This ethnography was written to give the readers an opportunity to learn about the magic, or ‘craft’ of witchcraft and the people who participate in what is called Wicca. Many say that witchcraft is simply a revival of the European pre-Christian religion, Wicca. This religion has become the core to many other pagan beliefs, magical systems, traditions and other religions. Throughout this ethnography, one is able to explore the many different facets of witchcraft practiced by those who call themselves witches and magicians. Those who believe that they are indeed witches and/or magicians believe that they can heal people and that the witchcraft they practice is harmless or benevolent magic. Orion’s ethnographic work took place in America and her anthropological research is both sociological and historical. Orion’s research is based on extensive analysis of various literature, fieldwork and interviews. Her purpose is to answer question of why there are those, in American society, who resort to such practices when most don’t.

The book includes the descriptions of many intricate details and the history of the old Wiccan religion, giving an overview of Gerald Gardner’s idea of Wicca. Gardner was a central figure of the Wicca as he and his cult of practitioners celebrated the old festivals and worshiped their pagan gods among other old Wiccan religious traditions. He is considered to be the most celebrated English witch and his books were used as guidelines in the establishment of many covens in Great Britain and as a way to preserve the ‘Old Religion.’ Orion continues to discuss the old religion, including the legends of Wicca, the pantheon, magic and love, etc. Although Gardner practices and has tried to preserve the ‘Old Religion,’ his revival of Wicca is the most recent of the many revivals in Western culture.

Throughout many chapters, Orion continues to describe the Wiccan way of working, which being able to work “with the flexible nature of the world” (29). She describes one ritual in detail, the Yule celebration of the Minoan Sisterhood. This coven engages in the rituals of “The Book of Shadows.” With these rituals, the witches are able to use magic to enhance enchantments or healings. There are many steps involved in this celebration including: creating the sacred space, calling of the divine and elements, raising energy, drawing down, magic and the ceremony of cakes and wine, along with the feast. All are key for allowing the creative process to take place, and the level or degree of the power of the magic is based on what degree or level of expertise one is at. Orion then continues by giving the conception the witches have of themselves and what a witch symbolizes.

The revival of Wicca, as is with any revival as Orion states, promotes the revision of the self and life. The deep roots of western magic are the product of pre-literate religions from the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The beginning of this religion is found on Greek papyri and has survived many centuries. Orion explains the fluctuations of the Wicca tradition and magic/witchcraft as the result of fear of being accused of being demonic. Most recently, the contemporary western magic is based on seven different principles, many dealing with energy and the control of that energy. Before one is able to perform magic or any use of energy, one
must prepare themselves or change their consciousness. Much of the use of magic, or control of energy, is based on personal power, imagination, psychic skills and creativity, whether using it directly or indirectly.

The last half of the book is devoted to Neopaganism; it’s traditions, religion, social structure, healing, the rapid growth of the movement and comparison of this religion to others within the United States. Orion looks at how the Neopagans approach magic by analyzing the questionnaire she distributed, with other details that were provided by the witches themselves. Throughout these chapters, she discusses their gatherings and rituals, while comparing American Neopaganism to the British Wiccan revival. She does this because American Neopaganism emerged from the British Wiccan revival. She also looks at the forging of social bonds through different rites of passage such as marriage, and also the social structure among the Neopagan movement. Orion discusses in great detail how the Neopagans see themselves as healers and how they are willing to try new options, as is expected with their imagination. One clear difference Orion makes is that Neopagans and the American public in general do not see eye-to-eye when dealing with the health care provided and what one believes constitutes good health care.

Orion mentions that this ethnography is only a prelude to further research that needs to be done on her part and others. She believes that additional historical background of the occult is needed to fully understand and possibly predict the “cultural revitalization of a religious, spiritual, or idealistic sort” (9).

This book is a great tool for anyone wanting to learn about some of the old traditions of Wicca and what witchcraft entails. I would recommend it for high school and college students alike. Although there was a great deal of information provided and I found this book to be very informative in answering my questions, I did feel that the book was slightly out of order in some areas. Having this much information all at once may cause some issues for younger students, but still feel that, with it being an overall easy read and jargon free, that they would be able to handle it well.