

BRIEF SUMMARY

Koutstaal, W. – Review of *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes*, by David C. Rubin (Oxford University Press, 1995).

(From the review) The remarkable phenomenon that cognitive psychologist David C. Rubin explores in this book—the “that” which he pokes and prods from a variety of angles and starting points—is the stability and persistence of oral traditions. How do the stories and songs found in such genres as epics, ballads, and children’s counting-out rhymes remain constant despite their dependence upon human memory for their survival? [...] How do “train wreck” ballads, or children’s rhymes such as Eenie Meenie, not metamorphose into quite different creations? To survive, an oral tradition must find successive homes in the mind and memory of multiple hearers and tellers. Yet how does it retain its identity across these many homes, hearings, and tellings given all of the vagaries, simplifications, and outright distortions to which we know our memory is prone? [...] Having read this book, one begins to notice a variety of factors that affect memory in small and everyday ways. There is a heightened sense of respect for the role that sound and surface characteristics of stimuli have on what we remember, and of the many ways we perceive, learn, and mnemonically benefit from structure in our environment. A deepened conception of how memory forms—and informs—our collective and individual lives is gained.
