
The logo features the letters 'AAR' in a large, bold, serif font. A thick, black, curved line arches underneath the letters. To the right of 'AAR', the words 'BOOK REVIEW' are written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font.

Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park. By James Bielo. New York University Press, 2018. 225 pages. \$89.00 (hardcover), \$28.00 (paperback), \$26.60 (e-book).

Well stop! Great God, stop still and listen
My God walked down by the briny sea
Beheld the evil of the sinful man;
Declared that he would destroy the land
He spoke to Noah; Noah stopped
He said: "Noah, I want you to build an ark
I want you to build it big and strong
Build it three hundred cubits along
Thirty high and fifty wide
'Cause it's got to stand that rain and tide."
Well, after God told him what to do
Noah began to cut and hew
The ringing of the saw cried "Judgement."
The ringing of the hammer cried "Sinner repent."
A hundred years, he hammered and sawed
Building the Ark by the Grace of God
After the foundation was laid
He hewed the timber and the Ark was made

Now the ark is made again, in Kentucky, and its making is examined by anthropologist James Bielo.

Frankie Laine's 1954 "Rain, Rain, Rain" was one of the first records I bought. Noah's Ark has had a central place in Western popular culture at least since, around 1800, redundant miners in the German/Czech borderlands took to toy-making. As Bielo points out in this splendid study, *Ark Encounter*, today Noah and his Ark continue to pop up in all manner of media. For creationists, though,

Noah and his Ark have a much more serious meaning than is usual in popular culture.

Ark Encounter, a Christian theme park, opened near Cincinnati in 2016, and in its first year saw 1.2 million visitors. There are ambitious plans for the 324-hectare site, but the main attraction at present is astonishing enough. The wooden replica of Noah's Ark is enormous: 155 meters long and 15.5 meters high. It is the achievement of Answers in Genesis, a creationist organization founded by an Australian schoolteacher, Ken Ham, which had already opened the hugely successful Creation Museum some forty miles away when Ark Encounter opened.

Ark Encounter is indeed an astonishing structure, with inside dramatic views through the three huge timber-framed decks. Those decks are partly set out as they "might have been," with cages of animals (including dinosaurs), storehouses for food, accommodation for Noah's family, and so on. But some of the huge spaces are given over to conventional museum-style displays devoted to the story of the Ark, how it worked, and general creationist arguments. This is the decision of the design team. Should the whole Ark be set out as it might be imagined to have been originally? This would be truly "immersive," but it might end up being rather boring. Better perhaps to use part of the huge space for museum-like interpretive displays? This is the dilemma faced by many curators of historic house museums: historic house, or museum, or some kind of combination/compromise? As many historic house museums do, the Ark Encounter team went for a combination. Bielo's examination of the resulting visitor experience, in which the visitor moves between the creationist past (the days of Noah) and the creationist present (the museum-style displays), is summarized in the rather odd phrase "walking poetics of faith."

Essentially this book is about the three-way relationship of the Ark, the designers, and the visitors. Within this triangle, acceptance of creationism is formed. This is such a valuable book partly because it focuses first on the corner of the triangle too often neglected in discussions of museums and visitor attractions: the designers. The creative team included Roger the creative director, Tyler the lead illustrator, Emily the set designer, and Kevin the artist/historian. Bielo brings these people to life and makes their personalities, skills, and interactions very real. Their overriding concern was to achieve "Hollywood quality": they were determined to deny skeptics the ammunition to associate creationism with kitsch or even with "poor white trash." That they succeeded triumphantly seems to be acknowledged by all. Bielo describes his fieldwork (which he illuminatingly describes in an appendix) as "revelatory, difficult and frustrating in equal parts," and in the end the team unexpectedly (and ungenerously, it seems) dumped him.

Bielo then moved on to look at the other corners of the triangle: the Ark itself, as it finally appeared, and above all at the visitors. His analysis of the organization of the Ark, the museum-style displays, and perhaps especially of the language in the many text panels shows exemplary museum studies skills. (Though sometimes Bielo's style seems a bit dense. For example: "For Emily, recalibrating the

exhibit pedagogy from textual reading to aesthetic learning was a strategy for reaching the broadest possible public” does not seem to say much more than “using pictures rather than words helped reach....”)

Equally interesting, and perhaps more important, is Bielo’s examination of visitors and their reactions. He had practical problems here, too, and was obliged to focus his research on the understandings and expectations local fundamentalists were bringing to their encounters with the Ark. This, though, is not the least important part of this book, because there has so far been disappointingly little research into visitors to religion parks—research that would allow us to assess how successful these venues are in their own aims. This seems to be true even of Holy Land Experience at Orlando, the religion park that has attracted the most academic attention. Things are little better in the Asian religion parks. This must surely be the priority for future studies of religion in theme parks.

Bielo looks beyond Ark Encounter, discussing “materializing the Bible” attractions worldwide (His “Materializing the Bible” website now lists 478 of them.) Here he describes four other promised creationist theme parks that will “teach creationists to be proud of creationism, and . . . demand that noncreationist audiences take notice.”

One of the book’s most telling chapters is not actually about Ark Encounter at all, but about a display on dragons and dinosaurs the design team was diverted to making back at the Creation Museum. Bielo shows how this display (could dragon legends come from folk memories of encounters with dinosaurs?) expresses the struggle for representation of opposing worldviews in the United States. From Western Europe this all seems delightfully distant and exotic, but of course all theme parks are political, and religious parks in particular have a religious, cultural, and political cause to promote. The Swaminarayan *Akshardham* theme parks in India preach a Hinduism that elides with Indianness; the *Russia My History* attractions and exhibitions preach an alliance between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Putin government; *Tierra Santa* in Buenos Aires preaches the comprehensive national role of Catholicism; Indonesia’s *Taman Mini* park preaches national unity through diversity, both religious and ethnic.

Religion appears in visitor attractions and theme parks extraordinarily frequently. First, there are actual “religion parks” like Ark Encounter, which aim to promote a faith or reinforce their adherents’ faith. Then there are “culture parks,” attractions themed either on the culture of their own countries or on those of (preferably exotic) foreign countries. Religion regularly appears in these parks as a key part of culture. Thirdly, there are amusement parks, and there too religion can appear: Dollywood, for example, has a church at its center. This is true of theme parks throughout the world, from Mongolia to Australia and Japan to Hawaii. All this is the product of huge social and economic changes in the world over the past two generations, including the vast new middle class with disposable leisure time, the interaction of religion with modern technology, the growth

of prosperous sects with strong middle-class support, urbanization and globalization leading to nostalgia for “traditional values,” and the growth of tourism.

This is great fun, as well as interesting and important, but in investigating it we do need to consider the limits of academic objectivity. The more success attractions such as Ark Encounter have, the more danger they pose to humankind and our Earth. Antiscience sentiments feed directly into climate change denial; the recent memory of 2018’s worldwide heatwaves should make us all very wary.

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Crispin Paine
Liss, Hampshire, England