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Magic: A Beginner's Guide (review)

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Magic: A Beginner’s Guide (review)

Abstract
Surveys of the history of magic (and of witchcraft, although this item is decidedly not one of the latter) are thick on the ground, so with each new book, one can fairly ask what new or different elements it offers. The greatest strength of this book is its conceptual breadth. Beyond the standard medieval and early modern history of European magic and its repression, it offers (relatively) lengthy treatment of magic in post-Enlightenment Europe, including coverage of two topics almost never found in more "standard" surveys—stage magic and the modern academic treatment of magic. Covering so much ground in so short a space is a tall order, and the book’s deficits inevitably stem from its constant compression of complicated topics and questionable choices regarding inclusion and exclusion.

Disciplines
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Comments

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Surveys of the history of magic (and of witchcraft, although this item is decidedly not one of the latter) are thick on the ground, so with each new book, one can fairly ask what new or different elements it offers. The greatest strength of this book is its conceptual breadth. Beyond the standard medieval and early modern history of European magic and its repression, it offers (relatively) lengthy treatment of magic in post-Enlightenment Europe, including coverage of two topics almost never found in more “standard” surveys—stage magic and the modern academic treatment of magic. Covering so much ground in so short a space is a tall order, and the book’s deficits inevitably stem from its constant compression of complicated topics and questionable choices regarding inclusion and exclusion.

Ralley begins by noting that “magic was an accusation long before it was a practice” (p. viii), introducing the idea that rather than a set of certain activities, “magic” in European history has more often been a (typically pejorative) label applied to a shifting body of practices in various historical societies. This history begins in antiquity, as the Greeks coined the term magic to encompass activities that they associated with the Persian priestly caste, the magoi. In his introduction, Ralley moves speedily from Persian magoi to the biblical magi, and skilfully uses their depiction over the centuries as a crash course in how the image of the magician—the magus—can change. The absence of more extensive treatment of magic in antiquity is regrettable, but recognizing that in a book of this nature radical concision is often necessary, I found Ralley’s strategy here effective.

Into his first chapter Ralley then condenses everything that frequently occupies all or most of other surveys, namely the medieval and early modern Christian condemnation of magic and persecution of magical crimes, notably witchcraft. Again, I found Ralley’s presentation basically sensible, at least until witchcraft. As this is a book about magic broadly conceived, Ralley justifiably does not want to give the early modern witch trials too much attention. The problem is that he gives them practically none at all. Moreover, his stunted presentation feeds into several persistent myths about witch-
craft that a survey should dispel. Ralley actually spends most of his “witchcraft” section on late medieval condemnations of demonic magic, culminating in the earliest real witch trials in the 1400s (pp. 22–25). He then treats the entire period of the early modern trials and their decline in less than one full page (pp. 25–26). For the general readership at which this book aims, this skewed emphasis could create an impression that Europe’s witch trials were more a medieval than an early modern phenomenon, and that clerics and above all the “Holy Inquisition” were primary agents in the trials. Ralley notes that “witch trials continued through the seventeenth century” and that “during the period of just over a century from 1561 to 1670, it has been calculated that at least 3,299 people were executed in south-west Germany alone” (p. 25). Yet this is the only statement he gives indicating that the height of witch hunting fell in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Experts, of course, will realize what he means to convey, but general readers will have no reason to make the necessary extrapolation. Also, why offer a relatively meaningless (in isolation) regional figure as the only allusion to the magnitude of the early modern hunts? Why not simply present the widely accepted estimate of approximately 50,000 total dead?

In his second chapter, Ralley turns to “Renaissance magic,” introducing Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, as well as other standard figures such as Johann Reuchlin and Johannes Trithemius, Agrippa, and Paracelsus. There are two deep problems with the chapter, however. First, although he recognizes that notions of natural magic extend well back into the Middle Ages, Ralley insists that “what European scholars achieved, over a generation either side of 1500, was a redefinition of magic” (p. 33). Generalizations, perhaps even overgeneralizations, are necessary in surveys, but this too deliberately flies in the face of much recent work questioning any strict division between “medieval” and “Renaissance” magic. An even more serious problem is Ralley’s attempt to hastily insert some mention of common magic, of ordinary cunning men and women, into a chapter really structured around elite magical discourse. He does so simply by declaring ordinary cunning folk to be exactly the same as Renaissance magi: “learned writers referred to the practitioner of magic as magus; others used terms such as ‘cunning’ or ‘wise’ men and women . . . but the meaning . . . was essentially the same” (44). His justification is that both elite and ordinary magic were often used for similar purposes: to heal, to protect, to uncover hidden information. The point is not wrong, but again for general readers I fear it creates a very skewed impression of how different levels of magic were perceived and functioned in this period.

In Chapter 3, Ralley traces a tradition of magic as performance and enter-
tainment, from conjurers and jugglers at medieval and Renaissance courts to modern stage magicians. Since modern stage magic is typically excluded from treatments of historical magic, his analysis here, again necessarily impressionistic, is valuable, especially as he stresses how the separation of performative magic from all other varieties in fact stems from a campaign by nineteenth-century stage magicians to present their craft as entertaining but essentially “rational.” While carefully guarding their own secrets, stage magicians often worked to expose what they regarded as the “fraud” perpetrated by clairvoyants, spiritualists, and those who claimed any kind of “real” magical power.

In Chapter 4, Ralley turns to “real” magic in the modern era, mainly the ritual magic of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century occult revival. Like stage magic, modern magical traditions are often simply excluded from surveys of Europe’s magical history. Ralley is right to include and to emphasize them. But the extent of his emphasis seems questionable. He spends fully twenty pages on the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and its most infamous member, Aleister Crowley. Important as the Golden Dawn and Crowley were, do they really warrant over one tenth of the entire book? Meanwhile, other important modern mystical/magical groups—spiritualists, Theosophists, and so forth—are speedily covered in a sentence or two, and basic issues of European modernism and these groups’ place within it are hardly broached. Even modern Wicca, a religio-magical system that has dominated much of the popular conceptualization of magic and magical practitioners in the second half of the twentieth century, is accorded only eight pages, barely more than the innovative nineteenth-century ritual magician Éliphas Lévi alone receives.

In his final chapter, Ralley examines how modern European academics, mainly anthropologists, have categorized and studied magic. Again this aspect of the topic is usually excluded from historical surveys. Yet trends in modern scholarship need to be treated as part of the history of magic, since throughout history magic has been a created category, and modern scholars—not entirely unlike inquisitors, magistrates, and demonologists in the past—undeniably share with practitioners the task of shaping that category.

In sum, Ralley is to be praised for including several important topics typically excluded from surveys of European magic. He must be faulted, however, for muddling some important issues, no doubt unintentionally, in his attempts at brevity. He can also be faulted for indulging himself in some areas where much greater concision was possible. Despite his impressive breadth of concern, Ralley fairly clearly thinks of magic first and foremost in terms of elite ritual magic such as performed by Renaissance mages and modern occultists. These are important but ultimately limited traditions. They are
also almost exclusively male forms of magic. Except for a brief mention of feminist elements of Wicca at the very end, Ralley says nothing about gender anywhere in this book, or examines the strong historical associations stretching over centuries linking many kinds of magic specifically with women. In a book that aims to be a full and complete introduction to its subject, this is one final, unfortunate, omission.

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Most modern Western adults say they don’t believe in magic, and undoubtedly believe they don’t believe in magic, but in certain circumstances, when the stakes are high or the costs of appearing credulous are low, they act in ways that indicate that at some level they actually do. This disjunction between explicit and implicit convictions about magic is peculiar to modern Western adults. Young children accept magical and physical causation equally readily, and magical thinking plays a positive role in their cognitive development. Similarly, unschooled adults in traditional societies accept magical as well as physical causation and phenomena, and magic plays a prominent role in the folk cultures that organize their lives. Developing and sustaining conscious disbelief requires the deliberate creation and habitual deployment of active psychological defenses, which are instilled and supported by the powerful cultural forces of institutionalized religion and science. Together, these findings suggest that magical thinking is an integral part of human cognition not just in childhood but throughout the life cycle, and is driven from modern Westerners’ consciousness not by the natural triumph of our innate rationality but by the concerted pressure of antagonistic cultural traditions.

This line of reasoning is, in a nutshell, the core argument developmental psychologist Eugene Subbotsky advances in *Magic and the Mind*. In the first chapter he sets out key definitions and distinctions, like NIMBs (non-institutional magical beliefs) as opposed to both institutional magical beliefs (religion) and science, “magical thinking” (which in his definition necessarily involves a fantasy world), and “magical beliefs” (which are about the real world). He then proceeds in the next nine chapters to methodically detail the