

Mieder, Wolfgang. 2025. *Worth a Thousand Words: Cultural, Literary and Political Proverb Studies*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 401 pages.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496858283.001.0001>.

Wolfgang Mieder's new book addresses old and contemporary proverbs through several overarching dimensions: politics, literature, culture and American identity. The book consists of 13 very diverse chapters and at times resembles a 17th century cabinet of curiosities, as it amalgamates so many interesting artefacts that are brought together under a very broad umbrella of proverbs. Another thing that unites many of the topics and ideas that can be found in the book is the author's personal interest: as he notes himself in the Introduction, "some chapters have a personal meaning for me" (p. 4). This makes the book more relatable for the reader as examples from politics, literature, history and other somewhat elevated spheres of life are interspersed with personal anecdotes, and references to family matters and everyday life.

The backbone of the book consists of two substantial and interrelated quests. The first is Mieder's search for the origins of proverbs. As he analyses particular examples, he traces their origins from the first recorded mentions, some of which might be in the Bible or in the ancient Roman texts, while others can be derived from famous peoples' speeches or from literature. The second quest is the exploration of the historical trajectories of proverbs. Mieder carefully looks into translations and adaptations of proverbs, their changes as they travel through time and space, and in some cases into the causes of their abandonment if the proverbs are no longer in use. He also efficiently argues against the idea that all proverbs are pieces of old wisdom by pointing out that "the time of proverb making is by no means over!" (p. 5). In the Introduction Mieder also uncovers the rationale for studying proverbs: according to him, they reflect the worldview of the society that has created and shared them (pp. 6–7).

Apart from the Introduction, the volume contains four sections: "American Proverbs", "Proverbs in Politics", "Proverbs in Literature" and "Proverbs in Culture". The first section starts with a chapter titled "'Think Outside the Box': The Wisdom and Nature of American Proverbs". In this chapter Mieder both comments on the increasingly globalised environment that proliferates the spread of proverbs and looks for "truly American" proverbs, i.e. those proverbs that originate in the USA (he remarks that these are mainly proverbs of different groups who had migrated to America, as unfortunately very few proverbs of indigenous people have been collected, p. 21). He also comments on the defining features of contemporary settler American proverbs – their relative brevity (seven words on average) and the decline of their didactic nature (p. 31). The second chapter, "'Proverbs Are Worth a Thousand Words': The Global Spread of American Proverbs", takes a closer look at the ways some American proverbs have metaphorically conquered the world. With the help of his international colleagues, Mieder has done impressive work searching for analogues of several American proverbs in 29 other languages. He acknowledges the role of the media in their worldwide spread and emphasises the increased speed of this spread in contemporary societies. The third chapter focuses on a single proverbial topic, namely, friendship. It is titled "'A Friend (Not) in Need Is a Friend Indeed': Friendship in Old, Modern and Anti-Proverbs", and as the title suggests, it analyses not only proverbs but also anti-proverbs, i.e. "parodied, twisted, or fractured proverbs that reveal humorous or satirical speech play with traditional proverbial wisdom" (Mieder 2004: 28; see also Litovkina et al. 2021). The analysis of proverbs and anti-proverbs on

this topic concludes with emphasis on their significance in modern, and also future, societies. The final chapter of this section, "Freedom Is Not Given, It Is Won': Democratic Principles in Modern American Proverbs", draws the link between the core values of contemporary society – freedom and democracy – and their reflections in American proverbs. It cites several well-known American politicians and traces how some of their slogans became proverbial (cf. Obelkevich 2015 on slogans and proverbs).

The section on proverbs in politics opens with Chapter 5, "Do unto Others as You Would Have Them Do unto You': The Humanistic Value of Proverbs in Sociopolitical Discourse". The chapter contains an important message that proverbs can be, and in fact are, as "contradictory as life itself" (p. 90) and "are not based on a logical philosophical system" (ibid.), but nonetheless carry humanistic value as illustrated by their use in inspiring political speeches. The next chapter, "Freedom Is Indivisible': John F. Kennedy's Reliance on Proverbs", again uses a zoom-in technique and analyses the proverbs in John F. Kennedy's speeches. Mieder notes that "Kennedy was clearly fond of formulaic statements based on parallelism and antithesis" (p. 124) and cites ample examples to illustrate this idea. In Chapter 7 the author to some extent moves away from the predominantly American context that informed many of the previous chapters. The chapter is titled "Concordia domi, foris pax': Willy Brandt's Non-German Proverbial Rhetoric". Mieder shows how skilfully Brandt wove not only German, but also English proverbs into his rhetoric and claims that Brandt familiarised Germans with several American proverbs (p. 187).

The next section, "Proverbs in Literature", starts with a chapter on proverbs in a masterpiece of Spanish literature. The title "Stringing Proverbs Together': The Proverbial Language in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*" already implies that the analysis will not focus on single proverbs, but on the use of their compilations by the characters in *Don Quixote*, primarily Sancho Panza. Indeed,

Mieder reestablishes Sancho Panza's reputation as a wise fool (cf. Close 1973) by showing that his prolific use of proverbs – often piled on top of one another – is in fact an indicator of his wisdom and humour. Chapter 9, "All Roads Lead to 'Perverbs'": Harry Mathews's Selected Declarations of Dependence", will be especially interesting for those who speak French and German as some curious examples from literature in these languages remain untranslated. However, most of the chapter focuses on the English-language work of American novelist, poet and translator Harry Mathews titled *Selected Declarations of Dependence* (1977), chosen by Mieder because it skilfully dissects proverbs and combines their parts in various ways, playing with the reader's imagination and expectations. The section's final chapter "Black Is Beautiful': Hans-Jürgen Massaquoi's Proverbial Autobiography Destined to Witness (1999)" uncovers the masterful use of proverbs in the autobiography of this Afro-German migrant journalist to the USA and shows that not only Massaquoi himself but also his mother were fluent in proverbial language. Mieder takes particular interest in the ways in which Massaquoi's multi-ethnic and multi-lingual background has affected his use of proverbs.

The opening chapter of the "Proverbs in Culture" section is titled "You Have to Kiss a lot of Frogs Before You Meet Your Handsome Prince': From Fairy-Tale Motif to Modern Proverb". It is situated on the crossroads of paremiology and fairy tale studies as it researches the motif of kissing a frog in the Frog King fairy tale type (ATU 440) and the above-mentioned proverb. The motif is nearly absent in German versions of the tale but present in the American versions, a fact that inspires Mieder's conclusion that "the proverb is not so much a 'reduction' of the fairy tale but rather an imprecise (!) 'allusion' or reminiscence to it" (p. 326). Chapter 12, "The Word (and Phrase) Detective': A Proverbial Tribute to OED Editor John A. Simpson", is dedicated to one of the key compilers of the Oxford English Dictionary, who also published the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of*

*Proverbs* (Simpson 1982) and an autobiography titled *The Word Detective: Searching for the Meaning of It All at the Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson 2016). Mieder draws upon both Simpson's study of proverbs and his skilful use of proverbs in the autobiography to show that he used proverbs not only to compile the dictionary but also to make his writing more vivid and relatable. The final chapter of the book is titled "'Injustice Anywhere Is a Threat to Justice Everywhere': From Classical to Modern Law Proverbs". Similarly to the third chapter on friendship, this chapter singles out proverbs on a particular topic that has indeed inspired a lot of proverbs in the Western world and beyond (Pirie 2021). Mieder shows that many of the proverbs on legal issues stem from the classical and medieval periods, although new proverbs on this topic have continued to be created and used in modern times.

The book allows its reader to explore the world of proverbs from different angles, such as outstanding personalities, pertinent topics and seminal works of literature. Much of the data analysed in the book derives from American literature and folklore, though references to German, British, French, Spanish and other cultures also appear in the volume. The prevalence of American data reflects both the author's personal circumstances as an immigrant American scholar and the dominant position of American culture in the globalised world. Mieder, nonetheless, does not attempt to extrapolate his conclusions onto the entire world of proverbs but rather embeds them in the contextual information relevant to the particular case studies that he describes. Newcomers to the field of paremiology may be perplexed by some of the terminology and may wonder about the difference between proverbs, proverbial sayings, proverbial phrases, proverbial expressions and maxims (all of which are used extensively in the book), as well as about questions such as when anti-proverbs become – or fail to become – proverbs. While the book does not give ready-made answers to these questions, it stimulates readers' curiosity and encour-

ages them to engage more deeply in the study of proverbs. Therefore, I suggest that *Worth a Thousand Words: Cultural, Literary and Political Proverb Studies* would be a welcome addition to folklorists' and cultural scholars' shelves as well as a welcoming introduction for anyone who is developing an interest in proverbs.

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