



Johnny Appleseed: The Man, the Myth, the American Story

Howard Means

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This portrait of Johnny Appleseed restores the flesh-and-blood man beneath the many myths. It captures the boldness of an iconic American life and the sadness of his last years, as the frontier marched past him, ever westward. And it shows how death liberated the legend and made of Johnny a barometer of the nation's feelings about its own heroic past and the supposed Eden it once had been. It is a book that does for America's inner frontier what Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage* did for its western one.

No American folk hero—not Davy Crockett, not even Daniel Boone—is better known than Johnny Appleseed, and none has become more trapped in his own legends. The fact is, John Chapman—the historical Johnny Appleseed—might well be the best-known figure from our national past about whom most people know almost nothing real at all.

One early historian called Chapman “the oddest character in all our history,” and not without cause. Chapman was an animal whisperer, a vegetarian in a raw country where it was far easier to kill game than grow a crop, a pacifist in a place ruled by gun, knife, and fist. Some settlers considered Chapman a New World saint. Others thought he had been kicked in the head by a horse. And yet he was welcomed almost everywhere, and stories about him floated from cabin to cabin, village to village, just as he did.

As eccentric as he was, John Chapman was also very much a man of his times: a land speculator and pioneer nurseryman with an uncanny sense for where settlement was moving next, and an evangelist for the Church of the New Jerusalem on a frontier alive with religious fervor. His story is equally America's story at the birth of the nation.

In this tale of the wilderness and its taming, author Howard Means explores how our national past gets mythologized and hired out. Mostly, though, this is the story of two men, one real and one invented; of the times they lived through, the ties that link them, and the gulf that separates them; of the uses to which both have been put; and of what that tells us about ourselves, then and now.

Johnny Appleseed: The Man, the Myth, the American Story Details

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From Reader Review Johnny Appleseed: The Man, the Myth, the American Story for online ebook

Terry Earley says

Happened to see this on the "new arrivals" table at the library.

I learned some interesting things, but wow, there was a lot of filler. The man left little in the way of information about his life, so we got a long first chapter on his genealogy, and a couple of extra chapters in the back on the myth as portrayed by Disney and others.

Skip to the middle and you will find out about his connection with Swedenbourg, and why he gathered seeds and not cuttings.

Roland Bruno says

Gets bogged down with too much genealogy initially and then the relative simplicity of the man's life doesn't make for scintillating reading. Certainly a man unlike any I've read about, living a life original. Anyone with an interest in the early diaspora of the white man into the original northwest of the Ohio valley will find this title fascinating. Part vagabond, preacher, arborist and entrepreneur, this book lifts the veil on an American legend.

Mankey says

So little is known of John Chapman's (the real Johnny Appleseed) that it's impossible to write a book just about the man's life. In order to turn a ten page sketch into an actual book, Means is forced to write about other things that help to provide a glimpse into the life and beliefs of the man we call Johnny Appleseed. Some of those things are boring, the book opens up with some rather confusing genealogies of Appleseed's parents and ancestors. Some are more fascinating, like pioneer life in 1809, or a discussion about Appleseed's "New Church/Swedenborgian" beliefs.

Perhaps the best part of the book takes place at the end, when Means traces the transformation of John Chapman into Johnny Appleseed American Myth. For those curious about the story of Johnny Appleseed this might be the most important part. This book tends to bog down in places, but it's well researched, and a good place to start for anyone seeking to know all there is about Johnny Appleseed.

Cheryl says

Even though it was in some ways disappointing for recreational reading, I don't want to dismiss the quality of the research in this work: if you are doing genealogy on ancestors who trekked westward in the early Republic, this book does a good job of imagining the lives they led and choices they made. I had hoped this

work would be similar to the biography of Charlie Chan by Yunte Huang, but it wasn't a very fun read. The remoteness of the time covered (1776-1845) is one problem--the facts of John Chapman's life are rather sparse (though less sketchy than for many people of that era). But the book reads like a genealogy research draft rather than a biography. The facts about Swedenborg and early American history and tangential figures swirl about, and Johnny Appleseed gets lost in the details. I respect the author's desire to keep close to the facts, but I see a lot of my own, flawed genealogical writing in this book--the connections that build around the research subject are too tantalizing not to share, but they detract from the purpose. As a trans-Mississippi West gal, I also found the geography of this trans-Appalachian (or is it trans-Allegheny?) wave of migration confusing, and the maps didn't include all the places mentioned--I kept flipping back trying to find the map that referred to each part of the text. I didn't really know where Marietta, Ohio is, or the river valleys of Pennsylvania. I pushed through to the end and feel that I came away much informed about the man and the historical time, but if I weren't such an avid genealogist and lover of eighteenth-century history in general, I would probably not have persisted. One thing is clear from reading this book: contemporary American culture is terribly ignorant of the religious currents that were such a critical part of our country's founding; it is very wrong to read religious sensibility from our own time back onto a time that was so radically different. We learn about 1776 and all that, but it was those decades in the early Republic that really set into motion cultural movements that still affect us.

Mary says

A very interesting look at the man who became the legendary Johnny Appleseed. The book examines how this eccentric man evolved into a Disney hero and beloved symbol of gentle environmentalism. I loved seeing how John Chapman's image changes over the years. Fascinating to see how historical figures are investigated through sparse primary sources such as store records, newspaper articles and census data. Also a history of the United States in the years after the Revolutionary War--the expansion to the west, pioneers, the killing and forced relocation of native peoples. This book is American history through the life of a very particular American.

James says

I heard mixed reviews before starting this with little intention of reading the entire book, but I was quickly captivated. It is very true that Means uses very little primary documentation or known facts about Johnny Appleseed, but that is because very few exist. He uses indirect storytelling focusing on the people, places, and known influences on John Chapman's life to help bring the unknown mystery a little more into focus. I happen to enjoy this type of history and find it very useful in trying to better understand motivations in the past.

As for the book's subject, he is a fascinating character. I remember the Disney stories and only knew he was a real person because I saw his grave site as a child. The look at the role of orchards, the pioneer entrepreneurial opportunities, and the Swedenborg mission do go a long way to explaining why there might have been a barefoot, pot-wearing, hermit pioneer dispensing apple seeds in early Ohio. Although honestly it still feels like there might be a major piece of the story missing.

Jim says

An excellent biography trying to separate the man from the myth. We know about his sowing appleseeds, but that he was also a missionary of the Swedenborgian religion (based on the beliefs of a Swedish mystic) is less well-known. Means also looks at the myth that grew up around the real person.

Marie Connor says

Good book, but seemed to drag on and repeat at times.

Robyn Obermeyer says

great reading!

Lisa says

Another disappointing book! I just don't agree with reviewer's on MPR I guess. There is so little known about JA that the bulk of the book is about the people who wrote about him! The author give detailed data of anyone who wrote a word about JA and then builds a case for it to be false or possible. Of course, JA wrote a few receipts and absolutely nothing about himself. So what I was hoping to read was a narrative story of facts about a folklore hero was a stop and go tale of bits and pieces.

Darel Krieger says

It was interesting to learn about his life and a lot about the exploration of early Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana. Not really a story about Johnny Appleseed as much as it was a travelogue of early American history.

Jeffrey Williams says

Howard Means does a fabulous job unraveling the myth of Johnny Appleseed (aka John Chapman). His research into the life and legacy of Chapman (aka Johnny Appleseed), despite fragmented documentation and erroneous information, is to be commended. Even during Chapman's life, the myth of Johnny Appleseed was already being propagated, including myths brought forth by Chapman himself. Like peeling an onion, Means excels at eliminating the layers of myth and replaces that with the truth through his careful research. Yes, he does speculate on a bunch of things, but then examines those speculations in light of the evidence. What emerges is a more accurate picture of Chapman/Appleseed and an understanding of how those myths came to be so popular in the first place.

If you want to hold onto the mythical ideologies surrounding Chapman/Appleseed, brought forth in popular

media, then this is definitely not the book for you. If you want to understand Chapman/Appleseed for the man he was in the context of his time and space, then this should be in the forefront of your reading list.

Samantha says

Johnny Appleseed has always been a much-beloved historical figure for me as a former Kindergarten teacher. I found this book to be a thorough account of his life and great at distinguishing between the man and the myth.

As a former resident of western Pennsylvania and someone who frequented the PA Turnpike, I found the description of the route during John Chapman's time to be humorously similar to my current feelings about the rough road; I had to laugh at that part of the book.

This book really does well with painting the picture of John Chapman in entirety. I had a much better understanding of his life and times than I expected. I enjoyed how in-depth the details were of the American frontier during his travels. It was really much more than just a biography of the man. It was a thorough look at the new frontier of America. It also showed how it was that John Chapman became Johnny Appleseed over time through the words of others.

I enjoyed this book and definitely feel as if I have a much better understanding of the man, the myth, and the American legend.

Joseph says

It was enlightening to learn that Johnny Appleseed/John Chapman was not so much a Christian as he was a follower of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Howard Means demonstrates in this book that Chapman is someone who could be easily portrayed in various ways to suit different purposes. It's not surprising that he has been portrayed as an ardent Christian, it's just not true. I did find this aspect of this book the most interesting as a Christian and because I think it's important that we seek the truth and make sure that what information we pass on is true.

However, I felt that Howard Means strayed from the topic of his book throughout and I found that distracting. I think he was trying to add historical background but it just made it less focused.

Kristi Thielen says

Was there ever a man whose considerable number of) biographies were more burdened by myths and mistakes? Incorrect dates and places, misassumed motives, dumbed down personal attributes - John Chapman, as he traveled from real life to larger than life has suffered a terrible fate. And that's before you consider what Walt Disney did to him.

The REAL Johnny Appleseed: smelly, occasionally cranky and always weirdly eccentric, guided by the pure light of a religious movement most of us have never heard of and possessed of absolutely no business sense at all, is a deeper, richer and more poignantly human individual than you've ever imagined. And Howard Means tells it all beautifully, in this completely enjoyable book about an American original. And I mean ORIGINAL.

Read this while enjoying an apple or two. (I recommend Granny Smith.) And if you don't have tears in your eyes as you read the last paragraph of Mean's book, then, well . . . you will. You just will.

Heather says

This book was less narrative than I expected, which makes sense when one considers how little is actually known about John Chapman's life and how much has been left to speculation. Instead it reads as American Studies Lite, detailing the history of land ownership and westward expansion, religious fervor of the Great Awakening, and the biological/mythological past of apples. While this book claims to deal with the myths of Johnny Appleseed and early America, it more often than not took the language of American exceptionalism (and particularly, conversations about the "Indians") for granted in a way that made me uncomfortable. Good research, average execution.

Lisa says

I grew up in western Pennsylvania and lived in the Greensburg area. Every apple tree found in the middle of the woods was suspected to be a Johnny Appleseed tree! I now live at the other end of the state and rarely come upon an apple tree in the woods. So I felt that I just really had to read this book to find out the truth. Turns out the apple trees in my childhood were not Johnny Appleseed products, but may have hailed from the same seed stock that he used as they were almost always sour crabapples. At least that was right. This was a well-researched book and I enjoyed the historical aspect of it tracing John Chapman's early life, possible routes he may have taken to Ohio, life in the Ohio Valley, his financial transactions and exchanges with other settlers. It would have been interesting if there had been medical research or analysis of whether John Chapman may have had a mental disorder. The author glosses over any real consideration that he may have been mentally disturbed although that opinion is found even before the Johnny Appleseed legend became such a phenomenon. The last two chapters just kind of dragged on with the analysis of how he went on to become a myth (Disney) and what relevance that has to us today. The maps were wonderful at putting the events into a geographical context. The illustrations did not enhance the book in any way -- nepotism isn't always a good idea.

Shannon McDermott says

This is a book about the life, times, and myth of Johnny Appleseed - and probably more the times than anything else. No one really knows much about John Chapman, and consequently this book is heavy on his historical context and relates stories only very incidentally connected to him. Despite some unnecessary details (does it really matter what U.S. routes all these places are close to?), readers who enjoy history generally may enjoy this book also. But people who just want to read about Johnny Appleseed will probably be disappointed.

Margaret Sankey says

One of my favorite genres--taking a semi-mythical figure and tracking down the de-mystifying paperwork to

reveal someone whose existence tracked the development of the Old Northwest frontier--the overcrowding of New England, the corrupt land companies, the War of 1812, land claim requirements of fruit trees to scare away squatters, Swedborgians and the Second Great Awakening and the inexorable closing of the Ohio frontier (and the fading tolerance for wandering crazy people). Plus, the afterlife of the myth, romanticized ""memoirs"" from the closed frontier, religious biographies, the WCTU's cleanup of the hard cider elements of the story, local promotion of relics, ill-informed congressmen (Mark Souder, IL) and Disney.

Gregg Sapp says

This book is somewhat more readable, to a modern reader, than Robert Price's scholarly biography written in the 1950's. There is some new material, a bit of fair conjecture, and good description of how the myths were made. This book does not glamorize the subject, in the manner of some other versions in popular culture. The part that sticks with me is where Means writes that, by most modern conceptions of mental illness, Johnny Appleseed would be considered insane.
