

Book Reviews

Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park

By James S. Bielo. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

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Although creationism encompasses different perspectives, creationists generally are groups of Christians who contend that the first chapter of the Book of Genesis presents an accurate historical account of events that produced life and the world as it exists today. In 2016, the organization Answers in Genesis (AIG) unveiled a spectacular achievement by creationists when they opened the Ark Encounter theme park in Williamstown, Kentucky, featuring Noah's ark, built to reflect the measurements provided in the Bible at a cost of approximately \$150 million. The Ark Encounter became a centerpiece of AIG's larger edutainment complex, which includes the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. For the price of a typical theme-park ticket, visitors can move through more than 100,000 square feet of exhibit space on the ark's three levels and directly experience a ship large enough to have held "every beast after his kind" (Genesis 7:14), Noah, and his family. As visitors interact with a variety of visual media in the ark, they can progress "from darkness to light, from judgment to salvation" (88).

For many people observing these events from afar, the Ark Encounter is a conundrum, a puzzling combination of a massive, technically sophisticated tourist attraction and a narrowly focused defense of fundamentalist beliefs. For teachers and students of anthropology seeking to make sense of the Ark Encounter, James Bielo's book *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* is a helpful guide, showing how the theme park reflects creationists' capacity to blend "play and piety, fun and faith, leisure and devotion, imagination and morality, affect and religious pedagogy" (175). The book, I suspect, will also be useful for both creationists and their most determined critics. I have a lifelong

familiarity with creationism and personal ties to creationists; I found the book's insights into the interactions between fun and faith in fundamentalist public culture to be especially valuable.

Bielo's research for the book included ethnographic fieldwork in the studios where AIG's employees designed exhibits and promotional materials for the Ark Encounter over four years when the theme park was still in the planning and construction stages. The book also draws on Bielo's repeated visits to the completed theme park and visits to other sites around the world that, like the Ark Encounter, seek to "materialize the Bible" (32). Modeling an anthropological approach that respectfully and critically explores the perspectives of creationists and incorporating more than 30 engaging photographs from Bielo's fieldwork sites, the book invites readers to recognize the world of creationists as deeply entangled with readily familiar forms of public culture and commercial entertainment.

The book is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion, and it includes an appendix in which the author describes how he gained access to AIG's design team, some of the challenges that he encountered, and other aspects of his fieldwork. In the introduction, Bielo provides readers with a concise explanation and history of creationism, as well as a history of the Ark Encounter and AIG's struggles to raise funds for the project up until the organization held a well-publicized debate between Bill Nye, a celebrity science educator, and Ken Ham, AIG's leader, in 2014. The introduction also establishes the thematic focus of the book: how the Ark Encounter, responding to the imperatives of contemporary entertainment industries, bolsters the cultural legitimacy of creationism. In chapter 1, Bielo begins with a captivating vignette from his fieldwork with AIG's design team, illustrating how the team strives for Hollywood and Disney quality. He then discusses other cultural trends to which the Ark Encounter responds, including devotional consumption, entertainment as play, and the growth of religious publicity that seeks to wrest cultural authority away from dominant, secular publics.

In chapter 2, Bielo draws on his fieldwork in sites beyond Kentucky to establish that efforts to material-

ize the Bible—which include Bible history museums and theme parks like the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida—address the “problem of Christian authenticity” (36), by facilitating intimacy with scripture and establishing continuity between biblical history and the present day. Chapter 3 returns to AIG’s design team, providing a description of the team members, their work space, and daily work routines. Bielo presents what he learned from ongoing dialogues with team members and observations of meetings and other activities, offering insights into the team members’ sense of being “culturally embattled” (80), and their commitments to creating multisensory experiences that would be convincing to nonbelievers and produce a religious conversion.

Chapter 4 explores how the team sought to design immersive projects that were plausible yet playful. In describing the team’s effort to make a map of the pre-Flood world for display at the Ark Encounter, for which the Bible provides very little information, Bielo highlights an important dimension of creationism and fundamentalism generally: the affinity between literal interpretations of scripture and the development of imaginary worlds, or world-making. In chapter 5, he further illustrates this affinity through a detailed examination of the design team’s exhibition *Dragon Legends* for the Creation Museum, with a series of well-explained photographs. Through sophisticated displays incorporating objects, images, and texts, *Dragon Legends* indicates that the existence of numerous ancient legends featuring dragons may be proof of creationists’ belief that humans coexisted with dinosaurs. Through playful projections of a “heterodox past” (136), the exhibition challenged the legitimacy of evolutionary science.

Chapter 5 also returns to the crucial debate between Bill Nye and Ken Ham, for which Bielo was in the theater audience, to illustrate that creationists and members of the broader scientific community are engaged in a battle over history-making, one in which creationists argue that “historical science,” or the study of origins, is distinct from directly observed science and should be questioned. Bielo suggests that AIG, with its various projects, asks, “When it comes to history-making is creationism more fun than evolution?” (138). Bielo’s analyses demonstrate clearly the importance of creativity, fantasy, and play for creationists. I believe, however, that the design team’s world-building efforts, which invite visitors to “just try it” (108) and ask, “Could it be?” (122), may be more important for the Ark Encounter and more deeply affective for both designers and visitors alike than the book recognizes.

In chapter 6, Bielo takes readers through the completed Ark Encounter and describes the experience of moving through the ark as a “walking poetics of faith”

(140) that requires visitors to accept that although many details of the reconstructed ark are “fictionalized,” the project maintains a “literalist commitment to scriptural authority” (145). In addition to presenting the historical reality of the Flood and life on the ark, some of the exhibits address contemporary challenges to creationism from popular culture, such as children’s books that misrepresent the Flood and the ark. Bielo also notes how auditory features and opportunities to touch exhibits and the wood structures of the ark enhance the visual experience of the ship. Chapter 6 does not include information gathered from interviews with visitors, opening the door for a future research project that will consider how visitors have interacted with the ark and whether their experiences align with what AIG’s design team sought to achieve. The brief conclusion points out that there are other arks and creation museums in development across the United States and in Europe and asks how secular cultural producers might respond to the “ambitions of fundamentalist religious publicity” (179)—although the term *religious publicity*, which Matthew Engelke (2013) has also used in his work, might not adequately capture the vast scope of creationist projects.

In sum, by drawing attention to the so-called “creative creationist” and the world-building that creationists undertake to generate trust in their version of history, the book *Ark Encounter* allows readers to appreciate the conundrum of a creationist theme park more fully. Bielo has made a valuable contribution to several subfields of anthropology. As a well-organized, insightful book that addresses a topic that interests many students, draws on innovative fieldwork with a design team, and engages and builds on the work of a wide range of anthropologists, including Engelke, Susan Harding (2000), and Tanya Luhmann (2012), *Ark Encounter* would be an excellent addition to reading lists for courses on the anthropology of public culture, the anthropology of religion, and visual anthropology, and it will inspire further research on the ongoing evolution of fundamentalist public culture.

References

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