

# BOOK REVIEW

*Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*, by JAMES S. BIELO.  
New York: New York University Press,  
2018, 240 pp.; \$89.00 (hardcover).

Is creationism fun? James S. Bielo's *Ark Encounter* provides a window into the making of a creationist theme park in Williamstown, Kentucky. The book shares the name of the park, which includes a full-scale re-creation (largest timber-framed structure in the world) of Noah's Ark. Bielo's work briefly covers the history and context of the creationist resistance to evolution and describes the wider global phenomenon of materializing the Bible in the form of gardens, museums, and replicas. The book focuses on the interactions, contexts, and strategies of the park's creative team during the initial design process. The design team included four creative professionals (creative director, illustrator, set designer, and costume designer) commissioned by the fundamentalist ministry, Answers in Genesis, known prior for its Creation Museum in nearby Petersburg. The contrast between the museum and Ark Encounter theme park exemplify the shift in tactic by this ministry. The Creation Museum hopes to win adherents through a scientific debate, while the theme park hopes to convert through entertainment and fun.

An introduction is followed by six chapters that begin with a broader scope and become increasingly focused on the specific Ark Encounter park. Chapter 2 details the larger international phenomenon of materializing the Bible. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on the labor and strategy of the design team. Finally, chapter 6 incorporates observation from the completed park. The book ends with a concluding chapter

and a methodological appendix. A generous amount of photographs (most taken by the author) are included.

Bielo situates his analysis in a broader consideration of the "culture wars." He describes the creationist design team's concern for legitimacy and the perceived threat of moral decline signaled by the broad acceptance of evolution. This struggle between creationists and evolutionary biologists for legitimacy is interpreted using Bourdieu's framework of orthodox/heterodox struggles for symbolic power over the other. The undertaking of the Ark Encounter park represents a creationist form of public culture aimed at bolstering public trust in creationism.

Creationists have long been engaged in mixing biblical literalism with selective treatment of modern science. However, in this book, Bielo shifts the focus from the scientific debate so often emphasized in the media to the creative work of creationists. While the design of a biblical theme park may seem inconsequential, Bielo shows the larger context and consequence of an American public culture of "survival of the funnest." If evolution is winning in public education, perhaps creationism can gain advantage in the realm of entertainment.

The book is based on Bielo's ethnographic work with Ark Encounter's creative team in the initial stages of design beginning in 2011. Unfortunately, his arrangement with the team was abruptly cut short in 2014—2 years before the park's opening. Nevertheless, Bielo made the most of his plight by supplementing the ethnography with descriptions of site visits to the park itself, the nearby and associated Creation Museum, as well as almost 40 other biblical attractions in the United States and beyond. In the appendix, Bielo details the frustration of the premature

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discontinuation of his access to the creative team and his subsequent efforts to find supplementary data for this project.

Despite the interesting analysis of cultural production as the centerpiece to this book, it is somewhat surprising that in a study of a Christian nonprofit organization, Bielo makes little reference to literatures on organizational theory. Parachurch ministries and faith-based nonprofits represent a unique religious phenomenon in the United States. Even while planning something as counter-cultural as an inland 500-foot wooden boat, *Answers in Genesis* still conforms to practices and strategies based on contextual norms. More attention to organizational research would have enhanced the book.

Just how generally relevant is the making of a biblical theme park? The truth is Bielo's framework will remain relevant as long as religious groups continue to

generate publicity through creative, entertainment-based endeavors. As for biblical theme parks, the book's conclusion lists several more announced, proposed, or rumored parks. Bielo's writing style is accessible to a wide audience, both creationists and non-creationists, academics and nonacademics. He does well in orienting the reader who may be unfamiliar with the creationist cause or his theoretical framing, while avoiding monotony for those who are. This book will interest researchers of contemporary religious culture, politics of science, and cultural production and circulation. In addition, it provides thought-provoking reading for anyone interested in the social and cultural context of Ark Encounter and biblical attractions like it.

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