

FOAFTALE NEWS
NEWSLETTER
OF
THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPORARY LEGEND RESEARCH

No. 69

December 2007

IN THIS ISSUE

A New Home For FTN

What Can We Learn From Popular Collections Of Urban Legends?

Sandy Hobbs And Seonaid Anderson

"Urban Legend/Myth" In Crosswords And Comics

Jan H. Brunvand

Two Legends From Estonia

Eda Kalmre

"The Man In The Middle." Further Update

Bonnie Taylor-Blake

Events

Awards

Publication News

Miscellany

PLEASE NOTE:
there will be no print version of this issue.

A New Home for FTN

Gillian Bennett (Editor)

This will be the last issue of FTN E-mailed to you from the UK. When Mikel Koven, FTN's previous editor, left the Department of Film and Theatre Studies at Aberystwyth we lost the web address we had been using for some time, and Eda Kalmre, generously offered her services and those of the Folklore Department at the Estonian Literary Museum, to fill the gap. Our new address will be <http://www.folklore.ee/FOAftale>. Contributions should be sent to <ftn@folklore.ee>

Eda has also offered to set up a user group for ISCLR members (its address will be <isclr@folklore.ee>). From

now on members will be able to share discussions and information, and access FTN from this site. Rather than sending FTN out via E-mail or as printed copy, as we have done in the past, members will be alerted when an issue of the newsletter is available, so they may read it online or print it out as they wish. Once the system is up and running, back numbers will also be available for browsing or printing.

Hearty thanks to Eda for bringing FTN into the 21st century!

REMINDER

Now would be a good time to check whether your membership is up-to-date for 2008. To renew your membership, send a cheque made out to "ISCLR" for US\$30.00 or UK£20 to Mikel J. Koven, Arts, Humanities and Social Science, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK.

What Can We Learn From Popular Collections Of Urban Legends?

Sandy Hobbs and Seonaid Anderson

Although scholars of contemporary legend naturally lay particular stress on stories which are orally transmitted, they have shown themselves willing to take account of material transmitted via other media such as newspapers, films and the internet. There is one type of transmission which seems to have received little or no systematic attention, namely printed collections aimed at a popular audience. Even the most cursory glance shows that there are many such volumes available. Since the apparently unscholarly nature of such volumes makes it unlikely that they will be reviewed in scholarly journals, it seemed worthwhile attempting a systematic consideration of some of these popular collections.

The modern era of research on contemporary legends may be seen as starting with the appearance of Brunvand's *Vanishing Hitchhiker* in 1981. Since then, there have been many books containing such legends. Whereas Brunvand's many collections have the dual aims of entertaining the reader and increasing our understanding, many of these other volumes appear primarily aimed at entertainment. This paper considers the

question of how scholars should treat these popular collections.

An initial look at some of these volumes indicated that they clearly varied in a number of potentially significant ways. Some had characteristics which might be considered as partly scholarly in nature, in that they encouraged a critical approach to the texts. This might include commentary on the legend texts, discussion of variants texts and possible origins, and giving references. Even an index might be regarded as a feature of scholarship as it implies a systematic reading of the book. Scholarship and entertainment may exist side by side, but without any of the scholarly attributes a book will simply be seeking to evoke responses such as amusement or horror.

We decided to look for books, published in English in the United States and United Kingdom since the 1990s, which appeared to be aimed primarily at a popular audience and to be concerned with contemporary legends in general. We excluded books by authors who are part of the scholarly community. Where authors have published more than one book we examined the content. The two books by Holt and Mooney (1999, 2004) have virtually no overlap in content, so both have been considered. However, in other cases there was considerable overlap, (e.g. Brown and Flynn, 2000 and 2003, Craughwell, 2000 and 2005, and Healey and Glanvill, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1996). For these authors, we selected only the latest volume. Dale (2005) was excluded as it is simply a slightly updated version of his 1978 book. We excluded Roeper (2002) because it is about Hollywood stories and not contemporary legends in general. Likewise Williams (2001) has been excluded since it is primarily a Christian polemic. However, Hennigan (2002) is included because, despite the title, *Scottish Urban Myths*, the contents show very little that is distinctively Scottish and most of the stories included occur in other collections. Since some collections of urban legends are ephemeral, we doubt whether our sample is in any sense definitive, but since these volumes show a number of contrasting features, the sample is probably broad enough to indicate some of the main features of this type of book.

The ten works subjected to systematic review are identified in the reference list by an asterisk. We have noted the number of legend texts included, whether the work contains an index and references to other publications, and the extent of any commentary on the texts. Whether, when transmitted orally, contemporary legends are always "told as true" is in doubt. What cannot be doubted about these volumes is that virtually from the titles onwards, the stories are told as "not true". The contents are referred to as "legends" or "myths", or sometimes both. Although some scholars prefer the phrase "Contemporary Legend", Brunvand has consistently employed the term "Urban Legend" and the popularity of his work seems to have established it as the preferred description. All of these books have "urban" in the title and seven have "legend". However, "myth" is almost as common, occurring in five titles.

The number of stories offered by these volumes varies from as few as 28 to over 600. However, it should be noted that counting texts is not always straightforward. Some books contain relatively full versions of stories supplemented with short statements, usually only a sentence long. In our count we have included these single

sentence statements as separate entities. However, this may have the disadvantage of exaggerating the apparent coverage of a particular volume. For example, Craughwell (2005, p 244) has as adjacent "Short Takes":

Burt Reynolds is Tom Selleck's father.
Clark Gable is Tom Selleck's father.

Note that even by generously counting these and similar examples as separate legends, we could not justify the book title's claim to include 666 entries. Our count reached only 636. Such exaggeration is not unique. The book by Genge presented us with particular problems as it is long and lacks an index. It is not always clear when a story is presented as a "legend" and when as a "true" incident which is comparable with a legend. For this reason, we are particularly cautious about giving an estimate of the number of legends in this book.

These books vary considerably in the extent of scholarship displayed. Only two contained an index and three have references to other works. At one extreme, Reeve (2002), apart from a single page introduction and a few simple illustrations, consists only of legend texts. By contrast, Harding discusses conceptual and theoretical issues (though not necessarily very well) and has references (but no index).

The concept of "urban legend" and "urban myth" is treated very broadly by some writers. The Tom Selleck examples we have quoted might be considered cases of using "urban legend" to mean simply a statement that is not true. This is not a very helpful usage, particularly if no attempt is made to indicate that the statement is in circulation and believed.

As a first step in exploring these variations we set out to find how frequently the legends appearing in Brunvand's *Vanishing Hitchhiker* appeared in each of the books sampled. Brunvand gives titles to 25 legends in that book. We scanned all 10 books seeking versions of these legends. Initially we erred on the side of overinclusiveness, then took a more critical second look.

The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs occurred most frequently (7 times) while Hot Dog (also known as the Microwaved Pet), Kentucky Fried Rat, The Runaway Grandmother, and The Vanishing Hitchhiker itself all appeared in six of the collections. In contrast, Fart in the Dark and The Ghost Airliner occurred in only one collection and The Cut-Out Pullman, The Devil in the Dancehall and The Economical Car did not appear in any.

How may this variation be interpreted? One explanation might be that the compilers of these popular books may have a preference for particular kinds of story. Another possibility is that the frequency of their occurrence is an indication of how prominent the legend is currently.

To explore this further, we decided to check the status of these 25 legends on the well known urban legend website, www.Snop.es.com. Since entries in Snopes are often updated, we checked for when the page devoted to a particular legend was most recently updated.

If we divide the Brunvand legends into those appearing in four or more collections and those appearing in three or less, they amount to 13 and 12 respectively. Of the 13 most commonly cited, 9 had been updated in Snopes.com since 2001. Of the 12 which were least common in the popular collections, only 4 had been updated since 2001

(and two had no entry in Snopes at all.). Scholars' judgements as to how current a given legend might be are usually made impressionistically. Neither the popular collections nor Snopes may be regarded as an infallible guide to a story's currency but both may be treated as helpful indicators.

Now let us consider aspects of actual legend texts in these books: We concentrated on seven of the most frequently included legends with a total of 40 variants in all.

These were The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs, Hot Dog, The Vanishing Hitchhiker, The Killer in the Backseat, Kentucky Fried Rat, The Runaway Grandmother, and Spiders in the Hairdo.

TITLES: This is the most obvious difference between printed legends and oral telling. If legends are normally told as invitations to believe, then the idea that what you are conveying has a name would perhaps be counterproductive. Book authors have already proclaimed that their stories are legends or myths, so a title for a story is not a problem. It is also beneficial from the point of view of the layout of the text. Of the 40 texts we studied in detail: only 2 had not been given a title, 15 had what may be considered a standard title (the same as, or similar to, Brunvand's, such as Phantom Hitchhiker, Southern Fried Chicken), and 23 had what might be termed creative titles. The last category is the most interesting. Some have the advantage over standard titles that they do not give the denouement away in advance: e.g. "Box of Surprises" for Kentucky Fried Rat. Some are puns or cultural allusions, e.g. "Racked With Guilt?" for The Runaway Grandmother, and "Upstairs, Downstairs", the name of a popular television series for The Baby Sitter and the Man Upstairs.

NAMES: We usually refer to contemporary legends as being told about anonymous characters, hence "friend of a friend" or "FOAF". Book authors have the option of naming the characters. This is much less common than giving the whole story a title. For three of the legends, we found no names attached to the protagonists. For the others, an occasional name was employed, amounting to only 7 texts in all. The names seem to add little and are fairly conventional, e.g. Jennifer and Mary Lou for threatened babysitters and Sherry and Millie for threatened drivers. This may be because the "success" of contemporary legends in oral transmission has demonstrated that there is no particular need for characters to be named. However, a question does arise here: Has anyone actually done a thorough study of when orally transmitted legends are told about named individuals? Without such a study we cannot say whether or not names more commonly occur in the popular urban legend texts.

LOCATIONS: We found that the books were much more likely to name locations than people. Of the 40 texts we looked at in detail, 24 had specified locations. This was most clearly a feature of the Vanishing Hitchhiker texts. This is possibly because the story gains a sense of authenticity by being in a specific location. Sometimes the location is a town or area (Oxford, Brooklyn, Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania). Sometimes a specific road is mentioned (A1 in the UK, Route 130 in the USA). The

Runaway Grandmother is also likely to have locations specified because in most versions, the grandmother's corpse is being transported across national boundaries, so we have Forth Worth, Texas /Mexico, or Surrey, England/ France or Moldova/Ukraine. The only Runaway Grandmother text without locations is a version which does not involve cross national borders. On the whole, for the other legends, the ascription of location does not seem to have any particular significance. One author, Hennigan, as part of his attempt to claim the stories to be Scottish, assigns each of his texts to a location in Scotland. To us, the ascriptions seem arbitrary. As with named characters, we believe it might throw more light on the book texts, if a similar survey were to be undertaken for oral texts.

DATES: Unlike locations, dates are rarely given. The clear exception to a "no date" rule is The Spider in the Hairdo. The reason seems obvious. The early versions of the legend refer to particular hairstyles which are no longer fashionable. Hence, there is a need to give the story authenticity by placing it in the past, "mid 1980s", "50s". Of course, any alternative is to associate the story with a more contemporary hairstyle. The version called "The Dreaded Nest" in Brown and Flynn (2003) relates to a male surfer with dreadlocks.

TEXT EVOLUTION Comparison of the legend texts may usefully be compared with other, earlier versions. The replacement of "beehive" hairstyle with dreadlocks just mentioned is a case in point. One text seemed worth quoting in full. Holt and Mooney (2004) present a version of the story Brunvand calls Killer in the Backseat under the title Pumped Up.

Sherry pulled into a gas station. She inserted her credit card in the slot at the pump and filled her gas tank. She then replaced the nozzle and started to get back in her car and leave. As she walked around the hood, she heard the attendant's voice over the loudspeaker. Something had happened with her credit card payment and she needed to come inside and re-pay. Sherry was confused, because the transaction at the pump seemed complete and approved. She decided to ignore him. The attendant once again urged her to come inside to pay, this time saying that if she didn't he would be forced to call the authorities. Sherry went inside and started arguing with the attendant about his threat. He told her to calm down and listen carefully. "While you were pumping gas," he said, "I saw a guy slip into the back seat of your car from the other side. I've called the police." She looked out in time to see the police pull up. She watched as they surrounded her car. With guns drawn, the cops opened the back doors and dragged a man wearing a ski mask from the back seat. The police later informed her that this was a new gang initiation rite. The requirement was to bring back a woman's body part.

This seems a particularly interesting development in the legend. Early versions had the woman driver being followed by a male driver whose intentions she

misunderstood. In the quoted version, the warning is given by the gas station attendant. As a piece of narrative this seems to us weaker. There is no build up of tension because of the other car continuing to follow her. However, it is clear from a number of sources that the gas station version is now very strong and being circulated as a warning (see, for example, the Snopes.com website and *FLS News* 49, 2006). It should be noted, however, that it does not seem to have "killed off" the earlier version. If we are right in considering this version dramatically weaker, some explanation seems to be required for the success of the more recent version. Our hypothesis is that it reflects a real anxiety about gas/petrol stations at night, where the staff member is safely locked away, heightening one's awareness that one is exposed to dangers against which the attendant is protected.

Conclusion:

Although our analysis has been limited, we believe that the issues emerging are worth the attention of scholars of contemporary scholars. While studying these book texts, we began to consider questions which might be raised about orally transmitted texts. For example, in what circumstances are stories told anonymously and in what circumstances are personal names, locations and dates employed? More issues would probably emerge from extending this preliminary review we have undertaken. It might even be argued that scholars have an obligation to study them. These are, after all, performances of legends, which are worth attempting to interpret through taking account of the particular circumstances in which they occur. As such they may take a place alongside the other performances which are available, including, of course, the oral.

References

- *Brown, Yorick and Flynn, Mike (2000) *The 500 Best Urban Legends Ever!* New York: ibooks. (385 texts, little commentary)
- Brunvand, Jan Harold (1981) *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*. New York: Norton.
- Craughwell, Thomas, J. (2000) *The Baby on the Car Roof and 222 More Urban Legends*. New York: Black Dog and Leventhal.
- *Craughwell, Thomas J. (2005) *Urban Legends: 666 Absolutely True Stories that happened to a Friend... of a Friend... of a Friend*. New York: Black Dog and Leventhal. (636 texts, index, little commentary)
- Dale, Rodney (1978) *The Tumour In The Whale: A Collection Of Modern Myths*. London: Duckworth.
- Dale, Rodney (2005) *The Wordsworth Book of Urban Legend*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth.
- *Genge, N. E. (2000) *Urban Legends: The As-Complete-As-One-Could-Be Guide to Modern Myths*. New York: Three Rivers Press. (around 320 texts, full commentary Note: No index or references.
- *Harding, Nick (2005) *Urban Legends*. Harpenden, Herts.: Pocket Essentials. (28 texts, references, full commentary)

- Healey, Phil and Glanvill, Rick (1992) *Urban Myths*. London: Virgin
- Healey, Phil and Glanvill, Rick (1993) *The Return of Urban Myths*. London: Virgin.
- Healey, Phil and Glanvill, Rick (1994) *Urban Myths Unplugged*. London: Virgin.
- *Healey, Phil and Glanvill, Rick (1996) *Now That's What I Call Urban Myths*. London: Virgin. (326 texts, little commentary)
- *Hennigan, Brian (2002) *Scottish Urban Myths*. Edinburgh: Black and White. (99 texts, little commentary)
- *Holt, David and Mooney, Bill (1999) *Spiders in the Hairdo: Modern Urban Legends*. Little Rock: August House. (55 texts, references, little commentary)
- *Holt, David and Mooney, Bill (2004) *The Exploding Toilet: Modern Urban Legends*. Little Rock: August House. (76 texts, little commentary)
- *Reeve, Robin (2002) *The Book of Urban Legends*. London: Michael O'Mara. (143 texts, very little commentary)
- *Roeper, Richard (2001) *Urban Legends: The Truth Behind All Those Deliciously Entertaining Myths That Are Absolutely, Positively, 100 % Not True!* Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press. (69 texts, index, references, full commentary)
- Roeper, Richard (2002) *Hollywood Urban Legends: The Truth Behind All Those Delightfully Persistent Myths of Film, Television, and Music*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press.
- Williams, John A. (2001) *The Cost of Deception: The Seduction of Modern Myths and Urban Legends*. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman.

"Urban Legend/myth" in Crosswords and Comics

Jan H. Brunvand

The acceptance by the general public of the term "urban legend" (sometimes, unfortunately, "urban myth") is proven by, among other things, the appearance of the term(s) in crossword puzzles and in newspaper comic strips. The ways the terms are used also indicate just how well the concepts are grasped by the purveyors and consumers of popular culture.

For example, in The New York Times crossword No. 00216, published March 30, 2006, the clue "Fairy tales and urban legends" was used to elicit the word "folklores." Choosing that larger general category for the answer was correct, although the plural form "folklores" seems odd.

In the crossword syndicated to newspapers by Thomas Joseph, published May 31, 2007, a specific urban legend is rightly referenced. The clue was "Home of some gators" and the answer was "sewers."

The acrostic puzzle by Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon published in the Sunday *New York Times* Magazine has twice recently referenced urban legends. In the acrostic published September 18, 2005, the clue for the answer "urban legend" is the accurate definition "Modern-day tale probably apocryphal (2 wds)." And in the acrostic

published January 22, 2006, the clue "Evidence for many an urban legend" was simply "anecdote."

Numerous daily newspaper comic strips have alluded to urban legends in the past; two recent examples are typical. In J. P. Toomey's strip "Sherman's Lagoon" (about creatures in an ocean lagoon) published on February 16, 2007, a made-up (or adapted) urban legend is somewhat wrongly labelled: Sherman the shark says to his sea turtle friend, "Fillmore, do you realize that at this very moment, there's a swarm of killer clams getting ever so much closer to this lagoon[?]." The turtle replies in the next panel, "That's an urban myth, Sherman." (In the last two panels the two creatures merely trade insults.)

In Darby Conley's strip "Get Fuzzy" published on February 20, 2006, the cartoonist seems to be alluding to the somewhat arbitrary usage of the term itself (with a sideswipe at a famous film director) . In panel no. 1 the cat introduces the dog to his new friend, saying "Satchel, this is my new mentor, Quentin Tabbytino." Satchel the dimwitted dog asks "Mentor for what?" In the second panel the cat rants, "Don't you know who he is? He's a world famous filmmaker! He's Quentin Tabbytino! He's a living urban legend!" "How," asks Satchel, in the last panel, "is he an urban legend?" The cat replies, "DUH! because he's a Legend . . . and he's from the City!" [bf in the original]. Obviously the term "urban myth" would not have worked in this context, for which I suppose we should be grateful.

Two Legends from Estonia

Eda Kalmre

Two cautionary tales which have recently gained considerable popularity in Estonia are probably also well known in the international legend tradition.

The first tale highlights fears connected with the recent incredible advances in technology. I first recorded the rumour, which was circulating mostly among people interested in technology and video recording, in 2000. Around this time digital video cameras became more popular in Estonia. The legend goes that certain models of Sony digital camcorders can be used not only for seeing and filming in the dark but also for seeing through clothes. People in online chat rooms claimed that this side-effect was due to an accidental error in the production process. Who would not be frightened of being seen naked through a tourist camera while walking in town, or filmed naked by a male colleague recording an office party! It is difficult to say why the legend has emerged anew in Estonia. Perhaps it is owing to the introduction of new models of camcorders in the market?

The second tale was inspired by the written press and an unfortunate incident in a Tallinn nightclub. Some months ago a young woman suddenly died in a nightclub. The cause of death was believed to be drink-spiking. Following this incident, dozens of cases of suspected nightclub drugging were mentioned. Legends about spiking women's drinks with eye drops containing deadly nightshade (*atropa belladonna*), which had previously spread in the Soviet era, were rehashed. (As a passing note, *belladonna* was used by the character played by

Sandra Bullock in the 1998 film "Practical Magic" to intoxicate her sister's annoying boyfriend, who unfortunately died of an overdose.) The narrators in Estonia, of course, were not bothered about the fact that such eye drops were not available in pharmacies. Last week it turned out that the cause of the young woman's death was alcohol mixed with drugs. The owner of the nightclub said in a television interview on November 21 that all the tales about drink-spiking are urban legends. Yet paramedics have commented on a number of analogous cases and claimed that nearly 10% of such intoxications may have been caused by malice. In any case, the moral is clear and simple: young girls, be cautious, do not drink with strangers or leave your drink unattended!

"The Man in the Middle." Further Update

Bonnie Taylor-Blake

From James Thurber's *The Years with Ross*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics; New Ed edition, 2001. First edition published in 1959.]

Cartoonist Thurber describes a discussion with *New Yorker* founding editor Harold Ross.

"There was another drawing that set off a memorable display of fireworks between the editor and me. It showed three hound dogs in the window of a pet shop, one of them, sitting between the other two, having unusually sad eyes and gentle expression. A would-be woman purchaser is talking to the proprietor of the store, who is saying, "I'm very sorry, madam, but the one in the middle is stuffed, poor fellow."

"I don't think they have stuffed dogs in pet shops," Ross said. "Not in the show window, anyway."

"This shop has one in the show window," I said stubbornly.

"You have me there," Ross growled. Then I got into deeper difficulty.

"It's a variant of that old story about the three men on the subway train late at night," I said. "They were sitting across from a fourth man, who is left alone on the train with the three others after still a fifth passenger hands him a note and gets off at the next stop. The note says, 'The man in the middle is dead.'" I never saw Ross look unhappier about anything. He said so much then, in such a splutter, that it doesn't come back to me coherently now.

"I'll send that drawing in to every art meeting until it's bought and printed," I told him. I think it was bought on its third resubmission." [p. 53]

In early 1930 Alexander Woollcott had written twice on "The Man in the Middle" in his "Shouts and Murmurs" column for *The New Yorker*. Thurber's "stuffed dog" cartoon appears on p. 16 of the 7 March 1936 issue.

Events

Perspectives On Contemporary Legend International Society for Contemporary Legend Research

26th International Conference
Dublin, Ireland
7-10 July 2008

The International Society for Contemporary Legend Research is pleased to announce that the 2008 Perspectives on Contemporary Legend International Conference is to be held at the Camden Court Hotel in Dublin, Ireland, from the 7th to 10th July 2008.

Proposals for papers on all aspects of "contemporary," "urban," or "modern" legend research are solicited, as are those on any legend or legend-like tradition that presently circulate, or have circulated at an earlier historical period. Previous discussions have ranged in focus from the ancient to the modern (including Internet-lore) and have covered diverse cultures worldwide (including popular and academic cultures).

The 2008 meeting will be organized as a series of seminars at which the majority of those who attend will present papers and/or contribute to discussion sessions. Concurrent sessions will be avoided so that all participants can hear all the papers. Proposals for special panels of papers, discussion sessions, and other related events are encouraged.

The Camden Court Hotel, Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2, is about 20 minutes walk from the centre of Dublin, and five minutes from the Grafton Street and St. Stephen's Green popular shopping, eating and entertainment areas. The projected room rates (including taxes) are: Single B&B \$129; Double B&B \$149. Exact room rates should be available in February.

Conference Fees:

ISCLR Members: \$95 US (or the equivalent).
Non-members: \$135 US (or the equivalent).
Students: \$25 US (or the equivalent).

To participate in the conference, please forward a title and abstract (400 words), along with the appropriate conference fee to the organizer, Paul Smith, by 1st February 2008.

For further information contact:

Paul Smith, Department of Folklore, Memorial University,
St. John's, Newfoundland, CANADA, A1B 3X8.
Phone: (Office) 709-737-8410/8402. (Home) 709-895-3159.
FAX: 709-737-4718 E-mail: fpsmith@mun.ca

Awards

1.
International Society for Contemporary Legend Research
Announces A New Award

The Brian McConnell Book Award

The International Society for Contemporary Legend Research has established an annual book prize in honour of Brian McConnell. The purpose of the award is to encourage scholarship in the field of Contemporary Legend, to recognize and inspire standards of excellence in Contemporary Legend publications and to commemorate the life and work of Brian McConnell, a long time member of ISCLR, celebrated crime reporter, author and legend scholar.

The prize is for a book receiving its first publication in the period 1st April to the following 30th March, for award the following summer. Only books published during the preceding twelve months will be considered. Eligible books will include original material or new scholarly editions of previously published texts, but excludes reprints

Three copies of each book submitted for the award should reach the judges, c/o the Society's President, by 30 March. Books submitted for the award will not be returned. The award winner will be announced at the Annual General Meeting of ISCLR. The main prize will be the award itself, but the winning author (or authors) will also be presented with a cheque for \$250 (US).

There will be three judges appointed by the Society's Council, one of whom will be the Society's President, or First Vice-President. The judges may, at their discretion, consider books which have not been formally submitted for the prize. The winning book will be that which, in the opinion of the judges made the most distinguished contribution to the study of Contemporary Legend in the year in question.

Books to be considered for the McConnell Award should be sent in triplicate to:

Cathy Preston, President, ISCLR
English Department
Hellems 101
226 UCB
University of Colorado, Boulder
Colorado 80309-0226
USA

Editor's Note:

As it is now almost 4 years since Brian's death, readers might like to refresh their memory of one of ISCLR's founding members. We are therefore reprinting, courtesy of the Folklore Society, the appreciation Sandy Hobbs contributed to *Folklore* (vol 105, [December 2004]:346)

IN MEMORIAM: Brian McConnell, 1928-2004

Sandy Hobbs

Brian McConnell was born on December 27, 1928 on Tyneside but spent most of his childhood in and around London. After a checkered schooling, he started work at the age of 14 on the *Municipal Journal*, the beginning of a life long association with the press. Amongst the many roles he fulfilled were court reporter and crime reporter for

the *Daily Mirror* and, for a short time, news editor of *The Sun*. When he died on July 10, 2004, obituaries in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* naturally focused on his life as a journalist and author. His interest in folklore was largely overlooked.

Although he did not join the Folklore Society until 1981, his interest in the subject had developed earlier. He had attended a meeting of the society as a journalist in the 1960s. As a crime reporter, he had become aware of the many legends which grow up around notorious cases. Under the pseudonym "Old Codgers" he edited the "Live Letters" column in the popular newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*. There he often had to try to disentangle reality and "myths". One question posed by a reader was "Are there or are there not alligators in the sewers of New York?" Brian gave a balanced and knowledgeable answer.

From the 1980s, Brian regularly attended meetings of the Folklore Society. He also participated in the conferences of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research held on both sides of the Atlantic, frequently accompanied by his wife, Margaret. His papers included "The Killing of a Murder Legend (College Station, 1989), "Hey, Judge, Tell Me Another!" (Boulder, 1997) and "Tales That Wagged The Dog" (Sheffield, 2002).

Brian wrote several books, mostly dealing with some aspect of crime. They included *Assassination* (1969) covering killings from antiquity to the Kennedys. *The Neilson File* (1983) dealing with the mass murderer Dennis Neilson, *The Possessed, True Tales of Demonic Possession* (1995), and *Holy Killers* (1995) which was concerned with religious leaders who were also murderers. His writings on folklore topics were numerous but in the main brief. He contributed regularly to newsletters such as *FLS News*, *FOAftale News* and *Letters to Ambrose Merton*. The range was wide, covering subjects such as baptismal customs, remembrance notices in the press, Essex girl jokes, modern witches, cauls and the puns in the names of hairdressing establishments. One of his most substantial publications on contemporary lore was his chapter, "The Corporate Folk-Legend: Marketing Invention or Consumer Response?" in Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith's *The Questing Beast* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1989). His articles for *British Journalism Review*, *South London Press* and *New Law Journal* also often dealt with folkloric themes.

Perhaps his most characteristic contributions were oral. Although at the annual seminars, Perspectives on Contemporary Legend, he often gave papers, it is probably as a frequent and enthusiastic contributor to the discussions which followed other peoples' papers that he will be particularly remembered. He was also a tireless storyteller in the evenings. To meetings where most of the participants were from academic backgrounds, Brian brought the distinctive and welcome perspective of the journalist.

Brian had planned to present a paper on "The Pretty Nun's Kiss" at the Perspectives on Contemporary Legend conference held at Aberystwyth in July, 2004. His death robbed delegates of the chance to hear him one more time. Instead he featured in the many reminiscences which his friends shared. Although the stories Brian told frequently featured himself, there was one story which many of his friends discovered for the first time when they

read the press obituaries. In 1974, in The Mall, London, an armed man crashed his car into a limousine carrying the Queen's daughter, Princess Anne, and her husband Captain Mark Phillips. Her bodyguard and chauffeur were both shot. Brian happened to be in a taxi near the scene. Hearing the shots, he got out and tried to persuade the man to give up his weapon. Brian was also shot. For his actions, he was awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal. It was characteristic of this essentially modest man that this was a story he did not tell to his many friends in folklore circles.

Students of contemporary folklore have lost a man of boundless curiosity, who had an encyclopedic knowledge he was always willing to share.

2.

Dr. David Buchan Student Essay Prize For Contemporary Legend Research 2007-2008

The International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR) is pleased to announce that it is to award an annual student essay prize to honour the memory of Dr. David Buchan (1939-1994), leading international ballad scholar, and a staunch supporter and perceptive writer in the area of contemporary legend research.

The prize will be awarded for the best student essay that combines research and analysis on some aspect of contemporary legend, or contemporary legend research. Previously published essays will not be considered for the award.

Applications are invited from registered (post)graduate students, although undergraduate essays will also be accepted for consideration on the advice of faculty members.

Either students or their teachers may submit essays. Instructors are asked to encourage students with eligible essays to enter the competition.

The deadline for submission is 1st of May in the year the award is to be made, and the essays should have been written within the previous academic year, or the current academic year.

The award will be made by the President of ISCLR upon the recommendation of the Selection Committee appointed by him/her, and will be announced at the annual meeting of the Society.

The winner will receive \$250 (U.S.), and a year's membership to ISCLR. The winning essay will normally be submitted for publication in the Society's journal, *Contemporary Legend*.

For further information or a copy of the Guide For Applicants, please contact:

Professor Paul Smith,

Coordinator, David Buchan Student Essay Prize
Department of Folklore
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland
Canada A1B 3X8
Email: fpsmith@mun.ca

Mikel Koven's new book, *Film, Folklore and Urban Legends*,

is now available from Scarecrow Press. For details, see FTN 68, page 10.

Publications News

Bonnie Taylor-Blake writes:

I thought I might pass along the titles of three recent papers that may be of interest to readers of *FTN*:

1) Libby Hill, "The Chicago Epidemic of 1885; An Urban Legend?" *The Journal of Illinois History*. 9(3): 154-174 (August, 2006). (Libby begins her paper with, "Countless histories of Chicago mention devastating 1885 epidemics triggered by a flood that washed unspeakable filth into the city's water supply. According to numerous sources available from the last fifty years, as many as ninety thousand Chicagoans -- 12 percent of the city's population -- succumbed to life-draining waterborne diseases of cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. It is a shocking tale of a vibrant metropolis laid low by ungovernable nature and disease. And it never happened.")

2) John William Johnson, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Africa," *Research in African Literatures*. 38(3): 24-33 (Fall, 2007).

(Abstract: The first possible variant of the urban legend The Vanishing Hitchhiker occurs in Acts 8: 26-40 with the conversion of an "Ethiopian" by the hitchhiking apostle Philip. More recent variants in the Gambia and Somalia exhibit a different plot, but retain the vanishing hitchhiker motif.

A female hitchhiker spends time with a man, who is later unable to locate her, but who finds his coat on her grave. The found-coat variant is part of a widespread cycle of vanishing hitchhiker legends. Could the story have originated in Africa? This article deals with this issue and with widespread occurrences of this legend.)

3) John D. Galuska & John W. Johnson, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker: Bibliographic References," *Research in African Literatures*. 38(3): 34-40 (Fall, 2007).

(Galuska and Johnson write, "It is not surprising that the legend of the Vanishing Hitchhiker is found in Africa. It is one of the most persistent and widespread urban legends in the world today, as will become obvious in the bibliography that follows. This work was completed with the assistance of a modest grant from the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University and the determined assistance of John Galuska. It contains every reference we could find dealing with the topic.")

These last two works are available as PDFs (they are about 500 and 460 KB respectively.

Miscellany

Brian Chapman writes:

"This cartoon comes from the 14 September 2007 edition of the syndicated one-panel comic, "Chuckle Bros.," by Brian Boychuk, Ron Boychuk, and Ronnie Martin.

I don't think it's available on-line, so I scanned the comic from my local paper, the Victoria (BC) Times Colonist

CHUCKLE BROS.



"Honey, have you seen the coffee can? I had to put Nana's ashes in it until the urn is ready."

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, AHSS, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, 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://www.folklore.ee/FOAFtale>.

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.

ISCLR users' group <isclr@folklore.ee>

ISCLR Web page:
www.panam.edu/faculty/mglazer/isclr/isclr.htm

ISSN 1026-1001

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.

Next issue April 2008

CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME!

Please send contributions to
<ftn@folklore.ee>

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. Articles will not be refereed and contributors will retain their copyright. However, the editor has discretion to refuse an item if it is considered unsuitable for any reason