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"Urban Legend/myth" in Recent Political Discourse

Jan H. Brunvand

In the steamy, seamy, squirmy world of political discourse there are often statements made to disallow, deny, rephrase, wiggle away from, and, in general, put earlier statements "into the right context." Increasingly lately, it seems to me, the terms "urban legend" or "urban myth" have been useful to politicians and pundits. The general meaning of the term seems to be "not true," or at least "not completely true," in other words, "just rumor or hearsay."

A simple example, occurring in syndicated columnist Joe Galloway's piece published on February 9, 2007, reviewed former Ambassador to Iraq L. Paul Bremer's inability to account for "\$12 billion in cold,

hard American cash" dispatched to him. In the column a saying was attributed to the late Sen. Everett Dirksen: "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money." Galloway remarks, "It may be an urban legend, but ... If he didn't say it, he should have." Perhaps this is just another way of commenting that the saying is "too good to be true" although it is often quoted as literally true.

A *New York Times* report published November 10, 2005, concerns "Ahmad Chalabi, once an Iraqi exile leader and now a deputy prime minister" visiting Washington to begin "his campaign for American rehabilitation." When asked about the claim that intelligence he had provided convinced the US government that Saddam Hussein had the "ability to use illegal weapons," and led to the war in Iraq, Mr. Chalabi dismissed the idea as "an urban myth." The quotation was repeated in a profile on Mr. Chalabi in the *New York Times Magazine* for November 5, 2006: "'This is an urban myth,' he says. The audience gasps."

In September 2006 when asked by a Fox News correspondent why his administration had not done more to get Osama bin Laden, former president Bill Clinton, according to a September 29th syndicated column by Leonard Pitts Jr., tore into the reporter saying that he had tried "harder than the Bush administration" to get bin Laden. He also blasted the correspondent, wrote Pitts, "for the 'little smirk' on his face and accused him of 'a ... conservative hit job.'" Pitts added, "One can hardly blame Clinton for being angry at the urban legend ...," but he added, "I don't care" and "... It's hard to imagine a more useless argument"

Another Clinton-related story involving a legend-claim arose two months later, as reported by the *Las Vegas Sun* on November 21st. A blogger had repeated a widely-circulated story that Senate majority leader Harry Reid had offered

Sen. Hillary Clinton "the majority leadership position for 2008 in exchange for her not running for president." The news report continued, "Reid denies the story as an 'urban legend.' Clinton said . . . it has 'no basis'." Interestingly, the word "rumor" is also applied to the claim later in the article, and another commentator is quoted dubbing the story " ... a narrative that's sort of percolating around."

A much more detailed look at "urban legends" of American political discourse appeared way back in the December 2004 issue of *The Hightower Lowdown*, a newsletter edited by populists Jim Hightower and Philip Frazer. The lead story in this issue (Vol 6 No. 12) was headlined "Fables, flim-flam, and urban legends of our time." Admitting that "a few of these legends actually are true, and some start with a germ of truth that quickly becomes overwhelmed with creative elaboration," the article reviews ten political claims, finding that only three of them possess even a grain of truth. Among the "urban legends" considered are that "Social Security is going broke and must be fixed, pronto" and that "Bush now has a mandate from the people to push through his full agenda."

A sidebar to the article asks "What can we do about urban legends?" and suggests that "... we can expose and correct legends the Bushites promote, but we also need to guard against the truth being wrongly dismissed as legend." The "truth" referenced here is that "fraud and computer hacking" may have stolen the 2004 presidential election. The *Lowdown* editors vowed to keep track of the issue, concluding that " ... what's important is that this very real drama is NOT dismissed as ... just another urban legend."

I note that most of my examples here (with the exception of Chalabi's quotation) come from liberal viewpoints. I wonder to what extent conservatives have adopted the term "urban legend." Possibly I am reading the wrong sources to learn the answer.

Nuns, Spies, and Sleeping Powder: Belgium, 1940

Jacqueline Simpson

In May 1940, the German army invaded Belgium, in order to penetrate France from the north, bypassing the defences of the Maginot Line. As a preliminary to the ground attack their air force spent several days and nights bombing important road and rail junctions in and around the town of Nivelles, about 25 miles south of Brussels. On the 14th of May the population fled, hoping to cross the frontier to what they imagined would be safety in France. As Nivelles is the town where my mother had been born and where her family still lived, I have always known about this panic-stricken exodus.

Recently I was given a copy of a book transcribed from a typescript in which the 27 nuns of a Nivelles convent recorded their memories of this flight. They belonged to an enclosed contemplative order, named in honour of the Immaculate Conception; my great-aunt was their Abbess and leader, and was 56 at the time. The work is collaborative and anonymous: *Exode des Conceptionnistes de Nivelles: Mai-Juin 1940* (Monastère des Religieuses Conceptionnistes, Bastogne, 1998). There is no indication how soon after the events the nuns wrote down their accounts, but they are extremely detailed and give precise locations and even times.

There are two elements which aroused my interest as a folklorist. The first concerns the idea that German spies had infiltrated Allied countries disguised as nuns. Now, that's something I personally recall as a rumour circulating in England at about this period (several people of my age remember it too). It was said these disguised spies had been parachuted in, and that if we saw any unfamiliar nuns around we should look carefully to see if they had big hands, Adam's apples, and (especially) boots ... As far as I remember, people in England did not take this very seriously. But from what the Belgian nuns experienced, it is clear that French soldiers did.

I should explain that as the Belgians made their way south towards France, on foot, in farm-carts, or in cars, they were overtaken by units of the French army who were themselves in retreat from the Germans and heading homewards. The situation was extremely confused, and most houses

had been abandoned by their occupants. The refugee nuns were on foot, without any map, and carrying very little food.

On the afternoon of Saturday 18th May, four days after leaving Nivelles, they were tramping along a country road leading to Belœil when German planes swooped overhead. One nun panicked and ran into a farmhouse:

At that very moment, we see a [French] officer on a bicycle emerge from the woods. Quick as lightning, he jumps off his machine, throws it to the ground, and hurls himself towards the same farm, revolver in hand... We see the officer reappear, grasping Sister Christine by the arm, with his revolver aimed at her temple, and with his eyes fixed on her. "Do you know this sister?" he asked us, in a terrifying way. "Yes indeed, it's Sister Christine, our little cook." "And why was she running ahead?" "Can't you see how frightened she is?" "And what is she frightened of?" etc, etc. The interrogation went on in the same tone for ten minutes, the revolver always at the ready, the officer's threatening eyes passing from one to another of us, to intimidate us and make us confess. I tried in vain, by making a joke of it, to persuade him to put his weapon away and look less fierce. But he took his role too seriously. "We've been betrayed by spies," he told us. "Yesterday I shot seventeen, five of them dressed as nuns, just like you!" But in the end he believed us, made an amiable apology, and received our congratulations on having done his duty so well. (p. 36; my translation)

Incidentally, since it would be the Abbess's responsibility to speak on behalf of the group, I presume the "I" who is the narrator here must be my great-aunt.

On the night of 19th/20th May, the hungry and exhausted nuns, who had by then been wandering round for six days in the vain hope of finding a way through to France, were on a road near St-Amand-les-Eaux; several were sick and could barely walk, while others hurried ahead. The group was beginning to split up. The fighting was now nearer, and bombers were overhead:

Fires were springing up everywhere; to our right, to our left, behind us, buildings were collapsing one after another. And still we walked on, terrified by this sight, and terrified too by what we saw close to us. It was a general stampede ... The retreating French army took up half the road, the other half was swarming with refugees... This intense confusion, this unbelievable tangle of vehicles which left hardly any room for the thousands plodding on foot, the frenzied shouts of the soldiers, the terrified whinnying of the horses, the incessant passage of German planes, the noise of their powerful engines, the constant glare of their flares – all that gave the tragic picture an unforgettably sinister air.

And still, that wasn't all. Three women, clad in great white shawls which covered them from head to knee – three spies, no doubt – were going round and about in all directions. Sometimes one would see one lift her arm, always draped in white, to signal to a plane, and at once one would hear a noise rather like a wooden rattle, and a fire would spring up. Sometimes one would see them in a cart, or at the side of the road, and then creeping about among us, armed with little packets of soporific powder; these they would open, and toss the contents over our heads. Several of us certainly felt it, Sister Rose and Sister Madeleine among others; the feeling, they said, was like a little shower of grains of rice. It must have been a first-rate soporific, since little by little we all more or less lost our heads! ... The sleeping-powder flung by these women spies found favourable soil for its work in us, weakened as we were by lack of sleep, fatigue and hunger (pp. 54-5, my translation).

This extraordinary episode is the second thing that seems to carry folkloric implications. It could be interpreted as a group hallucination, a malevolent counterpart to the famous visions of the Angel(s) of Mons in World War I, but there is nothing in the matter-of-fact wording to suggest that the nuns thought it in any way supernatural, either at the time or in retrospect. To them, the Women in White Shawls were simply enemy agents going

about their sinister work. Just why this involved putting refugees to sleep is never explained. Perhaps there was some underlying traditional motif about evil-doers inducing artificial sleep, as in legends of the Hand of Glory.

Unfortunately, the book gives no clue as to whether there were rumours about such women in general circulation at the time, but I think this is likely, since the nuns seem to take for granted that their story will be understood. For an approximate modern parallel, I would draw attention to the current rumours of robbers on night-trains to Budapest, Bucharest or Moscow using a soporific gas to stupefy the passengers – see the article by Seonaid Anderson of the University of Paisley in *FLS News* 52 (June 2007), pp. 6-7.

The context for the nuns' experience was one of extreme stress. A journey in such circumstances would be traumatic for anyone, but these were women from an enclosed Order, who would only ever set foot outside the convent grounds to go to hospital, or to vote (voting is obligatory in Belgian elections), and who only spoke to visitors through a window with a grille over it. The shock of going out into such turmoil, together with the fear and physical strain, must have been almost intolerable to them. It is clear that many were in a desperate condition that night. The Abbess at one point was too dazed to know who was speaking to her; Sister Madeleine collapsed on the ground, thinking it was her bed, and had to be dragged along by force; Sister Rose, on the contrary, "was highly excited and screamed out invocations to St Michael, St Gabriel and St Raphael as she furiously chased after the powder-throwers, thinking she was facing the devils themselves." Eventually all the nuns collapsed on the verge of the road and rested as best they could for half an hour or so, until further bombing drove them to take refuge in a farm (pp. 55-6).

There, on 20th May, they had another alarming encounter with French soldiers who insisted they were German spies and questioned them at gunpoint. To prove their innocence identity cards were not enough; they had to recite psalms and give details of the history of their Order. One nun, Sister Aimée, pulled off her veil and showed her shaven head, saying "To

save my community, I'd be willing to show myself like this to the whole French High Command!" (p. 60). The soldiers pretended to believe them, but then staged a mock attack on the farm. Only when the "spies" did not fight back did the French finally accept that they were real nuns. Two other occasions when the nuns were treated as suspects by the French are mentioned later in the book.

I am happy to say that the ordeal ended well. Various nuns accidentally became separated from the main group, but by the end of May the Abbess (like many other refugees) accepted that it would be impossible to enter France, and led her group back to Nivelles, where to their amazement they found their convent unbombed and unlooted. Gradually in the course of June the remaining nuns also made their way safely home, even the one who was 82 and the one who became too ill to walk. True to the spirit of reticence and selflessness, they compiled their reminiscences as a private record, and never said much to outsiders about their experience. For example, my mother and her aunt the Abbess wrote regularly to one another after the War, but the letters gave only a vague picture of the "exodus"; the vivid details in the book were a revelation to me.

In these reminiscence we see powerful "myths of war" at work, echoing the emotional pressures of the time, and determining the behaviour of those who accepted their reality without question.

The Man in the Middle

*Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith
(with Patrick Wildgust and Bonnie Taylor-Blake)*

In November 2005, *FLS News*, the newsletter of the British Folklore Society printed a letter in which a reader asked whether anybody could "throw light on a gruesome story which [she] had just been told (April 2005)." She called the story "The Staring Girl," but it was the tale better known to contemporary legend scholars in the USA as "The Dead Drunk on the Subway." Here is the story as retold in *FLS News*:

... As usual this is said to have happened to a friend of a friend and seems to be going the rounds among female university students. The story goes that a young woman was sitting in a railway carriage and noticed three other girls sitting together at the far end. They were the only people in the carriage. The lone girl noticed that the middle girl of the threesome continually stared at her, and she felt intimidated. The train ticket collector then arrived, looked at the lone girl's ticket, and told her it was invalid and she must leave the train. He followed her off the train and then told her that her ticket was fine but he had had to make up a ruse to get her off since the two girls who had been sitting either side of the "staring" girl had strangled her and that was why she had such a fixed expression. This just cannot be true. The student daughter of a friend of mine told this to her father and believed it to be true, saying it happened to a friend of a friend of hers, whom she herself did not know. (Rowe 2005)

A virtually identical story was contained in an email sent to Mikel Koven in December 2004 by Patrick Wildgust who had heard it in the 1980s. The setting is a train travelling from Leeds to Manchester (UK). A group of girls enter the train at some undisclosed town and find it full of young men. The story continues:

They walked through five or six carriages of the train until they found one that was occupied by three other girls which made them feel safer. The seats they occupied were on the other side of the gangway and the three girls were facing them. The friend of the friend was made to feel a little uncomfortable as the train journeyed towards its destination by the intense look that the "girl in the middle" was giving her. She (the FOAF) attempted to break this look by averting her eyes, but to no avail. She now was feeling slightly scared but her discomfort was alleviated by the entrance of a male guard who wished to inspect their (the two girls) tickets. The tickets were presented and the guard said, "These tickets are not

valid for this journey. You must get off at the next station." The two girls insisted that they had purchased their tickets that evening and that they were valid but the guard would have none of it. "You must get off at the next station!" he insisted.

They did and as they disembarked they found that the station was "crawling" with police. They "discovered later" that the girl with the intense stare had been murdered by her two female companions and that they were propping her up during her voyage.

We (Paul Smith and Gillian Bennett) discussed this story in our recently published book, *Urban Legends: A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors* (2007, 22-23). We pointed out that two versions of the legend had been collected for a Ph. D. thesis published at the University of Leeds in the early 1960s (McKelvie 1963, 348). These are less gruesome. The strange passenger is dead, but not apparently murdered. A girl gets into a train and finds a seat in a crowded compartment. At the next stop all the passengers alight except the man facing her. She leans forward to ask him what time the train gets in, but he doesn't answer. She asks him again; still no answer. So she touches him on the shoulder to get his attention. At this point, he topples forward—dead.

Another story from a mid twentieth-century British source can be found in Rodney Dale's 1978 book, *The Tumour in the Whale*, which was one of the first collections of urban legends to receive widespread attention (the urban legend phenomenon was so new, in fact, that Dale invented his own term for them, "Whale-Tumour Stories"). Dale's story combines elements of "The Man in the Middle" and "The Stolen Corpse" (Dale 1978, 46–47):

The grandfather of a poor Neapolitan family working in the north of Italy dies. The family can't afford the cost of a coffin so they dress him in his Sunday best and take him with them on the train, propping him up between them. For some reason they have to get out at a station and, leaving it a bit late to reboard it, have to scramble in

wherever they can. When they eventually find their way back to their former seats, grandpa has disappeared. Eventually the other passengers confess—when the train left the station it started with such a jolt that a suitcase fell off the luggage rack on to the old man's head and "killed" him. In a panic they had pushed him off the train (as retold in Bennett and Smith 2007, 23).

We also found a film version (*Weekend at Bernie's* [1989]) and a handful of literary versions in addition to those discussed or cited here:

Ben C. Clough. ed. "The Middle Man" *The American Imagination at Work: Tall Tales and Folk Tales*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947. 355-356. Reprinted in B.A. Botkin. ed. *Sidewalks of America: Folklore, Legends, Sagas, Traditions, Customs, Songs, Stories and Sayings of City Folk*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954. 521.

Robin, Ralph. "Open Ears" *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. 5.2 (August 1953): 77-82

Schwartz, Alvin. *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984, 50-51.

We first traced the story of "The Man in the Middle" back to 1949, in which year it appeared as a note in *Western Folklore* sent in by an Associated Press correspondent (Lowry 1949). This is the version that gave the legend its American name. In this story two men get in a subway train supporting a man who looks dead drunk. They get off, leaving him alone. The train goes around a curve, the man slides to the floor, "dead as a herring . . . drilled neatly through the head . . ." From there, the story then goes back to Alexander Woollcott, columnist of *The New Yorker*, one of the first people to identify, describe, and re-tell contemporary legends (he called them "modern folk tales"). Woollcott featured the story twice in his "Shouts and Murmurs" columns in 1930. His first guess was that it dated back to 1911. Promptly a correspondent informed Woollcott that the story was not a new one but had appeared in *The Bookman* magazine in "about 1902."

A month or two ago Bonnie Taylor-Blake found the *Bookman* version and has kindly sent it on. It appeared in the *Bookman*

volume XVIII (Sept 1903-Feb. 1904): 474-475. Here it is:

A TALE ONCE TOLD

Thirty or forty years ago, long before skyscrapers and rapid transit were thought of, and New York was just a great big growing town, they used to tell a story that was ghastly enough to curdle the blood of the most sceptical and to keep people of nervous temperament awake of nights. Of course, the thing probably never happened, but those who told it were careful to enhance its horror by assuring their hearers that it was an absolute, if inexplicable, occurrence. The tale went that on a summer night a husband and wife returning home from the theatre entered a Fifth Avenue stage far down town and for many blocks were the only occupants. A little above Fourteenth Street, however, the stage came to an abrupt stop, the door was opened, and three men entered. One of the three had evidently been drinking heavily, for his companions were obliged to help him to his seat. The door was closed behind them and the stage continued its journey northward. About ten blocks farther on, one of the young men rose, and bidding his friends good night, stopped the stage, and alighted. A few minutes later the second of the three said, "Well, good night, Dick," pulled the strap, stepped to the sidewalk, and walked off through one of the side streets. There remained in the stage only the husband and wife and the young man, who was obviously under the influence of liquor, and who sat in a crouching attitude in a corner of the stage under the dim flickering lamp. After a time, the husband noticed that the young man's head seemed to be drooping as if in sleep, and fearing that he might be borne beyond his destination, he rose, tapped him on the shoulder, and called attention to the number of the street they had just passed. There was no response, and the husband repeated his words, leaning over as he did so. Then he suddenly straightened up, turned to his wife, and said quickly, "We will get out here." She began to protest, but he simply repeated his words, pulled the strap, and helped her to alight. As they stood under the corner lamp-post, she turned questioning and asked him why

he insisted on their getting out of the 'bus blocks below their destination.

"Because," he replied, "that young man's throat was cut from ear to ear."

Now, from Bonnie but via Brian Chapman, we have been sent another version from the 1930s. It does not take the history of the story any further back, but it does help to flesh out the story's spread. This version comes from *The Fitchburg [Massachusetts] Sentinel*, 23 October 1933, Pg. 6, under the by-line of Paul Harrison

NEW YORK, Oct. 23 -- It seems strange that folk-tales could flourish in New York, but flourish they do, with the aid of raconteurs and ladies' clubs and strangers falling into fellowship at speakeasy bars. Manhattan folk-tales, though, never begin with, "Once upon a time -- " but start instead with, "A friend of mine had the most amazing experience last night -- " These stories, you see, are always kept up to date, and consequently have come to involve a lot of people. For example, almost anyone you meet these days knows someone whose cousin's uncle was the employer of the girl who figured in the corpse-in-the-subway incident. The popularly accepted version of this tale is that the girl had worked until after midnight getting out a lot of correspondence, and finally started home, huddled alone in one car of an almost-empty Brooklyn express, when three men entered. Two evil-looking, burly fellows supporting between them a third who seemed completely stupefied from liquor. At least, that was the impression given after the trio had lurched onto the seat opposite the girl. Each of the guardians kept an arm about his helpless companion, and occasionally tossed off some coarse joke about his condition. Meanwhile, too, they intently stared at the girl, and she grew very uneasy. The man in the middle seemed to be watching her too, through half-open, expressionless eyes. Pretty soon the train stopped at a station and an elderly gentleman came into the car. He looked at the three men, then rose as if to leave and managed to lurch almost into the girl's lap as the train rounded a curve. "Follow me out of here," he

commanded in a low voice. She followed, and they left the train at the next station. "I'm a physician," said the elderly man. "I noticed that the fellow in the middle was dead. He'd been dead for hours."

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Miscellany

A White Woman

Sent via email to Mikel Koven May 2007

This scene took place on a British Airways flight between Johannesburg, South Africa & London.

A white woman, about 50 years old, was seated next to a black man.

Very disturbed by this, she called the air hostess.

"You obviously do not see it then?" she asked. "You placed me next to a black man. I did not agree to sit next to someone from such a repugnant group. Give me an alternative seat."

"Be calm please," the hostess replied. "Almost all the places on this flight are taken. I will go to see if another place is available."

The hostess went away & then came back a few minutes later.

"Madam, just as I thought, there are no

other available seats in Economy Class. I spoke to the captain & he informed me that there is also no seat in Business Class. All the same, we still have one place in First Class."

Before the woman could say anything, the hostess continued.

"It is not usual for our company to permit someone from Economy Class to sit in First Class. However, given the circumstances, the captain feels that it would be scandalous to make someone sit next to someone so disgusting."

She turned to the black guy, & said, "Therefore, Sir, if you would like to, please collect your hand luggage, a seat awaits you in First Class."

At that moment, the other passengers, who'd been shocked by what they had just witnessed, stood up & applauded.

This is a true story. If you are against racism, please send this to all your friends; please do not delete it without sending it to at least 1 person.

WELL DONE, British Airways

Online Chain Letter

Jessica Grant Jørgensen

I just got my copy of FOAFtale News and it reminded me that I had a little something to send along. Last fall, there was a little flurry of media attention in Denmark surrounding an apparently ghostly text message (SMS). They even had some scared little boys and angry parents on the national news. I have attached a brief news report covering the subject. The original is in Danish and comes from Rene Pedersen, ComON.dk, 4 October 2006.

Translation

SMS-Ghost Wreaks Havoc on Cell-phones

Danish children are being harassed with frightening chain-letters via SMS. Police advise people to avoid sending them further and to delete them instead.

Normally, it is nice when the telephone vibrates and a little message pops up on the cell-phone's screen.

At the moment though, it's possible to run into a not so nice SMS.

"Hi, my name is Cornelia. I don't have a face, because I died in a fire 3 years ago. If you don't send this to 10 people, I'll come into your bedroom tonight and stare at you. I look like a 3-year-old with red hair – without a face. I will come to you every night. You have 7 minutes to send this on," reads the SMS, which is being spread quickly these days.

The message was already discussed a year ago in *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten* [newspaper], when the message haunted Norway. Now the message has reached Denmark.

"It is difficult for us to do anything about it and find those who originally started the SMS. It appears in our eyes as spam mail, and it is nearly impossible to do anything about it," says Detective Chief Inspector Ronald Pedersen from Rigspolitiet [National Police] to Epn.dk.

Another Wartime Story

Via email from Brian Chapman

Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* was first published in 1934. This excerpt about hyperinflation is from the essay "Valuta" and is taken from the 1995 Penguin edition, page 81.

Exchange! It happened that old Europe, the continent of immemorial standards, had lost them all: it had only prices, which changed from country to country, from village to village, it seemed from hour to hour. Tuesday in Hamburg you might buy a banquet for eight cents (or was it five?); Thursday in Paris you might buy twenty cigarettes for the price of a week's lodging in Vienna. You might gamble in Munich for high stakes, win half the fortune of a Czechoslovakian profiteer, then, if you could not spend your winnings for champagne and Picasso, you might give them the day after tomorrow to a beggar and not be thanked. Once in Berlin a man was about to pay ten marks for a box of matches when he stopped to look at the banknote in his hand. On it was written, "For these ten marks I sold my virtue." He wrote a long and virtuous story about it, was paid ten million marks, and bought his mistress a pair of artificial silk

stockings.

A Message from the Editor

In the past FTN always used to run two very valuable columns, the "Just In!" column and the "Cite Unseen" column. I regret that these have both somehow fallen by the wayside since I took over as editor. Though I don't feel I can undertake to do either of these jobs myself, I'd dearly love to see these columns return to FTN.

Is there anybody out there who would like to take charge of either or both of them? If so, please contact me at <Foafale-news@aber.ac.uk> Alternatively suggestions for new columns (plus offers to compile them) would be very acceptable.

As a "starter for ten," see the first item in the "Publication News" below.

Gillian Bennett

Publication News

Volume 54 (no. 1) of the revue **Diogenes** is given over to 9 English-language essays on "Rumors and Urban Legends" and a "dossier" by Véronique Champion Vincent which brings together reviews of 20 books in four languages (English, French, Italian and Spanish). Books reviewed are as follows:-

Philippe Aldrin, *Sociologie politique des rumeurs* (Paris: PUF, 2005).

Reviewed by Jean-Bruno Renard

Gillian Bennett, *Bodies: Sex, Violence Disease, and Death in Contemporary Legend*. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2005. Reviewed by Sandy Hobbs.

Yves-Marie Bercé, *A la découverte des trésors cachés. Du xv^e siècle à nos jours*. Paris: Perrin, 2004. Reviewed by Véronique Champion-Vincent.

Gérald Bronner, *L'empire des croyances*. Paris: PUF, 2003. Reviewed by Jean-Bruno Renard.

Jan Harold Brunvand, *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2001. Reviewed by Véronique Champion-Vincent.

Adam Burgess, *Cellular Phones, Public Fears and a Culture of Persecution*. Cambridge: CUP, 2004. Reviewed by Véronique Champion-Vincent.

Véronique Champion-Vincent, *La société parano: Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes*. Paris: Payot, 2005. Reviewed by Gérald Bronner.

Véronique Champion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard. *De source sûre: Nouvelles rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Payot, 2002. Reviewed by Jean-Marc Ramos.

Pamela Donovan, *No Way of Knowing: Crime, Urban Legends and the Internet*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. Reviewed by Véronique Champion-Vincent.

Frédéric Dumerchat and Philippe Véniel, *Forêt de Chizé: Attention puma!*. La Crèche (79260): Geste Editions, 2005. Reviewed by Véronique Champion-Vincent.

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Margarita Zires, *Voz, texto e imagen en interacción: El rumor de los pitufos*. Mexico: Miguel Angel Porrúa and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilico, 2001. Reviewed by Rayna Sánchez Estévez.

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Mikel Koven has sent us advance notice of his forthcoming book, *Film, Folklore and Urban Legends*. Forthcoming The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Dec 28, 2007 208pp

From *Alien* to *When a Stranger Calls*, many films are based on folklore or employ an urban legend element to propel the narrative. But once those traditional aspects have been identified, do they warrant further scrutiny? Indeed, why is the study of folklore in popular film important? In *Films, Folklore and Urban Legends*, Mikel J. Koven addresses this issue by exploring the convergence of folklore with popular cinema studies. Well beyond the identification of traditional motifs in popular cinema, Koven reveals new paradigms of filmic analysis, which open up when one looks at movies through the lens of folklore. In particular, this book focuses on the study of urban legends and how these narratives are used as inspiration for a number of films. Divided into five sections, the book begins with a general survey of the existing literature on folklore/film, predominantly from the perspective of folklore studies. Subsequent chapters address discourses of belief, how urban legends provide the organizing principle of some films, and how certain films "act out" or perform a legend. Movies discussed in this book include *Alligator*, *Candyman*, *The Curve*, *Dead Man on*

Campus, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Urban Legend*, *Weekend at Bernie's*, and *The Wicker Man*, as well as zombie films, killer bee movies, and slasher films. Koven also devotes attention to key television shows such as *The X-Files* and *Most Haunted*. In his analysis, Koven explains not only how film and television narratives are built upon already existing popular culture beliefs, but also how films and television shows recycle those beliefs back into popular culture. Taken as a whole, *Film, Folklore and Urban Legends* both stands on its own as the first book length study of folklore and popular cinema, and as an introductory textbook for the study of folklore and film.

Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith have a new book in print, their first for over 10 years. *Urban Legends: A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors* (Greenwood CT, 2007) brings together over 150 legend with explanatory headnotes, specimen texts, and suggestions for further reading. A 33-page Appendix provides a preliminary list of urban legends in film and literature, and a guide to further reading and online resources. 349pp. hardback. ISBN-13: 978-0-313-33952-3; ISBN-10: 0-313-33952.

Paul Smith has produced a 30 page anniversary booklet celebrating 25 years of Contemporary Legend Conferences entitled *A Blast from the Past*. It features a transcript of a discussion aired on BBC Radio 4 in 1983, a year after the first conference (see original poster opposite, designed by Doc Rowe). The text is embellished with cartoons by David Austin which were originally commissioned for Paul's two legend collections, *The Book of Nasty Legends* (1983) and *The Book of Nastier Legends* (1986). *A Blast from the Past* is available from Paul at the Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada A1B 3X8

**PERSPECTIVES ON
CONTEMPORARY LEGEND**



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CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME!

Anybody is free to send a contribution to **FOAFtale News**. We welcome a wide variety of items, including those documenting legends' travels on electronic media and in the press; also news, queries, notices, reviews and research reports; clippings, offprints, and citations are also encouraged.

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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.

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

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