REVENANT – SPECIAL CONTEMPORARY LEGEND ISSUE

INTRODUCTION

‘There was this bloke that worked with my cousin…’

‘Did you hear about the woman that…?’

‘You won’t believe what my hairdresser told me…’

In 2019, a letter published in *The Guardian*’s Notes and Queries section asked readers:

> urban myths – alligators in the sewers etc – used to be very popular and some were gruesomely entertaining, so why have they disappeared? Have they been replaced by online conspiracy theories and fake news? (Jones, 2019).

Ironically, the same issue of *The Guardian* contained an example of a persistent conspiracy theory, the suggestion that the Apollo Moon landings were faked. We are pleased to report that oral and written urban myths happily coexist alongside those being generated and shared via online spaces.

All of these different forms of narrative can be considered contemporary legends, an umbrella term used by folklorists for the stories we love to hear, tell and swap in schools and in the workplace, in pubs and other social environments and increasingly online. These are narratives that are frequently picked up and passed on through the press, the internet, and social media. Unlike traditional myths and legends that take place in the distant past or in a fantastical realm, contemporary legends typically involve ordinary people in everyday environments and explore modern concerns, anxieties, and social dynamics. Contemporary legends are stories that may seem fantastical or banal, extreme or everyday, and they happen in recognisable worlds. The ‘everydayness’ of the stories is key; a listener does not require a different belief system to understand and believe them (Smith, personal communication, 2025). They are believed to be true, or at least to contain an element of truth, often because they are told as having happened to someone connected to us in some way, to a friend of a friend.

A search on any online news archive will turn up thousands of references to such stories and legends currently in circulation and common usage, including stories of big cats or other cryptids roaming the countryside; urban myths telling of second hand cars smelling of death or hook-handed murderers; and, more recently, internet memes or horror-related creepypasta, such as Slenderman and Momo. Such stories are all around us, embedded in jokes, advertisements, news stories, popular culture, and social media.

Academic study of contemporary legend explores the origins, variations and dissemination of these different but related forms of popular narrative examining, amongst other things, how they reflect societal values and concerns, the role they play in social cohesion, their impact on public behaviour, and their

wider cultural significance. As such, contemporary legend study exists at the intersection of a number of disciplines including Folkloristics, Sociology, Psychology, English and Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, and Media Studies. Contemporary legend studies thus provide valuable insights into the narratives that shape modern life and human experience.

This special issue has been compiled and edited by Dr David Clarke, Dr Sophie Parkes-Nield, Andrew Robinson and Dr Diane A. Rodgers of the Centre for Contemporary Legend (CCL) at Sheffield Hallam University, Yorkshire, UK. Alongside a selection of peer reviewed academic articles, we also present a series of creative works and reviews, all of which reflect the broadly magical, mythical and mesmerising aspects of contemporary legend, from ancient history to the digital, transmedia age. This introduction aims to provide the reader with an overview of the field of contemporary legend and its academic study, highlighting key subjects, approaches and histories through reference to a range of examples.

Sheffield and contemporary legend

Our presence in Sheffield, and our continued interest in contemporary legend, is no accident. The Centre for Contemporary Legend was founded at Sheffield Hallam University in 2018 in part in recognition of a shared interest in folklore, myth and contemporary legend amongst researchers at the University, and in part to revive the city's historic link with legend and folklore scholarship. We have since hosted a number of international conferences to platform contemporary legend including our inaugural symposium in November 2018, *Folklore On Screen* in September 2019, and the 40th anniversary conference of the International Society of Contemporary Legend Research in June 2023.

Although the first use of the term 'contemporary legend' can be traced back to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* written in 1924 (Hobbms, 1989 p. 2), its widespread use in contemporary folklore studies originates from a conference held at the University of Sheffield in 1982. 'Perspectives on Contemporary Legend' brought together legend scholars from around the world and led to the creation of an international society (The International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, ISCLR), annual conferences, a series of publications and a journal that continues to promote and provide a platform for legend study and scholarship. The original week-long conference was the result of the perseverance of a number of British folklorists based at the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield, along with Visiting Professor Ervin Beck from Goshen College in Indiana. 'Before many weeks had passed,' Paul Smith writes in the introduction to the conference proceedings, published two years later, 'Ervin was developing a mailing list, Doc Rowe was producing the posters, I was writing flyers and John Widdowson was resigned to the fact that a seminar devoted to Contemporary Legend was about to be born'. Crucially, the hosts had neglected to offer a brief that defined '"our" interpretation of the term Contemporary Legend' but would-be contributors had largely understood the title in a similar fashion, 'that Contemporary Legend equated with such terms as Urban, Modern and Rumour Legend' (1984, p. viii).

Smith notes that the success of the conference, along with its subsequent iterations in 1983 and 1984, and the combined legacy of these conferences over the subsequent forty years, can be equated to the 'perspectives' aspect of the conference title, with contributors presenting research on the subject of contemporary legend informed by a variety of approaches, backgrounds, interests, and methods. Wilhelm FH Nicolaisen noted that, when attending other conferences, it became clear who was a 'Sheffielder' and had been present at the *Perspective*s series, such was the 'considerate progress [made] on these three occasions' (Nicolaisen, 1985, p. 213). In 1984 Smith explained that contemporary legend research is 'one area of Folklore [Studies] where, after a decade of research, the most we can say is that we are now perhaps beginning to understand what the questions are' (Smith, 1984, p. x).

Contemporary legend: towards a definition

As stories shift and flex to fit their purposes and situations it becomes difficult to contain them in convenient boxes, and contemporary legend scholarship is littered with terms that are used interchangeably by some and with nuance by others.

The Dictionary of English Folklore defines legend as: 'a short traditional oral narrative about a person, place, or object that really exists, existed, or is believed to have existed; even when it recounts a supernatural or highly unusual event, this is claimed to have occurred in real life' (Simpson & Roud, 2003, p. 212). This appears simple enough, but this makes legend an undeniably broad spectrum. Gillian Bennett notes that 'what makes a legend a "legend" is the difficulty of assigning fixed characteristics to it or placing it forever and always in one category' (Bennett, 2005, p. 8). In contrast, Bennett sees myths as 'sacred narratives supporting a particular worldview and teaching the truths of a particular religion' and folktales as 'traditional secular fictions relating the (mis)adventures of fantastical protagonists' (Bennett, 2005, p. 8). Nevertheless, legends can behave similarly, combining the sacred and secular, the fantastical and the recognisably real-world. It is the latter that is key: the legend is 'always set in the world as we know it, and the stories seem to be giving information about that world' (Bennett, 2005, p. 8).

Jan Harold Brunvand published seminal popular and academic works on contemporary legend at the beginning of the 1980s, becoming 'an instant scholar-celebrity' and even appearing in a 1982 edition of *People* magazine (Brunvand, 1984, p. xi). His early works attempted to define the form and collect popular examples in the United States and beyond, and his focus on the horrific and the gory came, for some, to be representative of the genre. Brunvand's work exposed a further difficulty: whereas a legend is a 'traditional believed story', contemporary legends – or urban legends as he called them – 'are not necessarily taken as literal truth by all of their tellers all of the time' (Brunvand, 1984, p. 4). Some stories, he observed, are offered as jokes, as 'recent popular fallacies… [or] some are really more *rumour* (plotless unverified reports) than *legend*' (Brunvand, 1984, p. 4, original emphasis). Their newness – that

sense that the story has recently occurred and therefore is being told as a kind of news broadcast – is not always the case, with stories adapting and evolving consistently over time. Indeed, Rodney Dale, a collector of contemporary legends, has deemed them 'the folk tale of the present, but it differs from the folk tale in that it is of paramount importance that the hearer should believe that it is true' (Dale, 1984, p. 8).

Prior to the 1960s, folklorists defined legends as stories believed to be true 'that focused on older supernatural beliefs assumed *not* to be true by academics and indeed not shared by other "hard-headed, rational" thinking people' (Ellis, 2003, p. xiii, original emphasis). Bill Ellis notes that simply assuming that all legends are not true 'oversimplifies complex social situations in a way that impugns the credibility (and intelligence) of those who pass them on' (Ellis, 2003, pp. xiii, xiv). Truth, therefore, remains central to legend, as 'In a legend, the question of truth must be *entertained* even if that truth is ultimately rejected' (Oring, 1986, p. 125). Nicolaisen emphasises that the legends become true upon narration, as they 'narrate the past and by narrating it create it, or at least a chunk of it, and each narrated legend, however believable or incredible, creates a true chunk of the past' (Nicolaisen, 1985, p. 215).

The term 'contemporary legend', adopted by the aforementioned and highly influential *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* conferences, broadens the scope of what Noel Williams acknowledges 'is more generally referred to as "urban legend"' (Williams, 1984, p. 216), by removing the restrictions regarding setting and placing emphasis on the stories' dissemination in and relevance to the present day. Brunvand, 'following folkloristic tradition', used 'urban legend' despite acknowledging that although urban legends are often set in towns and cities, they are not exclusively so (Brunvand, 1984, p. 4).

However the high-profile usage of 'contemporary legend' as the preferred term at the Sheffield conferences did not put an end to the debate. In 1999, eminent contemporary legend scholar, Paul Smith, cited six problems he encountered when attempting to detail the definitional characteristics of 'contemporary legend' for an entry in a encyclopedia of folklore, not least the continued difficulty to define the term 'legend' per se. Here he highlights the mutability of the genre and the range of terms in common usage, many of which are linked to specific types of narratives. He also points out the lack of agreement regarding content with some seeing contemporary legends as 'just a collection of sensational blood-chilling stories, while others take a broader view as to what is embraced in the canon'. Smith identifies approximately sixty-four recurring definitional characteristics providing a multi-faceted definition of the genre (Smith, 1999, pp. 5-8).

Folklorist Bill Ellis (2007) has pointed out that many of the difficulties in defining the field were encountered 22 years before the first of the Sheffield 'Perspectives' conferences by participants in the 14th Conference of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute for Social Research, titled 'Myth in Modern Africa', held at Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in 1960. Ellis recognises strong similarities between

the themes explored at Lusaka – where similar types of popular narrative were then referred to as ‘myths’ – with those debated at Sheffield, and summarises the essential theoretical points of the Rhodes-Livingstone conference as a series of definitions of contemporary legend. This sees such narratives as a form of public discourse circulating from person to person via spoken word, popular media and public events, which exist across educational, economic and class boundaries. They form part of the larger body of thoughts, beliefs, and activities associated with a subculture, reflecting social realities or naming culturally ambiguous factors, and as such related actions can be seen as politically charged acts (Ellis, 2007, pp.10-13).

Ellis has been keen to state the evolutionary, transformative status of the contemporary legend, where academic examination infers an adaptive and evolutionary process, as legends are consistently reworked for contemporary audiences. He suggests that ‘overall, folklorists have come to see the contemporary legend as an *emergent* form best understood as a folk process, not a static form’ (Ellis, 2003, p. xiii, italics in original). Ellis suggests that stories can reveal social tensions, bring them to the surface and perhaps even motivate actions and events which may relieve such anxieties. Indeed, contemporary legends thrive on the edge of plausibility, blending fact and fiction in ways that make them compelling and believable – if not believed – to both their audience and those who share them. This plausibility is often based on the narrator’s claim that the story being told occurred to someone they knew, one or two steps removed from the teller. William H. Friedland, who first coined the term ‘urban myth’ in the paper he presented at Lusaka in 1960, includes in the same paper a popular story which is told in such a manner:

> The story is always told by someone who says that he had the story from a friend who got the story from another friend to whom the event is actually supposed to have happened. The placement of the story at this distance precludes, of course, any investigation as to its fundamental truth. (Friedland, 1960 in Ellis, 2007)

Rodney Dale created the term ‘FOAF’, or ‘friend of a friend’, to describe this phenomenon (Dale, 1984, p. 12).

For Paul Smith, contemporary legend is most useful as an umbrella term to categorise a wide range of narratives. The urban legend, for example, with its sensational focus on gore and shock factor, is one strand of contemporary legend (personal communications, 2024). Conspiracy theories, and the recent rise of fake news, a type of propaganda, might be others. Overlaps between terms and categories may also be observed.

Bill Ellis has suggested that legend telling is a fundamentally political act and suggests ‘it should be no surprise to find legends used to justify political actions by professional politicians’ (2017, pp. 5). In a 2018

paper titled '"Fake news" in the Contemporary Legend Dynamic' he demonstrates how 'notorious' false claims by three recent American presidents (used to justify Desert Storm (1990); the invasion of Iraq (2003); and anti-immigration proposals in the 2016 presidential election) can be considered legendary. Ellis notes that 'the term "fake news" as used by [Donald] Trump and his supporters is similar to the call of "urban legend" or "urban myth" in a previous generation; that is, it is used to refer to a claim that is maliciously or ignorantly circulated as truth' (Ellis, 2018, p. 400). Tom Mould, however, makes clear a necessary distinction: when news is intentionally created as fake – it has no truth in its creation – then it cannot be legend. However, when this fake news is passed on by those who believe it to be true, or to have an element of credibility, then it becomes legend (Mould, 2018a p. 414).

Themes and topics

Contemporary legends are a reflection of the uncertainties, societal fears, anxieties, moral concerns, and threats that people face in modern life offering explanations, however implausible, for the dangers of the modern world (Nicolaisen, 1990). In addressing such concerns, contemporary legends can serve as cautionary tales, reinforcing social norms and warning against behaviours perceived as dangerous or transgressive.

'The Phantom' or 'Vanishing Hitchhiker' is one of the best known and most frequently documented contemporary legends (Bennett, 1985), a narrative exploring themes of death, loss, and unresolved trauma. The story involves a driver picking up a hitchhiker, often a young woman, who mysteriously disappears during the journey and leaves behind a personal item. On the driver's attempt to return the belongings, they learn that the hitchhiker is the ghost of someone who died in a car accident many years before. Different variants of this story are found across the world, adapted to local circumstances and 'culturally variable' (Bennett, 1984, p. 48), meaning that the resonance of the legend also varies, from a simple thrill of ghostly discovery through to, in the Mormon community for instance, one of deeply religious significance.

Legends can also arise and spread quickly, causing real panic and concern before disappearing almost as quickly as they arose. For example, during December 2004, reports surfaced of a series of vampire attacks across Birmingham, UK. A man had been bitten while walking in the Ward End area of the city on 19 December and those who came to his aid were also attacked (Jones, 2005). Rumours spread that a vampire was on the loose, leading to similar reports across the predominantly South Asian communities of Saltley, Small Heath and Alum Rock. The attacker was reported to be a Somali in his 20s and to have red eyes, the ability to turn invisible, and to have caught rabies from a dog (Bentley, 2014). Residents contacted the police, the local press and schools to voice their concerns. The story was covered by the *Birmingham Evening Mail* who sent out a reporter armed with a crucifix and cloves of garlic (Press Gazette, 2005) before being picked up by the national press including *The Guardian*, *Sky News* and the BBC. Sightings continued until mid-January when the police finally revealed that they had

no evidence of any attacks, dismissing the whole incident as an ‘urban myth’ which had spiralled out of control (Jones, 2005).

Contemporary legends also fulfil emotional and psychological needs, addressing ‘human fears and ambitions and dreams and anxieties, often subconscious or only inarticulately brought to the surface of consciousness’ (Nicolaisen, 1985, p. 214), allowing individuals to process their anxieties in a controlled manner. This explains the ability of legends to change and evolve with each retelling, adapting to local culture, context, or current events. For example, since the 1970s, American Sociologist, Joel Best, has been documenting the Halloween candy legend, which warns that strangers might tamper with Halloween treats, inserting razor blades, poison, or drugs (Best, 2023). Fears about dangerous Halloween candy has resulted in new legislation being passed, candy inspections by individuals and civic agencies such as schools and moves towards a ban of trick-or-treating in particular communities (Best, 1985, p. 488). It can be inferred that this legend reflects parental anxieties about child safety in a world where the community can no longer be implicitly trusted. And though the legend reappears each October, with the press carrying related reports, Best asserts ‘there are no reliable official statistics on Halloween sadism’, with very few evidenced examples (Best & Horiuchi, 1985, p. 489). Sylvia Grider notes that the eight-year-old boy who apparently died from eating Halloween candy laced with cyanide in 1974 was later found to have been poisoned by his own father, a perpetrator ‘unique among American criminals, for he is the only person ever convicted of acting out an “urban legend” and carrying it to the ultimate conclusion – murder’ (Grider, 1984, p. 128). ‘Like collective hysteria and organized claims-making efforts,’ Best and Horuchi write, ‘urban legends are a product of social strain and of the social organization of the response to that strain’ (Best, 1985, p. 489).

Contemporary legend transmission and the impact of technology

Although the study of contemporary legends can be viewed as relatively recent, scholars have traced certain legends back through generations, with their components adapting accordingly. Bennett, for instance, notes that the legend of the ‘The Phantom Hitchhiker’ has been collected featuring horse and cart (Bennett, 1984, p. 49). But the shift from traditional to digital transmission of contemporary legends has marked a significant evolution in how these stories are shared, adapted, and sustained within society.

Firstly, the development and popularity of print media and the growth of mass communication during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries provided a wider audience with which a legend could flourish. Jan Harold Brunvand describes how the legend most commonly known as ‘The Choking Doberman’, where an otherwise healthy dog is taken to the vet and human fingers are discovered lodged in its throat, has been taken up and perpetuated by the media. Brunvand notes that a 1981 report in Phoenix, Arizona’s *New Times*, stating, crucially, that the paper was unable to locate the identity of the dog’s owner, was followed by a similar story by a columnist in the *Atlanta Journal* in the same week. In the

following months, Brunvand documents the spread of similar reports in newspapers and on radio programmes in Nebraska, Iowa, Oregon, New York, Florida, California, and many more states, even crossing the border in Canada, with investigations into the identity and whereabouts of the dog owner seemingly coming to nothing (Brunvand, 1984). Specialist radio and television dramatisations and documentaries, such as the *Unsolved Mysteries* series, have brought stories to life in new forms and helped to generate further interest.

However, the power of the internet, specifically the rise of email in the late 1990s and social media in the late 2000s significantly accelerated the dissemination, extended the reach, and increased the impact of contemporary legends, enabling them to reach a global audience in a matter of hours or even minutes.

The ease with which emails are created, sent, received, and archived, across distance and time zone, has made the form a primary method of communication for contemporary legends – and a handy, economical, and highly effective way in which to perpetuate them (Kibby, 2005). In her study of 'email forwardables', the term given to virus alerts, chain letters and various stories couched as warnings, petitions or requests for help, all with a directive to "Please forward" (Kibby, 2005, p. 774), Marjorie Kibby observes that, aside from virus alerts, email 'forwardables' have pre-internet counterparts, but the benefits, features and etiquette of email – such as the ability to forward on an email wholesale to an entire address book, without the accountability of composing an original email – led to a greater propulsion to participate. Chain emails, like their chain letter predecessors, invite a recipient to forward the email to their own networks to bring about good luck, avoid bad luck or even to receive rewards such as cash, '[exploiting] the irrational wishes and fears of recipients, threatening calamity and promising rewards that seem credible' (Kibby, 2005, p. 778). Kibby notes that the majority of email forwardables can be considered '"scarelore", dire warnings that reflect the fears and obsessions of contemporary society', citing examples such as waterproof sunscreen causing child blindness and HIV-infected needles pricking the fingers of those retrieving coins from a payphone (Kibby, 2005, p. 781). The personal tone of such forwardables lends credibility to the stories they contain and helps them proliferate across diverse demographics. Nevertheless, on close analysis, they are almost always anonymous and lack clear or traceable sources.

The online marketing and promotion of the film *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999) was one of the first to fully utilise the internet as a vehicle for storytelling and myth-making, leveraging the nascent power of the platform to create a viral campaign that blurred the lines between reality and fiction, demonstrating how contemporary legends could be propagated online. A dedicated website (blairwitch.com) was launched months before the film's release, designed to look like an amateur, fan-created page devoted to the supposed 'real' events surrounding the Blair Witch legend. The site featured fake police reports, interviews, news articles, and the constructed backstory of the Blair Witch, all presented as genuine, historical documents. The marketing strategy effectively created an online contemporary legend presenting the Blair Witch as a genuine piece of folklore.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of websites and online forums specifically dedicated to cataloguing and discussing contemporary legends. These forums, often organised around specific interests or topics, provided a platform for users to share and discuss legends. Snopes.com, launched in 1994, plays a dual role by debunking legends through provision of factual information while at the same time acting as repositories where legends can be preserved and accessed by a wider audience. Such websites and forums have become key nodes in the transmission of contemporary digital folklore, enabling legends to be rediscovered and reborn long after their initial spread. The anonymity of online communication allows users to share and embellish tales without the need for verification or accountability. Successful online legends can then transfer to the mainstream media drawing in an even wider audience thus prolonging their power and influence.

Snopes.com reports on the email chain that began circulating in the US in the early 1990s to warn recipients about the tourists who woke, dazed and in unfamiliar environments, in bathtubs of ice to find themselves missing a kidney. The website tracks the variants of the legend through time, following its trail through various US cities, and dubs the legend as ‘false’, but offers suggestions of what may have given rise to the legend at that particular time including an episode of the NBC TV drama *Law and Order*, and news stories about the illegal sale of organs in India and Turkey (Mikkelson, 2001). The website also indicates why the legend may have caught the imagination of so many readers and participants in the chain, saying:

> As many urban legends do, this one plays upon our fears. Fear of travelling to distant cities and thus being out of our element. Fear of being ill and desperate. And, most of all, fear of becoming the victim of random crime. We picture that man waking up in a bathtub filled with ice, and we see ourselves in his place. It's not a nice picture (Mikkelson, 2001).

More recently, internet memes have come to play a crucial role in transforming and spreading contemporary legends. Memes draw on shared cultural references, often borrowed from television and film, making them relatable to a broad audience. They are able to distil complex narratives into easily digestible and visually appealing formats, allowing the core message to be communicated quickly and nimbly, by adapting to cultural milieux. They also thrive on the engagement and participation of users, who often add their own variations, further spreading and transforming the original legend. By combining images, humour, and a simplified message with the power of social networks, memes not only create and perpetuate legends but also adapt them to fit modern contexts, making them more memorable, relatable and engaging for contemporary audiences.

Slender Man is a good example of this, having originated on an internet forum in July 2009 as a response to a Photoshop challenge to ‘create paranormal images’ (Gerogerigegege, 2009). Two black and white photographs of young people, both apparently taken by photographers who were missing or dead, were posted by forum member ‘Victor Surge’. One of these included a strange blurry figure in the

background accompanied by a caption referring to the ‘Slender Man’ and the disappearance of 14 children. Variants of the figure, along with related explanatory texts, quickly proliferated through online forums and Slender Man was born (Dagnall & Drinkwater, 2017). Though the creation of Slender Man is attributed to one author, the character's simple design – a tall shadowy figure, in suit and tie, and the absence of facial features – became easy to replicate and adapt (Boyer, 2015). The adaptability of the Slender Man myth allowed it to incorporate elements from horror fiction, video games, and user-generated content, resulting in a legend that resonated deeply with internet culture. As Tina Boyer observes: ‘Because of the vagueness of the creature, the blurred characteristics, the setting and the victims, the monster sparked enough interest for other people to create multiple stories, which ensured certain longevity’ (Boyer, 2015, p. 246). Slender Man is what Andrew Peck calls ‘a crowd-sourced monster’ (Peck, 2015, p. 334), who quickly evolved into a full-fledged contemporary legend that has spawned numerous stories, fan art and films, and even inspired a violent crime where two twelve-year-old girls in Wisconsin, USA, lured a friend to woodland and stabbed her to allegedly appease Slender Man (Associated Press, 2018).

The recent rise of fake news and its relationship with contemporary legend has attracted the interest of folklorists with conferences, journal articles and academic publications on the topic. Tom Mould, writing in the introduction to a special issue of *American Folklore* on Fake News, suggests folklorists are ‘well positioned to study’ the subject (2018b). Indeed, much fake news, from the ‘Euromyths’ which helped lubricate the Brexit campaign in the UK, to the unfounded but persistent stories that President Obama was born in Kenya, and more recent narratives used to justify action in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, whilst perhaps originally fabricated, spreads as a form of contemporary legend believed as true by those who both receive and share it. Bill Ellis argues that in response to the spread of fake news, folklorists should have the courage to use their intellectual resources to ‘study the influence and significance of folklore wherever we find it’ (Eills, 2018, pp 339).

In conclusion

Contemporary legends are more than just entertaining stories; they are a vital part of contemporary culture. They originate from societal fears and are spread through a combination of believability, emotional impact, and the power of social networks. These legends address contemporary concerns by providing explanations for the inexplicable and by reinforcing social norms. Psychologically, they allow individuals to process and manage their fears, serving as both a mirror and a coping mechanism for the complexities of modern life. They can also be manipulated in order to sell products, or exploited to spread propaganda and misinformation, in extreme cases even threatening democracy through their reach and influence.

The digital transmission of contemporary legends fundamentally altered how such stories evolved. As Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi observed in 1983, ‘legends proliferate and disseminate with

increasing speed and over wider space, exercising more direct influence on the society that called them into existence' (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 5). Furthermore, the shift to digital transmission has made contemporary legends more resilient. Unlike oral traditions that can fade over time, digital records ensure that these stories remain accessible and can be revived or adapted by new generations, held in easy-to-access online repositories where they can be rediscovered and reborn.

But while we may today source and perpetuate our legends predominantly online, legends still have their place in the analogue, physical world, from ostensive acts inspired by them to legend-tripping to visit related sites. Ostension, borrowed from semiotics, is the term Dégh and Vázsonyi give to the notion of a legend becoming shown through action, rather than told through storytelling. This might mean the acting out, behaving in a particular manner or changing behaviour as the result of a legend, citing the Halloween candy legend as a paradigm example: the belief in Halloween sadism means that, at the time of writing in the early 1980s, 'It seems that both adults and children are now appropriately scared into giving up trick-or-treating, the characteristic episode of the ritual cycle of Halloween' (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 11). Related to this is the legend-trip, which involves 'travelling to a specific location attached to a legend in the hopes of witnessing some kind of phenomena *as if in the legend itself*', favoured, as Koven observes, by young people in particular (Koven, p. 186, emphasis in original). A glimpse of the monster at Loch Ness or visiting Pendle, as Hannah Singleton does later in this issue, might be famous UK examples.

This special issue of *Revenant*

We are delighted to present this special issue of *Revenant* in which we offer a snapshot of papers and creative responses that explore aspects of folklore and contemporary legend today. The variety inevitably demonstrates the breadth and variability of contemporary legend scholarship.

Firstly, John Quinn's 'Netflix, Websleuths and the Contemporary Urban Legend' examines how streaming media frames true crime contemporary legends as a 'form of participatory infotainment'. Websleuthing is the practice of individual or collective investigation using the internet in all its many facets and is perhaps best known for the community hunting of suspected paedophiles. Quinn considers how viewers of the Netflix true crime series, *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (2021), are invited to 'create and critique the processes of contemporary legend construction', an unusual approach to both true crime and the representation of contemporary legend in television: the criminal justice system has concluded the case at the heart of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, there are no perpetrators to be investigated or tracked down, but the series employs 'the aesthetics of the modern legend to not only increase the entertainment value of the tragedy depicted but also challenge the audience'.

Chia-Cheng Hsu's article also examines television but in the context of how contemporary legend is communicated in drama, specifically in HBO Asia's first Chinese-language original series, *The Teenage Psychic* (2017). The discussion considers the role of domestic film productions in the promotion of

Taiwanese culture and folklore across different countries (it has been aired in 23 territories) within settings from Taoist temples to high school campuses, and evaluates the effectiveness of the balance between universal themes (the life and loves of a teenage girl) and nuanced Taiwanese markers of folklore that may not have been previously encountered by audiences in other nations. Its approach, more bildungsroman than supernatural fantasy or horror, claims both admirers and detractors and the author analyses how these critiques have been formulated, reflecting on scenes from the series and Taiwanese culture alike.

Andrew Robinson's article, 'A Postcard from Lover's Leap', moves discussion away from the media and into the physical landscape of a location long known as Lover's Leap in the county of Derbyshire in the UK. Robinson's work introduces the site, previously a popular destination for tourists but now largely unkempt and forgotten, and offers a discussion of the legend located there and its representation in material culture. This Lover's Leap legend differs from many similarly named legends elsewhere in the U.K. and beyond because the lovers in question are eloping runaways, rather than the victims of a fall to their deaths. Robinson examines the historical evidence for the legend's veracity, discusses the ability of landowners to turn their hand to legend proliferation in order to satisfy the curiosity of prospective tourists, and charts the effects of the romantic on the place and its legend-making.

Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby's 'The Cave Conspiracy' takes us into Kentucky's extensive cave system and longstanding folk traditions of fairy folk entwined with the Hopkinsville Goblins and the Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, legends and the legends of Satanic cults, in the context of how these are presented in an online documentary series, *Hellier* (2019). The paranormal researchers behind the series draw on a range of resources and approaches in their investigation into the reports of goblins, 'small humanoid creatures [emerging] from an abandoned mine' that allegedly create havoc above ground, and Rouhier-Willoughby interrogates how these narratives are cast, told and retold for different mediums. Crucially, Rouhier-Willoughby looks at the knotty intersection of contemporary legend and conspiracy theory, and finds examples of 'quasi-ostension', where 'the interpretation of puzzling events connected to a legend according to one's existing belief system'.

Daniel Compora's discussion takes us to another part of the United States to consider 'Michigan's Monsters'. Compora presents several fascinating examples of legends about 'hybridized, humanoid creatures…from deformed children to Bigfoot's brethren', including 'Dog Lady' and hoax legends such as the 'Michigan Dog Man', all seeming to emanate from an idea which is 'either close to human, or once previously human'. Compora locates the context for these legends and includes fascinating excerpts of investigative and qualitative research with reporters and Michigan residents over three decades, reflecting upon his own experiences of the legends when growing up in the state.

David Clarke's article, 'Tears for Fears: The Curse of the Crying Boy', moves us to legends linked to objects and folk art in his discussion of mass-produced prints, popular in the 1970s with working-class

families. Clarke, a journalist and folklorist, looks at how journalism helped create and perpetuate contemporary legends linked with the ‘cursed’ artwork, specifically how the prints, often attributed to ‘Bragolin’, were frequently blamed for house fires. The legend, living on in newspapers in the 1980s, told of homes smouldering and families left homeless, while the crying boy portraits remained remarkably intact. Clarke applies Paul Smith’s framework regarding the six ways in which news titles appear to perpetuate contemporary legends to the phenomenon and charts how the curse, initially confined to South Yorkshire, UK, began to travel to other parts of the country once national newspapers carried the story.

Remaining within the UK, Hannah Singleton’s ‘On the Hill’ contemplates responses to the history of the Pendle Witches and related dark tourism to Pendle in the English county of Lancashire, relating directly to the folk mythology of the region. A researcher in Art and Design, Singleton’s gaze is firmly in the visual aspects of the legend, appraising its replication, representation and perpetuity in tourist infrastructure, street furniture, artworks, souvenirs and other ephemera that tourists may encounter across the region. This, Singleton argues, ties the narrative firmly to the landscape, meaning that to understand and to appreciate the landscape is to acknowledge the legend, becoming an ‘embodied landscape’.

In our creative section, we present a series of four poems by Sandy Feinstein, inspired by travelling in Syria, considering its long, rich cultural history, legendary leaders and landscapes. The poems are connected as ‘Legends collapsed into one another’. Sophie Parkes-Nield submits an engaging short story which centres on the (fictitious but plausible) personal experience of a teenage girl with her peers in relation to the notorious ‘Bloody Mary’ legend. Our creative section concludes with a series of poems by Carolyn Waudby, two of which are inspired by the industrial and urban landscapes and legends surrounding the River Don in the city of Sheffield in the UK.

The reviews we chose to include, though on disparate subject matter including maps and films in addition to books, not only reflect the contemporary, transmedia range of the topics of the articles featured in this issue (and the varied research interests of the members of the Centre for Contemporary Legend), but also the evolving, dynamic nature of contemporary legend itself across many different platforms.

We hope you find the submissions throughout this issue fascinating, thought-provoking – and perhaps even a little spooky. We are confident that here we are providing a space for contemporary legend scholarship to expand, revisiting elements of history, place and legend whilst maintaining an outward, forward-looking perspective across continents and into the digital age. This collection aims to reflect upon how the modern world engages with the past, how legends are represented and reinterpreted in different periods and forms of media whilst creating its own, new legendary cycles for future generations.

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