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Disappearance and Denial: A New Look at a Legend Motif on the Screen

Sandy Hobbs

In a section described as non-supernatural horror stories in his *Type and Motif- Index*, Baughman (1966) includes as entry Z552*, "*The mysterious disappearance. Guest mysteriously disappears from hotel room*".

The text reads as follows:

"A woman and her daughter take a room in a Paris hotel. The mother becomes ill. The physician sends the daughter to remote part of the city for a special medicine. When she returns to the hotel, she is unable to find her mother. Moreover, she finds that the room which she thinks they have taken is unfamiliar, that it has obviously been redecorated and refurnished in her absence. The manager and the staff profess never to have seen her before, and the names of her mother

and herself are not on the register. In some variants she never does find the explanation for the situation; in others it is explained that the mother is discovered to have bubonic plague and that this means is used to prevent panic and also loss of business to the hotel."

In *Foaftale News 26* (June, 1992) Paul Smith and the present author argued that film versions of Baughman Z552*, such as *So Long At The Fair* (1950), should be distinguished from other apparently similar stories, such as *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965). In the discussion which follows the question is revisited and it is concluded that these and other films such as *The Midnight Warning* (1932) and *Flightplan* (2005), may usefully be regarded as employing a motif which includes two elements, (a) the disappearance of a loved one or friend, and (b) the denial by others of that person's presence or existence. The various ways in which such a combination is incorporated into films will be discussed. The films are also related to the literary texts from which some of them derive.

In recent discussions of Z552*, the two most common sources cited are Alexander Woollcott and Katharine Briggs. Under the name "The Vanishing Lady", Woollcott (1937) retells the story at length and asserts its status as a legend. He claims to have traced the story to a newspaper article published in 1889 (although it appears that no other writer has seen this source). Woollcott also draws attention to the fact that the story has been employed in a number of literary works, including the novel *The End of Her Honeymoon* by Marie Belloc Lowndes (1913). Briggs published a text under the title "The Foreign Hotel" in *Folktales of England* (jointly authored by Ruth Tongue, 1965). This had been collected in Yorkshire in 1915. In her *Dictionary of British Folk Tales* (1971) she also

mentions a similar text heard in Warwick around 1926.

More modern accounts of the story generally make use of these sources. Brunvand in his *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2001) suggests that it “no longer seems to circulate in oral tradition” but it “occasionally appears in print”. Examples of these printed versions include one of Healey and Glanvill’s popular collections (1996). A rather more significant printed version appeared in a *Guardian* newspaper column recently (Hyde, 2006). Whereas Healey and Glanvill were quite explicitly presenting their stories for their entertainment value, the *Guardian* columnist told it “as true” and presented it as having a moral. Discussing the possibility that Disneyland Paris might suppress evidence of “bird flu”, she told a story which is clearly Z552*, indicating that the “French authorities” participated in the cover-up. In other words she used the story as a reason to mistrust those authorities.

The reconsideration of the relationship of Baughman’s story to film and television is partly justified by the fact that in the years since the original article in *Foafale News* more relevant films have been noted. Smith and Hobbs (1992) mentioned five films, for two of which we had to rely on secondary sources. In the discussion which follows, ten films will be covered, seven of which have been viewed.

For the purposes of this analysis, Baughman’s text will be treated as having the following seven elements:

- A: A protagonist (in Baughman’s version, the daughter)
- B: A person who disappears (in Baughman, the mother)
- C: A location (in Baughman, a Paris Hotel)
- D: The contrived absence of the protagonist
- E: The denial of the presence of the disappeared person
- F: The hotel room has been redecorated
- G: An explanation (not always given) that the death of the mother from bubonic plague has been covered up.

The films will be considered with respect to these elements, but before doing so, let us see how the analysis applies to some non-screen versions. As well as the two

possibilities mentioned by Baughman (B1 and B2, with and without an explanation), these include the only text supposedly collected orally (T1, Briggs), a piece of literary fiction (T2, from Hemingway’s *The Torrents of Spring* as quoted by Barnes, 1982) and two more recent printed versions, T3, Healey and Glanvill’s and T4, Hyde’s. The analysis is summarized in Table 1.

It may be noted that, as in Baughman, the protagonist and the disappeared are a woman and her mother in most cases. The location is always an hotel but not always Paris. Only Healey and Glanvill omit the denial of the presence of the disappeared person and the redecoration of the room. All of the other versions agree with Baughman in having death from a serious illness as the explanation, but cholera and food poisoning occur as well as Baughman’s bubonic plague. The clearest deviation from Baughman is the fact that none of these versions involve the contrived absence of the protagonist. Furthermore, despite Baughman’s suggestion that an explanation of the disappearance is not always given, all of these versions do indeed account for it.

To what extent is it justifiable to regard these as “versions” of the same story. They all involve a mysterious disappearance from a foreign hotel, later explained by the cover-up of a death. The Healey and Glanvill story is the one which differs most from the others. I suggest that this may have arisen from their desire to make it seem more contemporary. Thus they replace the mother and daughter in Paris, explicitly or implicitly in the distant past, with two male friends on holiday in Turkey. The hotel does not deny the presence of the friend, but claims that he checked out overnight, and food poisoning emerges as the explanation. I suggest that Healey and Glanvill probably started with a Baughman type of story and intentionally gave it an updated character.

Turning now to the screen versions, I shall initially consider the ten cases listed below.

FILMS TO BE CONSIDERED (indicates that information given is based on secondary sources)*

- S1. *UNHEIMLICHE GESCHICHTEN** (Germany, 1919, directed by Richard Oswald)* An episodic film, the episode in question being based on a novel.
- S2. *THE MIDNIGHT WARNING* (United States, 1932, directed by Spencer Gordon Bennett) original screenplay.
- S3. *VERWEHTE SPUREN* (Germany, 1938, directed by Veit Harlan) based on a radio play.
- S4. *THE LADY VANISHES* (Britain, 1938, directed by Alfred Hitchcock) based on a novel.
- S5. *SO LONG AT THE FAIR* (Britain, 1951, directed by Anthony Darnborough and Terence Fisher) based on a novel.
- S6. *DANGEROUS CROSSING** (United States, 1953, directed by Joseph M. Newman) based on a British radio play.
- S7. *INTO THIN AIR** (United States, 1955, directed by Don Medford, episode in "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" TV series) story attributed to Woolcott.
- S8. *BUNNY LAKE IS MISSING* (Britain, 1965, directed by Otto Preminger) based on a novel.
- S9. *THE LADY VANISHES* (Britain, 1979, directed by Anthony Page) based on novel and earlier screenplay.
- S10. *FLIGHTPLAN* (United States, 2005, Robert Schwentke) original screenplay.

Table 2 shows the result of subjecting them to the same sort of analysis as was applied to the non-screen texts. Assuming initially that these are all versions of the Baughman story, we may first note that the least stable element is in column D, the contrived absence of the protagonist, which is found only in *Into Thin Air*. The relationship of the disappeared person to the protagonist is also unstable. In only two cases is it the young woman's mother. Brother (twice), child (twice), friend (twice), lover and husband also occur. The redecoration of the room, column F, is rather more stable but occurs in only 4 of the 8 versions for which we have information. All of the screen versions explain the disappearance and denial, column G, but that explanation is plague in only half of the cases. In the other half conspiracies involving kidnapping and hijacking appear. Those correspond to the five versions where the location, column C, is *not* an hotel. These are S6, *Dangerous Crossing* (a liner), S8, *Bunny Lake is Missing* (a nursery), S10, *Flightplan* (a plane) and S4 and S9, the

two versions of *The Lady Vanishes*, in which the location is a train. Where the location is an hotel, 3 out of 5 versions locate it in Paris.

What are common to all ten versions are, first, that someone disappears and, secondly, that following the disappearance the protagonist is met with denials that such a person had been there. The protagonist is almost always a young woman. As mentioned previously, Paul Smith and I suggested a distinction should be drawn between films where the disappearance resulted from plague and those where another explanation emerged. On the basis of the information now available, this seems a less viable position.

I now suggest that the key aspect of all these films is that the protagonist experiences both a disappearance and a denial. The strength of earlier printed and oral versions of the story lies in the poignancy of the situation. The listener or viewer can identify with a situation in which a profoundly held piece of knowledge is challenged. Furthermore, the circumstances cause the protagonist to feel a deep sense of danger and of powerlessness. I suspect that the fact that this is usually depicted as happening to a young woman gives the story greater cogency.

But what about the differences between the films? We should first note that Baughman suggests that the disappearance is not always explained. If this were the case with oral versions, then it makes it questionable whether differences in the way the disappearance is explained may be regarded as crucial. Details such as the location of the disappearance and the redecoration of the room are not crucial to producing the psychological effect of the core situation the protagonist faces.

Alfred Hitchcock, the producer of S4, the first *Lady Vanishes*, and the producer of S9, *Into Thin Air*, told Francois Truffaut that he saw them as essentially the same story (Truffaut, 1978). The most recently collected non-screen version (Hyde, 2006) refers to the Paris hotel version as a model for *The Lady Vanishes* and *Flightplan*. However, by looking at two of the literary sources for three of the films,

we can go beyond mere assertions. The novels *The Wheel Spins* (White, 1997) and *Bunny Lake is Missing* (Piper, 2004) both make explicit use of the Paris hotel version. In the former, Iris, the heroine remembers a tale “which she had read in a magazine and which was supposed to be authentic”. A brief description of what happened in a “continental hotel” follows. Iris wonders whether her friend Miss Froy’s disappearance “might not be a parallel on a very scale”. In her case it would not involve a vast conspiracy “merely the collusion of a few interested persons” (White, 1997, p 166). Thus although we cannot be sure that the novel was inspired by the legend, we know that the author was aware of the legend. The same is true of the author of the novel *Bunny Lake is Missing*, Evelyn Piper. Her use of the legend is somewhat different. It is Wilson who belatedly befriends the heroine, Blanche, who refers to the story. Explaining his initial disbelief, he tells Blanche that he had been sure that his wife had put Blanche up to this, “that she had lifted your story from the Paris Exposition one” (Piper, 2004, pp 141-142). Thus again we know that the author was aware of the legend while writing the novel and, at the very least, saw it as related to the subject of her own book.

The case of *Flightplan* is somewhat different. It is credited to an original screenplay and no other source is cited. However, there is one incident in the film which clearly derives from *The Lady Vanishes*. The heroine is faced with denial that she brought her daughter on to the plane. All efforts to prove the contrary fail but she sees a heart that her daughter had drawn on a window, which gives her confidence that she is right. This parallels a famous scene in *The Lady Vanishes* in which the heroine sees the word FROY which had been written on the train window. Here then we have another link in the chain which joins these films.

My suggestion is that writers of novels and films have been attracted to the possibilities implicit in the disappearance-and-denial motif. Some have seen themselves as retelling an old story. Anthony Thorne, the author of the novel *So Long at the Fair* (1947) has an “Author’s Note” in which he refers to “events” which have become “a curious legend” and admits to arbitrary

rearrangement of details. In contrast, other writers treated the disappearance-and-denial motif more freely.

In making this case, I am not suggesting that this disposes of all questions concerning the “meaning” of these films. Many other issues remain. One way in which the film *Bunny Lake is Missing* differs from the other films is that the audience is not initially shown the child who has disappeared. This means that the viewer may consider the possibility that the heroine is mentally disturbed and does not really have a daughter. That is not a possibility when the person who disappears has already been shown. Non-screen versions generally start with statements about the arrival of the two people, so the listener or reader identifies with the protagonist in her dismay at the denials. The audience for *Bunny Lake* may identify less strongly, until near the end when Bunny appears on screen.

The novel *Bunny Lake is Missing* has been reissued by a feminist publishing house and it is not difficult to see how the situation of the, usually female, protagonist can be given a feminist interpretation. However, different readings of these films are possible. This may be most clearly illustrated by *Verwehte Spuren*. This film was made in German during the Nazi era. The director, Veit Harlan, was one of the most prominent directors of Nazi propaganda films. In his account of the film, the critic of the *New York Times*, Hal Erickson, writes that Harlan “manages to suppress his political beliefs in the straightforward melodrama”. (<http://movies2.nytimes.com>). However, Leanne Downing, reviewing a book by Karen Beckman, approvingly quotes her view that the disappearance of the mother doubles as a useful justification for the Nazi state’s “necessary eradication” of all socially unwanted bodies. (www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/reviews) This claim may seem rather far fetched, but there is certainly one aspect of the *Verwehte Spuren* version of the story which would allow us to characterize it as compatible with Nazi ideology. Seraphine, the heroine, forms a romantic attachment with Dr Morot. Dr Morot becomes part of the conspiracy to cover up her mother’s death. When she discovers the truth, she also discovers Dr Morot’s role in the conspiracy. This she

accepts and the film ends with them together as a couple. She has accepted that her treatment was necessary for the greater good. To assert that the good of the state takes precedence over truth and the good of the individual hardly seem to illustrate that Harlan has “put aside his political beliefs”.

There are clearly many more aspects of these films which might be explored with respect to their legend content. I shall conclude by referring to another film whose relationship to the disappearance-and-denial motif seems uncertain. *The Forgotten* (United States, 2004, directed by Joseph Ruben), like *Flightplan*, is based on an original screenplay. The central character at the start of the film is grieving for her child killed in a plane crash. She is told that she did not have a son and that her “memory” of him arose after a miscarriage.

She finds some physical evidence of the boy, drawings under the wall paper of a redecorated room. It finally emerges that her son is not dead. She has been the subject of an alien experiment to assess the strength of the mother-child bond in humans. As in *Bunny Lake is Missing*, the audience does not see the child initially, so the possibility that the heroine is mentally disturbed is available. The “disappearance” of the child is of course an aspect of the film which it has in common with those already discussed. Similarly the protagonist is met with sustained denial. However, the fact that the film eventually reveals the story to be in the realm of science fiction places it apart from the other films derived from the legend. Since I have been arguing that the eventual explanation for the protagonist’s situation is not a crucial element in the legend, it may be that *The Forgotten* should have been included in my tentative list of films employing the legend motif.

Table 1: Analysis of non-screen texts

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
			(P: Paris)				
B1	Woman	Mother	Hotel P	Yes	Yes	Yes	Plague
B2	Woman	Mother	Hotel P	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown
T1	Woman	Mother	Hotel	No	Yes	Yes	Cholera
T2	Woman	Mother	Hotel P	No	Yes	Yes	Cholera
T3	Man	Friend	Hotel	No	No	No	Food poisoning
T4	Woman	Mother	Hotel P	No	Yes	Yes	Plague

Table 2: analysis of screen versions

? indicates missing information

* indicates use of secondary sources

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
			(P: Paris)				
S1, 1919*	Man	Lover	Hotel	No	Yes	?	Plague
S2, 1932	Woman	Brother	Hotel	No	Yes	Yes	Plague
S3, 1938	Woman	Mother	Hotel P	No	Yes	Yes	Plague
S4, 1938	Woman	Friend	Train	No	Yes	No	Kidnap
S5, 1951	Woman	Brother	Hotel P	No	Yes	Yes	Plague
S6, 1953*	Woman	Husband	Liner	No	Yes	?	Conspiracy
S7, 1955*	Woman	Mother	Hotel P	Yes	Yes	Yes	Plague
S8, 1965	Woman	Child	Nursery	No	Yes	No	Kidnap
S9, 1979	Woman	Friend	Train	No	Yes	No	Kidnap
S10, 2005	Woman	Child	Plane	No	Yes	No	Hijack

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Abortion Wars. Abortion and Breast Cancer: Myth or Conspiracy?

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Abortion is perhaps more controversial in Ireland than anywhere else in Western Europe. It has been the subject of several deeply divisive referenda and remains illegal. However, as part of a counselling session with a crisis pregnancy agency, women are entitled to information on abortion clinics abroad.

A recent investigation by the Dublin radio station Newstalk106FM, broadcast on the "Life with Orla Barry" programme (over three editions on July 18, 19 and 20, 2006), looked into the methods used by a Dublin-based crisis pregnancy agency, Alpha. Alpha has been accused of peddling misinformation to women in order to dissuade them from having an abortion (*Irish Examiner*, July 18, 2006; *Sunday Independent*, July 16, 2006; *The Irish Times*, July 15, 2006). The claim is that women have been told that abortion drastically increases their risk of developing breast cancer.

In response to these allegations, pro-choice activists have asserted that this claim is a "myth" used as a means of frightening women away from having an abortion. For example, the website of the Canadian Cancer Society, in a section entitled "Cancer Myths" states that "scientific evidence does not support a link between abortion and breast cancer" (www.cancer.ca). These are the views, too, of The National Cancer Institute in the United States, the American Cancer Society, the National Breast Cancer Coalition in the United States, the National Health and Medical Research Centre's National Breast Cancer Centre in Australia, the UK Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the World Health Organisation, and the health arm of the United Nations.

In a counter-claim, pro-life activists allege that the media, the medical establishment, and what they call "the abortion industry" are all engaged in a conspiracy to hide the truth from women" (see www.abortionbreastcancer.com, which urges "Stop the Cover-up! Be informed!"). Organisations promoting these claims include the Family Life Planning Foundation, Christ's Bride Ministries, and various family values groups in the US (http://www.crlp.org/crt_cen_cancer.html) has a list of some of the organisations

promoting the link and some of the actions taken).

Each side claims that the other is more interested in politics and ideology than in women's health. It is clear that science and ideology have become the folklore of rumour and conspiracy theory. So, are the pro-life side spreading a propaganda rumour, or are the pro-choice side engaged in a conspiracy?

On the "Life with Orla Barry" show (Newstalk 106, July 20, 2006), Marie Peterson, a spokesperson for Alpha, said that 28 out of 37 studies did support a link between abortion and breast cancer, and that "there is enough evidence out there for us to present to women the fact that there are many, many, many studies and many doctors around the world who strongly believe in a link between abortion and breast cancer." Among the strongest proponents of this view is Professor Joel Brind, a biochemist who converted to Christianity in 1985 and sought to reconcile his professional life with his religious convictions. He has advanced his argument through the "Breast Cancer Prevention Institute" (an organisation which he established and which deals exclusively with the supposed link between breast cancer and abortion), and appears to believe that there is a conspiracy of silence to deny the truth to women (see Jasen, P. "Breast Cancer and the Politics of Abortion in the United States" in Cook, H. & Hardy, A. (eds), *Medical History*, Volume 49.4, London, 2005).

On the other side are a number of respected oncologists, including Professor John Crown, consultant oncologist at St Vincent's University Hospital, and Dr. John Kennedy, consultant medical oncologist and chairperson of the Irish Cancer Society's medical committee. Professor Crown expressed himself with some vigour: "To state, incredibly, that most breast cancer is found in women who have had abortions is utterly untrue" (*Sunday Independent*, July 16, 2006). Speaking on the Orla Barry show, Dr Kennedy said: "The fact is that many studies have been done over the past few years and there has been a lot of larger, more comprehensive, more robust, stronger, better methodological studies done over the past few years which really

show very little evidence there is any increased risk of breast cancer in a woman who has an abortion." Dr. Brind, he claimed, "is not an objective observer of this particular question. He's not a breast cancer expert, he's a biochemist, and he is, you know, he is well recognised by people who are interested in the area of breast cancer as having a particular perspective on this particular problem" ("Life with Orla Barry" Newstalk 106, July 20, 2006). After the Orla Barry show, messages were received by the producers of the programme suggesting that Dr. Kennedy had taken this position because he was pro-choice. At this point, Dr. Kennedy revealed that his personal feelings on the issue of abortion were actually more slanted towards the pro-life side, but that his interest was in "truth". Meanwhile, Professor Crown had some years previously identified himself as "very anti-abortion" (*Irish Examiner*, October 10, 2005). It transpired then, that at least two leading proponents of the "myth" theory were hardly likely to be involved in a conspiracy to hide the truth.

Regardless of personal opinion on the issue of abortion, an objective overview of the research, such as that carried out by Professor Richard Peto of Oxford University, leads one to the conclusion that the link between breast cancer and abortion now has the status of a rumour-legend. If there is a real risk that abortion causes breast cancer, why does no genuinely independent, scientifically credible organisation promote the link? Unless, of course, the conspiracy really does go that deep ...

Both sides of the argument are unlikely to ever believe the other, regardless of any new evidence which may emerge. The folklore of breast cancer is just another weapon in the ongoing abortion wars. That the target may be women's health often seems to be overlooked.

In Memoriam: Bill Scott 1923-2005

Gillian Bennett

Bill Scott—Australian folklorist, songwriter, storyteller and poet—died just before Christmas 2005. He had been in increasingly poor health for some time,

then a stroke in early December spelt the beginning of the end.

Bill was born in Bundaberg, Queensland, and grew up in Caboolture and then in Brisbane. He had had a very varied career — prospector, sailor, steam-engine driver, wood-carver, to mention only a few— before turning to full-time writing and becoming, in the words of one admirer, "Australia's grand old man of letters." He was married to his wife Mavis, a writer of children's fiction, for over 50 years. Together, they had one son and four grandchildren.

Bill began writing poetry when he was serving with the Royal Australian Navy in World War II, his first poem being published when he was only twenty-one. Over a career lasting till his death he made a name as a collector of Australian folklore and folksongs, and he wrote or edited 51 books in prose and verse firmly rooted in the Australian cultural tradition. Probably the best known of these is *The Complete Book of Australian Folklore* (first published in 1976), which has an excellent section on Australian yarns and contemporary legends.

Bill's other works include compilations of his own verse, compilations of humorous poems, books of yarns and Australian tall tales, collections of ballads and songs, bushranger ballads, and a novella (*The Currency Lad*, 1994). He contributed several articles to the folklore magazine *Dear Mr Thoms*, many of them about contemporary legends, and wrote a regular column for *Queensland Folk*. His compilation *Pelicans and Chihuahuas and Other Urban Legends* (1996) is drawn from these columns and is a good source for Australian versions of familiar legends:

Bill was a free and generous spirit who will be greatly missed. His epitaph perhaps should come from the last line of his poem "The Old Man's Song," which can be found in his compilation *Following the Gold* (1989)

"What is this life if it isn't a song?"

Have You Heard?

Peter McGuire* has sent in 3 more items of interest for FTN readers

1. Two Dublin Legends

These contemporary legends were collected from Mary Rainey, aged 24, from Derry City in Northern Ireland. According to Mary, these had been widely circulating around the city. The first is an interesting, localised variant of The Mexican Pet, which in this instance, I am going to call The River Pet. Mary first heard it around ten years ago, when she was thirteen. The second is the story of The Stolen Biscuits, which here becomes The Stolen KitKat. This was heard "just a few years ago". It is quite possible that the Stolen KitKat is still in circulation, as Mary has told it to many people who appear to have heard it from other people already. The stories are transcribed as close to Mary's words as possible, excluding only some false starts.

The River Pet

You know the Waterfront Hotel, well there's houses there now. But years ago it was just like bogland, and a girl was working in the Waterfront Hotel, and she came out from work and she walking was walking along, just above the bog area, walking home by the Waterside, and it was about 11 at night and she saw in the water a plastic bag that was kind of moving about. She went down to the plastic bag and she opened the - there was a thing, kind of a bit of fur sticking out the side - through a hole in the bag. So she ripped it open, and there was a wee tiny puppy in it. She thought someone had left it there to drown. So anyway, she took it home and gave it a bath, and she had a wee cat, and she left her cat - her cat used to sleep beside her on the bed - and, no, anyway, she bathed the puppy and put it at the bottom of her bed. She was waiting till the morning to check if it was alright and put an ad in the paper or whatever. She woke in the middle of the night to a loud coughing noise, and she opened her eyes and her kitten had gone from beside her bed, and she looked down to the bottom of the bed, and the puppy - or whatever it was - had grown to six times its size. It was really massive and it was coughing up bits of fur. She took it to the vet, and the vet said to go straight to the

hospital and get a tetanus objection, because it wasn't a puppy, it was a water rat. I heard through a friend of a friend who knew the person, but I was never told the name of anyone. I believed it...

The Stolen KitKat

My aunty Maeve was in Florentino's, the wee ice-cream shop. She went in and she got cup of tea and she got a KitKat. She sat down and there was no other seats anywhere, and a man came up to her and said, "Do you mind if I sit here?" and she was like, "Aye, no problem." So she was sitting with her cup of tea in front of her. She got the KitKat and broke off a finger and dipped it in her tea and started eating it, and the man did the same. She was like, "Oh my God, he's so cheeky!" And he had a cream bun in front of him as well. She broke off another finger and ate it, and he took the last finger. So they were sitting there in silence and just before she left she ran her finger through the middle of his cream bun, and she walked out. She put her hand in her pocket then and pulled out a full KitKat! I remember hearing it from a taxi man and I told him "that happened to my aunty Maeve!" He had heard it through someone else and he was telling people in the taxi.

(2) Under the heading, "Museum plays diplomatic role on psalm's 'warning to Israel'," *The Irish Times* (28 July 2006) told the story of the discovery of a 1,000-year-old psalter in a bog in the Irish midlands. What made the find particularly newsworthy was that, while most pages had yet to be carefully studied, there was one that was legible. Psalm 83. That made the news and web-sites go crazy for Psalm 83 talks about "the wiping of Israel from the map":

"On Wednesday," wrote the journalist, "under the title An Amazingly Timely Discovery, a writer with one Israeli news magazine devoted an entire column to the find, which he regarded as 'nothing short of a phenomenon ... time may show that the discovery of the Irish psalm book was a warning.'"

Things were not, however, all they seemed, as the director of the National Museum explained. Dr Patrick Wallace, issued a statement saying the text visible on the manuscript found in the bog does not refer to the wiping out of Israel but to

the "vale of tears". The mistake was made because the old psalter was the Latin Vulgate, not the better-known King James version (which journalists and others would have consulted), and the numbering of the psalms is slightly different in the two versions. "The text about wiping out Israel occurs in the Vulgate as Psalm 82", Dr Wallace said, not Psalm 83.

*Peter McGuire is carrying out a thesis on missing persons in contemporary legend in the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin. As part of this, he is collecting variants of the contemporary legends "The Killer in the Backseat", "The Hatchet in the Handbag", and stories of women being knocked unconscious by perfume samples which are being distributed orally and electronically in Ireland. He is also collecting rumours and contemporary legends about abductions and abduction attempts, particularly by men in white vans or ethnic minorities. Any such narratives encountered, from Ireland or any other country, would be gratefully received by, Peter MCGuire, at petemcguire@gmail.com. Please include all the usual background details - who it was heard from, in what situation, whether the informant appeared to believe it etc.

Clipped from *The Guardian* (1 August 2006, p 17) by Jill Clayton.

"Doctors 'caught selling amputations to beggars'."

"A television sting claimed to expose a thriving "arms-for-alms" trade in India yesterday when journalists apparently filmed doctors agreeing to amputate the limbs of beggars for as little as 10,000 rupees (£125) [...]"

There appears to be a thriving trade in Delhi where gangs kidnap beggars and force them to undergo surgery to attract sympathy."

[Two of the doctors said to be involved denied the allegations; the others have disappeared. Surprise! Surprise! JC]

Readers will be interested to know that Professor W.F.H. [Bill] Nicolaisen, who has been involved in ISCLR since its

inauguration and has contributed so much to the study of contemporary legend, was honoured by the University of Aberdeen in July this year by being awarded the degree of Doctor *Honoris Causa* for his work in place name and narrative studies. All Bill's friends will surely join the Editor in sending him our heartiest congratulations and telling him to "keep up the good work"! [GB]

Recent appearances of an email scam

As editor of FTN, I have found that I get sent a lot of spam. Most of it is a nuisance, of course, but I am always pleased to welcome an old friend. Since the last issue of FTN I have had 3 letters from desperate or destitute people asking me to send money for some touching cause [GB]. Here's a sample:

Dear,

I got your contact information through this site. And I decided to contact you, hoping that by almighty god grace you will successfully assist me out from my situation after my seven good days prayers and fasting over seeking for an overseas guardance .

I am viviani kwuame (22 years old) the only daughter of late chief Joseph kwuame who was a famous and wealthy cocoa merchant based in Abidjan, the economic capital of Ivorycoast. I am seeking for your urgent attention to help me transfer the sum of (us\$10,500,000.00) ten million five hundred thousand united state of American dollars into your nominated bank account overseas for an investments purposes, such as real estates managements and stock markerts. The fund was deposited in fixed suspense account

Please , I am willing to offer you 20% out of this my total fund as your commission for your urgent assistance to me. please kindly write immediately for more important details concerning this my mutual transaction.

Yours faithfully,
Viviani kwuame.

Dear Sir,

My name is Danny W. Wilson, I am a 17 year old Student, and I am the only surviving Child of Engr. Walter Wilson who was murdered on Saturday 10th Dec.2005 by a group known as Niger Delta Militant Force. Two weeks later I lost my mother and my Kid brother to a fatal motor accident.

My late father was an American married

to a Nigerian woman, my father was the Managing Director of Century Oil Services an oil drilling contracting firm attached to Shell Petroleum.

Since the death of my father and my mother, I have been confronted with difficulties with my maternal uncles here in Nigeria scrabbling for my father's ASSETS with several threats on my life being a young girl, I have decided to leave all the assets to them for my dear life.

But my father has a cash deposit of \$8.350M in his Bank account in Kenya because he lived so long in Kenya before coming to settle finally in Nigeria because of my mother's influence and another \$2.8M in his Bank account here in Nigeria.

As an orphan I have no choice, considering my age than to look for your assistance to partner with me to claim the fund and help me invest it for my future since the grater part of the fund is not here in Nigeria, I have no access to it, but I have the documents of the deposits.

Thanks a lot for your consideration and kindly contact me via
email:dannywilson@o2.pl

Danny.

Publication News

Jerome Clark, **Unnatural Phenomena: A Guide to the Bizarre Wonders of North America**. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005. 369 pages. ISBN 1-57607-430-7

A valuable (but overpriced) collection of Fortean articles from American newspapers, most dating from the mid-19th to the early 20th century, an era of journalistic credulity and creativity. Among the topics covered are lake and sea monsters, poltergeists, ghosts (many associated with railways), objects and animals fallen from the sky, mystery airships of 1896-97, giant snakes, celestial phenomena, unearthed remains of giants and dwarfs, and bosom serpents.

Brian Chapman

Gillian Bennett, **Bodies: Sex, Violence, Disease and Death in Contemporary Legend**. University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 313 pp. ISBN 1-57806-789-8.

Back in 1959, when most folklorists still saw their material as archaic survivals, Dr

Sona Rosa Burstein published a Presidential Address to the Folklore Society on 'Folklore, Rumour and Prejudice' in which she said, 'Folklore is no fossil, a fossil is less dangerous'. Being Jewish must have given her good reason to know.

Dr Gillian Bennett, who has been one of the leading scholars in contemporary legend research for the past twenty years, has written this book to show how the genre can indeed sometimes be dangerous. It is an in-depth investigation of six particularly disturbing legend-clusters which focus upon the perceived vulnerability of our bodies to infectious disease, intrusions and violations, malevolent exploitation, and murder. These are grim tales, far from the jocular pseudo-horrors told in pub and campus; the most extreme examples, the Blood Libel and the allegations of ritual child abuse, have had a devastating impact.

Showing equal skill in the presentation of material and in its interpretation, Bennett tracks these clusters back through history, shows how they have functioned in various contexts, and discusses the cultural attitudes which lend them their credibility.

The first cluster, 'Animals Inside', concerns snakes, toads, or eels living in one's stomach or guts; it expresses a folk understanding of the causes and symptoms of certain illnesses, and can serve as ammunition to either side in a debate between medical orthodoxy and folk cures. Next comes a group of loosely linked tales about poisoned robes and poisonous brides, including modern American legends of girls killed by their hired wedding dress or ball gown (previously worn by a corpse), as well as Indian and classical Greek tales; here one underlying theme is fear and loathing of women, especially in a sexual context. The sexual theme is carried further in the third chapter, about people who deliberately infect others with AIDS; here Bennett shows how the emergence of three distinct legend-plots mirrors different stages in public information (and misinformation) about the disease.

Chapter 4, 'Killing the Prodigal Son', tracks the story of the villainous innkeepers who unwittingly murder their

own son for his money when he returns incognito after long travels. As her title shows, Bennett sees 'homecoming' rather than 'mistaken identity' as the core motif, involving an allusion to the famous parable, but with reversal of roles – rich, virtuous son, but criminal, impoverished parents. There are explicit references to the parable in the earliest known version, a chapbook of 1618, and again in Camus' play *Le Malentendu* (1944); some others highlight the traditional villainy of innkeepers. Curiously, this once highly popular legend has not been recorded in Western Europe or the USA for over fifty years.

Chapter 5 studies modern rumours that children are kidnapped, or adults drugged, so that their eyes and kidneys can be extracted for use in transplants; in earlier tales, it was blood that was being taken, to cure some diseased prince. There are political and xenophobic issues here (causing heated arguments over interpretation), plus genuine anxiety over the trade in organs and the trade in babies for adoption, plus a profound revulsion at mutilation. Bennett draws an illuminating comparison with the distress and anger expressed by relatives and pressmen on discovering that British hospitals routinely remove and preserve organs from dead infants for research.

The final chapter, 'Blood and Babies', concerns accusations of ritual murder and orgiastic behaviour down the centuries, especially the Blood Libel (with particular attention to the medieval English legends of William of Norwich and Hugh of Lincoln), and British accusations of Satanic abuse of children in the 1990s.

If anyone still maintains that the study of folklore is 'a trivial pursuit'; or that we should suppress both belief and disbelief when looking at a legend, these last two chapters should convert them. Mothers have been terrified by the 'Baby Parts' legend; Jews have died because of the Blood Libel; families have been torn apart by accusations of Satanic abuse. These stories are not true, and we must say so, loudly and often, even if in some cases we can understand the reasons people believe them. 'They are not fossils; a fossil would be less dangerous.'

Jacqueline Simpson

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Next Issue

**Deadline for submissions
November, 2006.**

**Next issue out
December 2006**

*Send contributions to <Foaf-tale-news@aber.ac.uk>
clearly marked "Contribution."*

From the Editor

The present editor of *FOAFtale News* wishes it to be known that:

- (1) anybody is free to send a contribution, and it will not be refereed. However, the editor has discretion to refuse an item if she considers it unsuitable for any reason.
- (2) there is no house-style and there will be no editorial intervention in any text sent in. It is up to contributors to check spelling and grammar. Original spelling and punctuation (US or British English) will be retained and may therefore vary between items.
- (3) authors retain their copyright, and reserve all rights.
- (4) clippings from newspapers should note bylines and sources.
- (5) this policy may change if a new editor is appointed.

FOAFtale News (FTN) is the newsletter of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. We study "modern" and "urban" legends, and also any legend circulating actively. To join, send a cheque made out to "ISCLR" for US\$30.00 or UK£20 to Mikel J. Koven, Department of Theatre, Film and TV, Parry-Williams Building, Penglais Campus, UWA, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, SY23 2AJ, UK. Institutional rates available upon request. Members also receive **Contemporary Legend**, a refereed academic journal. Some back issues of **FTN** are available on-line at <http://users.aber.ac.uk/mikstaff/>. **FOAFtale News** is indexed in the **MLA Bibliography**.

This newsletter is called **FOAFtale News** for the jocular term current among legend scholars for over twenty years. The term "foaf" was introduced by Rodney Dale (in his 1978 book, **The Tumour in the Whale**) for an oft-attributed but anonymous source of contemporary legends: a "friend of a friend." Dale pointed out that contemporary legends always seemed to be about someone just two or three steps from the teller — a boyfriend's cousin, a co-worker's aunt, or a neighbor of the teller's mechanic. "Foaf" became a popular term at the Sheffield legend conferences in the 1980s. It was only a short step to the pun "foaftale," a step taken by a yet-anonymous wag. **FOAFtale News** welcomes contributions, including those documenting legends" travels on electronic media and in the press. Send queries, notices, and research reports to a maximum of 3000 words to the Editor; clippings, offprints, and citations are also encouraged.

The opinions expressed in **FOAFtale News** are those of the authors and do not in any necessary way represent those of the editor, the contributing compilers, the International Society for the Study of Contemporary Legends, its Council, or its members.

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