p.

CHRISTINE GROGAN
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Kristin M. McAndrews prefaces her book about humor and gender in the tourist town of Winthrop, Washington, with a poem by Linda Hogan titled “The Other Voices.” Hogan’s poem begins, “There are things we do not tell when we tell about weather and being fine.” Those “things we do not tell” are what McAndrews seeks in her ethnographic study of the modern-day cowgirls who work in the Methow Valley of eastern Washington State. After explaining the impetus for her project (a *faux pas* in which she assumed that Cowboy Bob was the boss of the lodge instead of Cowgirl Teresa), McAndrews explores the subversive implications of being a cowgirl and of their use of humor. Her book, which includes four chapters and 22 illustrations, is a step toward remedying the lack of cowgirl narratives. As she provides the stories told directly from the cowgirls, thus portraying “the other voices,” McAndrews instructs the reader to “enjoy the ride” (xvi).

In traditional feminist fashion, McAndrews explicitly calls attention to her position in her research and discusses the problems involved when transcribing spoken language into written form. McAndrews tells the reader that she is viewed as an outsider: not only is she a dude among wilderness experts, but an academic tourist dude at that. McAndrews mentions the mistrust the word *academic* conjures up for the Methow Valley residents: academics (Ph.D.s) are referred to as “posthole diggers” (150). She also notes the sting the word *tourist* suggests when she explains that “permanent residents are still treated as outsiders twenty years after they arrive” (11). In addition, she admits to the difficulty of capturing the authentic voices of her subjects. Although wanting to include the narrative breaks—such as the *um*’s, *uh*’s and *ah*’s, the repetitions in speech, and the western accents—McAndrews admits that the nuances are too difficult to represent in written form because they disrupt the flow of the narrative. Yet despite her outsider status and the difficulties of creating authentic voices, McAndrews gathers much insider information from the women she interviews.

McAndrews devotes many pages to defining the women whose stories inform the book. What is most striking is how she defines the women by what they are not. They do not want to be labeled as feminists, nor do they want McAndrews to “Betty Friedan” the research (46). And yet, as she notes, these women contain the American trailblazing feminist spirit. The stories they tell go beyond cowgirling: one cowgirl shares the story about the time she buried gold so that visitors thought

that they struck the real thing; another cowgirl admits that she smoked marijuana in front of two police officers during a trip. What all of the stories reveal is a sense of endurance and strength and, most importantly, a sense of humor.

In the introduction McAndrews clearly states that her thesis is to examine how the cowgirls of the Methow Valley use humor in their storytelling and what this humor reveals about issues of gender in the American West, but she does not address the theories about humor until the final chapter, titled “‘Nothing to Lose’: A Horsewoman and a Tall Tale.” Even though the reader gets glimpses of what is meant by the phrase “humor studies” throughout the book, McAndrews saves the theoretical discussion for the final few pages. She relies on the work of Claire Farrer and Carol Mitchell and agrees that there is a gender division in storytelling. According to Farrer, “we have ‘tall tales,’ a male genre of storytelling; the female corollary is exaggeration. Men have ‘stories’ or ‘yarns’: women have ‘gossip’ or ‘clothes lining’” (131). Essentially McAndrews’ study challenges the belief that women’s narratives are insignificant. It is not that the women she interviewed are not funny; in fact, just the opposite is true. The crux of her argument, which comes together by the end of the book, is that women’s humor has been discounted because it has the potential to undermine the status quo. McAndrews expresses her hope that “this book has made clear that cultural norms about women’s behavior endow their lying tales and jokes with a potential for subversion that makes their telling often unsettling for both teller and listener” (144). Indeed it becomes clear that women’s humor has the potential to disrupt regional gender and narrative expectations. But, as McAndrews notes, it is too often an unrealized potential because women’s humor challenges the traditional male-centered history.

McAndrews is clear about the purpose of her study; she is not as clear about her methodology. We learn that in order to understand how humor operates in the Methow Valley, she conducted interviews with Winthrop’s female wranglers. In her introduction, McAndrews states that the interviews ranged from one to eight hours—a considerable range. We are not told which women were interviewed for eight hours, which women interviewed for one, and which women were somewhere in between. Nor do we get the dialogue between McAndrews and the interviewees. It is the interviewees’ stories that are included. Moreover, it is not until almost half-way through the book that the reader learns the prompt read to the women to elicit their stories: McAndrews asked the women to explain a scary story that focused on a horse experience. The reader is not given the reasoning behind the choice of this particular question. The consensus in the stories that McAndrews received suggests that a horse wreck is the most feared occurrence among the women. She explains that the horse wreck has become a common motif in western art, with Claude Miller’s

“End of the Line” illustration as the quintessential depiction. Since she mentions Miller’s painting, and since she provides many rich illustrations in her work, a replica of “End of the Line” is a glaring omission.

Two other points in the book may puzzle the reader. The first occurs when McAndrews is discussing the western myth and argues that it consists of “the fundamental relationship between Man and Nature” (55). Although she clarifies what she means (man and nature are bigger and more powerful than woman), it is troubling that she does not explain Woman’s intimate relationship with Nature. The second assertion that a reader may stumble over occurs when McAndrews writes, “Sharing stories with me does not necessarily mean sharing them with the community at large” (139). The women telling the stories know McAndrews is going to publish the stories. In that sense, these stories will be shared with all who care to read the book—that is, the community at large.

Despite a few shortcomings in *Wrangling Women: Humor and Gender in the American West*, McAndrews does an excellent job of portraying the cowgirls of Methow Valley. She makes her presence known in both Methow Valley and in her book. But McAndrews also knows when to cede center stage to the cowgirls, which she does most of the time. Her insightful comments about the community, in which the women occupy two subordinate positions (to men and to the tourists), add to her credibility as a researcher. In her epilogue, McAndrews compares her work to that of the cowgirls when she states she has “been full of fear while riding next to an academic abyss that always seemed to threaten a wreck” (147). Like the cowgirls she interviewed, McAndrews gets back on the horse and gives voice to those “things we do not tell.” ✱