

THE CAVE CONSPIRACY: CONTEMPORARY LEGEND IN *HELLIER*

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Introduction

The YouTube¹ documentary series *Hellier* (2019) tracks the evidence for claims about unusual humanoid creatures in Kentucky's extensive cave system. A group of paranormal researchers first investigates 'goblin' sightings in the small town of Hellier in Eastern Kentucky. Their investigation over the course of two seasons (totaling 15 episodes) leads them from Eastern Kentucky to Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Ultimately, they connect their findings with two well-known legend cycles of the 20th century: the Hopkinsville Goblins (*Kentucky New Era* 1955) and the Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia (Clarke 2022) and, naturally, to the writings of John Keel, author of *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975). This series exemplifies the way that legends not only move beyond their regions, but how these disparate cycles may be combined into a coherent narrative about the paranormal in the southeastern United States. It illustrates how people tell and share stories today. *Hellier* draws upon a wide range of sources to make its case, including published literature and/or Internet sites on Wicca, Greek mythology, Jungian psychology, geology, cryptids, and UFOlogy. Also in the mix are news reports, e-mails (some from mysterious anonymous sources), Internet fora, and a museum of the paranormal. The creators center the final three episodes on the town of Somerset, which the researchers claim is the epicenter of the 'high strangeness' in the Kentucky underground. Thus, while the series is named for the Eastern Kentucky town of Hellier (located in Pike County, population just over 2000) where the investigation began in 2017, Somerset plays a more significant role in the story overall.

Somerset, population just under 12,000 (World Population Review, 2025), is the county seat of Pulaski County, Kentucky. It sits on the Pennyroyal (or Pennyryle) Plateau, an

area of rolling hills underlain by the longest cave system in the world (Gaffney 2021). The caves are necessarily an inherent feature of life in this part of Kentucky, tied to the coal economy as well as to tourism. They also provoke concerns about the instability of the location itself. Locals say that ‘one good earthquake would destroy the city,’ and sinkholes in sidewalks and roads are a fact of life there (Bodie 2020). In addition, Somerset sits at the center of a magnetic field that NASA researchers (Johnson-Groh and Merzdorf 2020) call the South Atlantic anomaly, a field powerful enough to affect orbiting satellites. The geologists Mayhew, *et al* conclude that this ‘very magnetic source’ emanates from the Pennyroyal and refer to it as the Kentucky Anomaly (1985). Leaving aside the region’s geology, caves in the European tradition, as folklorists have long documented, are often associated with supernatural legends about the fairy folk, trolls, goblins, and the like. They thus function as an entrance to a supernatural otherworld of sorts (Virgolet 2015; Newman and Wilson 1952). In the Somerset legend cycle, as told by many locals at least, the forces in caves that threaten the local populace represent another sort of spiritual danger entirely: satanic cults.

The rumors and legends about cults worshipping in the caves in and around Somerset are part of persistent and well-developed local oral tradition. These cults are said to be guilty of human sacrifice and sexual abuse of children. Narrators assert that powerful cult members (doctors, lawyers, politicians, and police) protect it from discovery and themselves from prosecution for their crimes (Bodie 2020). Locals often blame the cult for a gruesome murder that occurred in July 1994 (Bodie 2020). Linda Gibson, 24, and her younger half-brother Cody Garrett, age 4, went missing for four days; their bodies were found near the entrance to a cave, now closed to the public, on Rush Branch Road outside of Somerset (Fulton 2019). The police determined that the bodies had been killed elsewhere and dumped on this spot. The case remains unsolved over 25 years later. Linda’s brother reported that she had been worried for months that someone was going to ‘hurt her,’ but she would not reveal the name of the person out of fear of retaliation (Fulton 2019).

The conspiracy rumors were exacerbated when the sheriff in charge of the case, Sam Catron, was killed by a sniper's bullet in 2002 while running for reelection during his 17th year in office (Gibson 2002). His death at the hands of political rivals who had hired the assassin fed the flames of a belief in a cabal of powerful Pulaski County residents who were willing to stop at nothing to keep their nefarious deeds under wraps. Somerset residents concluded that Catron had new evidence in the case and was about to arrest the perpetrators, and that fact, rather than political ambition, was the reason for his murder (personal communication).

The *Hellier* documentarians entered this environment without any real conception of the existence of local legends they would encounter either in Hellier or Somerset. However, they do learn of them and, in some cases, these materials lend support for their claims and indeed their subsequent actions. We will now turn to *Hellier* and how it creates the case for the existence of mysterious creatures in the caves of Kentucky. This article will examine how this contemporary narrative structure forms, is further amplified by viewers of the series, and is thus fostered by the Internet.

***Hellier*: The Children of Pan**

Hellier is the brainchild of four paranormal researchers. Cincinnati-based Greg and Dana Newkirk, founders of the website Planet Weird (<https://weirdhq.com/>) and managers of a travelling paranormal exhibit, received a compelling email from Doctor David Christie in Hellier, Kentucky. He writes that small humanoid creatures were emerging from an abandoned mine and tormenting his family. To investigate these claims, the Newkirks joined forces with Karl Pfeiffer and Connor Randall, two Colorado ghost hunters known for their YouTube series *Spirits of the Stanley* (2016). In episode 6 of *Hellier* (the beginning of the second season), Tyler Strand, an occult researcher and make-up/special effects artist from Minnesota, joins the team. The Newkirks have developed a pantheistic approach, to borrow a term from religious studies, to what are traditionally seen as separate worlds in the

paranormal community. As Greg Newkirk notes in *Hellier* episode 1 (2019), he and Dana draw on a 'weird unifying theory' that brings into conversation often isolated communities of paranormal researchers (ghost hunters, UFOlogists, cryptid hunters, neopagans and folklorists).² As a result, they rely on a wide range of sources in their investigation. As noted above, John Keel's work researching Mothman and other paranormal phenomena plays an important role in their search for creatures in Kentucky caves, particularly the collection *Flying Saucer to the Center of Your Mind* (Colvin 2013). Other UFO/paranormal researchers (Allen H. Greenfield (1994), John E.L. Tenney (2020), George P. Hansen (2001), Eric Norman (1969), Barton M. Nunelly (2011), and Aleister Crowley (1976) also figure in their investigation. While the paranormal community is a prime driver for their conclusions, they also draw on Wiccan practices and writings (largely from the Internet³ and Dana's knowledge as a practicing witch; no particular sources are mentioned in the series) as well as folklore studies, including Yioutsos (2018) and Raglan (1939). They cite information about regional geology/cave systems (also largely from the Internet, from their comments) as well as blogs by cavers about the Kentucky cave system and news reports about deaths in caves.

In addition, two texts play a significant role in the development of their narrative about the Kentucky underground and merit particular discussion here: Brandon's *The Rebirth of Pan* (1983) and Moore's *The Archetype of Initiation* (2001). In the former, the author, an adherent of the Fortean movement, argues for the existence of a Pan cult in North America. According to Greg Newkirk, in episode 13, Brandon lays out the argument that the three-toed footprint found in caves in Ohio, and elsewhere in North America, is an indicator of the worship of Pan in that territory at some point in its prehistory. Brandon's comments on the footprint are particularly relevant for the *Hellier* researchers, since they had received images from the doctor in *Hellier* of three-toed tracks made by the creatures (episode 1). Later, in episode 3, they obtain pictures from a local teacher of a mysterious, purportedly ancient (according to university researchers) three-toed footprint in a cave in the region. Brandon's Fortean credentials lend particular credence to his claims for these

investigators. Like the *Hellier* team itself, Brandon relies on a combination of archeology, mythology, magical practices, UFOology and cryptid sightings to make his argument. He argues that, despite Pan's supposed death, the Earth 'once again...contains a great collective identity, a living thing with an awareness and will of its own' (1983: 2).⁴ He chooses Pan not to refer necessarily to the Greek goat god but rather because the name means All⁵ and best reflects the nature of this entity. This claim that Pan has been reborn (and evidence of his presence can be found in North America) is the first step in a chain that relates the creatures in the caves of Kentucky to the worship of the nature god.

In episode 13, Greg Newkirk explores the faces of Pan in the world's religions with the team. He asserts that Pan (in the sense of Bradford's entity 'All') occurs in Egyptian, Christian, Islamic, Greco-Roman, and Druidic mythologies as well as in European witchcraft:

And then people stopped paying attention to Pan. Pan's actually the only Greek God that ever died. The Green Man, Lord of Vegetation, Growth, Rebirth [...] those are all tied in with Pan. So, we start to see Pan everywhere in all these different religions over and over and over [...] There's an entity, we can call it Pan [...] The name changes, the mask changes all the time. But there's rarely as consistent an archetypal character that exists throughout history, has to do with being a trickster, shows up in UFOlogy cases, shows up in paganism, shows up in Christianity, all these different places as this horned entity that's Pan. It all really comes back to Pan.

He notes also that Crowley invoked Pan in order to speak to the AIWAS, the mythic entities that supposedly dictated *The Book of the Law* to him. The *Hellier* researchers associate Pan with the Green Man, although there is no actual cultural or historical connection between them. Jungian psychology is the key to understanding Brandon's assertion that the same figure exists in vastly different contexts and purportedly serves the same purpose for all peoples, regardless of their culture. The *Hellier* researchers embrace the notion of the archetype⁶, as developed by Carl Jung (1959) and exploited by Joseph Campbell (1949, 1959) in his works. Jung defines the archetype as a "symbolic image" that relies on "primitive" motifs that lie in the collective unconscious of the human mind (1964: 32, 41-42, 58). They are not bound to a particular culture but are reproduced by humans across the globe in dreams and fantasies. Thus, Pan and the Green Man are quite different figures to a

folklorist, but from the perspective of Jungian archetypes they may be manifestations of an identical symbol—the trickster in the form of a nature deity.

If Brandon lays the first brick in the narrative structure, Moore's work cements it in place (2001). Drawing from his arguments about initiation and Jungian psychology, the filmmakers conclude that Pan (the neglected god of Brandon's work) demands worship and that they are being initiated as his priests. This conclusion was influenced by their conversations with Allen Greenfield (episode 12) and John Tenney (episode 15), who both assert they are involved in a rite of initiation; Greenfield particularly emphasizes Campbell's hero's journey (1949), while Tenney focuses more on the occult rituals of Aleister Crowley, concluding that they are being asked to perform a ritual.⁷ They are meant, therefore, to conduct an invocation of Pan (aka the Green Man) in a cave in Somerset. Moore draws on Victor Turner's theories of liminality during the process of ritual (1969). The concept of marginality and liminality attracts the attention of the *Hellier* group and plays a key role in their understanding of why and where certain people have paranormal encounters (as discussed in more detail below).

This evidence culled from disparate sources leads them to the conclusion that the extensive cave system beneath Kentucky has served as a passageway across the Pennyroyal region (and up into West Virginia, as Mothman demonstrates) for these mysterious entities. The pathway is located along the 37th Parallel, said to be the site of most UFO activity across the globe (Mezrich 2017), another point of confirmation for the theory. According to Greg Newkirk in episode 1, the earliest documented manifestation of these creatures began in 1955 during the Kelly-Hopkinsville Goblins encounter. As reported in the Hopkinsville newspaper, *The Kentucky New Era*, on the day after the incident, a local family claimed that their farm had been invaded by a spaceship carrying a dozen four-foot-tall aliens with big heads and long arms. The creatures were unaffected by shotgun fire and, after several hours of terrorizing the family, they apparently simply melted away into the dark (*Kentucky New Era* 1955). Two family members reported the alien invasion to the police, but the officers found no physical evidence of the aliens during their investigation. The

encounter with these creatures drew national attention at the time and holds a hallowed place among UFOlogists.

The term goblins, of course, as a description of space aliens would seem to be a misnomer, but it has been commonly used in media and popular culture to refer to the Hopkinsville creatures for decades. In recent years, in the Hopkinsville area itself, the invaders have seemingly been reframed more in keeping with their subterranean namesakes than space aliens. For example, a former student in my Introduction to Folklore and Mythology course collected a narrative from a Hopkinsville native in 2014. It describes how goblin-like creatures have been emerging from caves and abandoned mines and menacing local farmers and their livestock all around Hopkinsville and Christian County (Oldfather 2014). This description returns us to the oral tradition, of course, and stories about fey folk living beneath our feet. The aliens then seemingly have been transformed (or have evolved) into an earth-dwelling creature in the local oral tradition. Interestingly, the *Hellier* team, despite not being aware of this local variant of the legend, makes a similar conclusion. If sightings of mysterious beings in the caves (from Hopkinsville in the west through Somerset and into Hellier in the east) are connected to Pan/Green Man, then it follows, in their estimation, that the creatures are associated with the fey as well.⁸ Dana Newkirk describes how they intend to create an altar for the fey near the Somerset cabin they have rented to let them ‘know that we’re here, we want to communicate [...] respectfully [...] If you’re comfortable, if you want to come hang out with us [...] this is our hub’ (Episode 13).

We can make a few preliminary conclusions about how people tell and structure narrative today at this point. As Bodner *et al.* point out in their study of contemporary conspiracy theories, these narratives draw on two kinds of ‘knowledge authority...scientific or other mainstream academic experience and personal experience...’ (2021: 14). While it may not be appropriate to consider *Hellier* a conspiracy theory (although it does refer to a possible governmental/military cover up at various points), the types of ‘knowledge authority’ for the narrative they create are remarkably similar to those for conspiracies. In

addition, Bodner *et al.* mention that the supernatural elements in conspiracy theories may be present but are often ‘hidden behind a curtain of mundane human agents and their actions’ (*ibid.*: 15). We see a similar pattern in *Hellier*, where the people providing information reveal the hidden paranormal forces at work behind the scenes. The researchers interpret these informants either as people ‘in the know’, with access to secret information (and thus referred to by pseudonyms to conceal their identity), or as mere pawns who got caught up in the supernatural happenings and provide eyewitness testimony.

Most importantly, in assessing how contemporary narratives (whether conspiracy theories or paranormal investigations) are created and spread, the search for corroboration in a wide variety of sources is key. The *Hellier* investigators emphasize that they do not take the word of witnesses at face value but must ‘do their research.’ As we have seen, they are assiduous about finding evidence and support for the claims of personal knowledge conveyed by others, and, indeed, for their own eerie experiences in caves during filming. What is striking, however, (aside from the remarkable disregard for the quality and reliability of their sources) is that their conclusions are a classic example of quasi-ostension (Ellis 1989:208). Quasi-ostension is the interpretation of puzzling events connected to a legend according to one’s existing belief system. Many might dismiss sightings of these humanoid creatures as animals, dreams, hallucinations, or indeed as hoaxes. However, the researchers assume they are linked to the paranormal because of their knowledge about (and belief in) the Hopkinsville goblins and Mothman. Indeed, the evidence from these sources also provides justification for a commitment to their pantheistic approach to the paranormal.

Their encounters on the ground in *Hellier* and Somerset are no exception in this respect. In their visits to *Hellier* (episodes 2-5) and Somerset (episodes 13-15), they are committed to finding narrative evidence from local residents, just as any folklorist would be. Any type of ‘high strangeness’ lends credence to the potential for goblins in the caves. For example, in *Hellier* episodes 1 and 2, people are eager to tell them about strange encounters with UFOs, Bigfoot and odd footprints on their property. No one knows anything

about goblins in caves, though, or, unusually in such a small town, about the doctor who sent them information about the sightings on his farm; although one local man does report that ‘A lot of weird stuff goes on here [...] They used to say that you could hear of a nighttime, there was a little cave or something, you could always hear a baby crying or something up there’ (episode 2). This classic folk motif is enough to convince the team that the caves have a supernatural presence worthy of investigation. They go into the caves to see for themselves in episode 5 and have their own strange experience. As they are deep inside a rural cave attempting to communicate with these entities, they hear the beep of an electronic car door lock. Upon their return to Cincinnati (also in episode 5), Randall is reading a piece by John Keel on the characteristics of paranormal encounters, in which Keel states that those with paranormal encounters often hear two sounds in particular: ‘the sounds of a baby crying and the sounds of an unseen car door slamming’ (Colvin 2013). While they experienced neither of these sounds directly, Randall and the rest of the team conclude that the evidence from locals about a baby’s cry and the lock beep support the claim that Hellier and its caves harbor uncanny forces. In their view, the ‘updated’ version of a car door slamming is the sound of an electronic car lock. This explanation is a classic example of quasi-ostension and brings us to the question of how the team interprets local (oral) legend and decides whether to incorporate it as evidence or reject it as unimportant.

Local Legends, Local Reactions

Both Hellier and Somerset have native legend traditions that the team documents from local residents. The Appalachian Mountains, where Hellier is located, are remote and wild, an area known for harboring ‘the unexplained.’ Legend collectors have documented many cryptids in the Eastern Kentucky mountains (Rouhier-Willoughby 2021). They range from the natural (black panthers) to more supernatural (human/animal hybrids, e.g., human with goat, horse, or cougar). The research team is undaunted by the lack of corroboration about doctors or goblins, since, as discussed above, any examples of strange phenomena are evidence that they are on the right track in their investigation. In the case of Christie, they

assume that he was using a pseudonym to protect his reputation from being tarnished by his supernatural encounters. Nevertheless, it seems odd that a local doctor that had mysteriously disappeared would be known by patients in a town of only 2000 residents.

Somerset's legend cycle presents a greater challenge for these paranormal researchers. Satanists accused of murder and child abuse do not conform to their expectations for 'high strangeness.' Cults run by town notables are all too human and potentially much more dangerous than mysterious creatures. They first learn of the Somerset legends in an email from a Somerset resident named Amy (episode 9). In her message, she uses terms that correspond to those cited by one of Greenfield's informants about alien encounters, Terry Wriste, namely UFO-nauts and SLUF.⁹ Like Christie, she makes reference to small creatures in the caves, but also to the Green Man, all in the context of the Somerset Satanist cult (which she also refers to a 'pagan Wiccan cult'). Amy warns them that her life is now in danger since she has witnessed cult activity and discovered their secret entrance to the caves through a cabin in the woods. She also makes accusations of a connection between the cult and the CIA and US military.

By the time the team arrives in Somerset in episode 13, Amy has been jailed. They arrange a video call with her from the prison. She claims that she has been accused of trumped-up charges because she possessed (and shared) damaging information about the cult. This encounter spooks the team, particularly Randall, who is ready to give up the investigation. Their concerns are exacerbated by two other locals, Kyle Kadel, owner of the International Paranormal Museum in Somerset, and Nathan Isaac, creator of The Penny Royal podcast, which is dedicated to paranormal activity in the region. Kadel echoes Hellier residents by describing Somerset as 'a weird place' that has 'gotten weirder' as he has aged (episode 13). He mentions examples such as 'ghost stories, Bigfoot sightings, a flying stingray in 2015, a ghost train, a church with gospel singings in middle of night, secret cults. It's the perfect place for a hub of weird things' (episode 13). He mentions the conspiracy theories that abound about this cult. However, he is reluctant to share any information about the rumors about them beyond saying local people think that it is to blame for the 1994

murder of Linda Gibson and her brother. However, he recommends that they speak to Isaac, who is more forthcoming about the cults.

Isaac also connects the murder of Linda Gibson and her brother to cult activity, saying they were witnesses who had to be silenced. He gives another example of a woman who was dating a local doctor, a member of the cult, who took her to orgies, including those with children. She became uncomfortable and broke up with the man. In response, the powers that be tried to frame her for drug possession by planting methamphetamines in her house (she had no history of drug use). When she beat the charges, she was a victim of a hit and run accident that nearly killed her. He tells of reports about robed figures in the woods, animals drained of their blood, and 'ritualism.' He notes that, in his view, this cult is somehow connected to a more mundane evil, a powerful local drug cartel that was broken up in the 1990s. In addition, he describes the geological and electromagnetic features that make Somerset (and the Pennyroyal broadly) a site of such prolific paranormal activity. He details a plethora of mysterious events, including sightings of 'gobliness or dwarf-like creatures,' that he and his family and acquaintances have experienced, concluding 'There's definitely distortions and some weird permeability of reality here. There is an anomalous nature to the very place we're standing right now.' He also notes that a doctor at the state psychiatric hospital said that the majority of his patients come from Somerset or Pulaski County, suggesting that the place, with and its supernatural and/or geophysical anomalies, cause mental illness in the population.

Despite misgivings, the *Hellier* team persists. Ultimately, the paranormal aspects of the region outweigh those risks. Thus, in this case, they (like many people when confronted with a legend that does not conform to their worldview) reject the Satanic aspects in favor of the supernatural they are seeking. They remain in Somerset and decide to enter the cave and perform the invocation ritual they had designed to honor Pan. The last episode of the series is dedicated to the rite. Ironically, they miss one obvious synchronicity that could be drawn from Newkirk's discussion of the images of Pan in episode 13. Newkirk claims that one of Pan's guises is the devil surrounded by dancing witches. In this view, Pan would

certainly not be the forgotten god as they claim, since the Somerset cult is apparently worshipping him in his demonic form in these same caves. The final episode culminates in their future plans relating to the *Hellier* investigation, highlighting the tools and information they have amassed during the project. In fact, a third season is in the works. In December 2021, the *Hellier* team met with me to discuss East Slavic folklore practices for another film project. At that meeting, Greg Newkirk mentioned that they had been filming in Somerset that day. They arranged to speak to me in central Kentucky on their way back to their home to Cincinnati, is an hour north of Lexington, KY. He confirmed in a personal communication that an aim for this season was to convince people that there was no satanic cult in Somerset, Kentucky. His statement addresses the seeming inconsistency about Pan's neglect noted above; after all, if the cult does not exist, Pan was not being worshipped. They thus needed to perform the ritual to rectify the situation. It also brings to the fore the misunderstanding of how legends function and an inability to control belief or the spread of legends.

The *Hellier* investigators, as we have seen, are themselves involved in the creation of a legend cycle, exhibiting both ostension and quasi-ostension at various points during the series. While they give a great deal of credence to local legends that fit their view of the paranormal, they reject those that do not conform. As Bill Ellis has shown, legends about satanic cults emerge out of a 'social problem that needs attention' (2003: xiv). Legend helps to restore a sense of control in a chaotic situation, be this from a fear of undocumented foreign workers, family and social decay, or economic upheaval. Interestingly, both the emic (insider) and etic (outsider) views of Somerset in particular coincide in these cases. Locals view Somerset as unusual, and its oddity worthy of comment. However the motivation for these overlapping views held both by outsiders and insiders emerge from two different socio-cultural realities. From the etic perspective, Kentucky is home to uncivilized, uncultured, and dangerous folk. For example, the geographers Ulack and Raitz document that non-natives describe Appalachia as beset by poverty, low levels of education, poor health, and inadequate housing (1982: 735–741). They also cite demeaning stereotypes

such as illegal liquor production by 'hill people' in a socially and physically isolated region of the country. This perception of the region and its people by outsiders has not changed much over the last forty years, as Hellier demonstrates, too.

Their depiction of the people in the region and indeed the state itself is one that relies on the idea that Kentucky is an uncivilized frontier, of sorts. In both *Somerset* and *Hellier*, the filmmakers repeatedly mention the dangers that they might face 'in the middle of nowhere.' These threats are not from paranormal forces, but from malevolent human actors. After Amy's email arrives in episode 9, Dana Newkirk, is particularly worried, saying that, 'It's someone trying to get us to go out to the fucking middle of nowhere in Kentucky...' But this idea of Kentucky as the 'middle of nowhere,' a space of potential threats, recurs throughout the series. The space itself is anomalous and thus its citizens are suspect as well. In particular, the researchers seize on the Turnerian concept of liminality as outlined in Moore's book on ritual. Liminality, however, is not just limited to those in process in a ritual, but to huge numbers of people. Liminality is equated with marginality in their view of the concept (as in Hansen's (2001) analysis of the paranormal). As Greg Newkirk states 'You rarely ever see a nice midwestern housewife possessed by a demon. You see somebody whose life is in chaos, they're hoarders, they're criminals, they're people that have attracted a weird supernatural element to them because of the way that they live' (episode 11). Randall goes on to describe the figures in this case in those terms:

So, you bring in liminality and marginality into through all the main characters in the *Hellier* case. [...] You have David, who was marginalized within his community by the people who lived there and he literally just moved to that house [...] in an in-between physical state. It's not even necessarily a mental state, it's literally living in between in one place and another. And then you have Amy was literally living in a trailer in *Somerset*, KY, a moveable liminal state and the phenomena is reaching out to her.

In episode 4, Greg Newkirk discusses how Amy is from a 'very rough group of people [...] Not the type of people you'd just want to get mixed up with.' She has two relatives in prison, imprisoned for ten and twenty years respectively, and her messages indicate 'unbridled insanity.' When he later speaks to her in episode 14 and learns that she was a schoolteacher, the amazement in his voice is palpable. Nevertheless, the team is still

worried about the fact that they made this phone call in Somerset proper, which is relatively close to Cincinnati, particularly in light of the threat to their lives that a cult populated by powerful local figures might represent. As noted above, they do proceed with the ritual anyway.

However, the emic interpretation of Kentucky's 'oddity' grapples with the mystery of Somerset (and Hellier) as the result, not of assumptions about the state as an uncultured, backward place, but of pride in their home. Internal views of the state, as Ulack and Raitz show (1982, p. 735), are overwhelmingly positive, citing family-oriented, hardworking, and proud as well as religious and awed by its natural beauty. When these positive views are challenged by something as devastating as the murder of two young people, especially when no-one is charged, the dislocation between the reality and the conception of one's community values becomes profound. Add the shifting economic conditions over the same time period, as manufacturing and mining jobs were lost, and, as Ellis notes, the community is faced with an emergency. One explanation is a powerful cabal that has abandoned core religious values and is willing to commit the most heinous crimes, including murder and child sexual abuse, to maintain their social position. If indeed the people of Somerset are ruled by such elites, then regular folks, who are not involved in these immoral acts except as possible whistle blowers and witnesses, can absolve themselves from the guilt and horror that the events naturally have caused. The legends allow tellers to retain their own love for the community and what it stands for, even reveling in its magical weirdness to some extent, since they know they cannot be blamed. The powers that be hold the cards, and, as one local said, they 'need God' (Bodie 2020). Faith distinguishes the moral codes of working and middle classes from the elite. In sum, the Somerset narratives, in my view, are noteworthy for the fact that two different cultural contexts produce legends with common interpretations of the place that produced them. However, they emerge from two very different worldviews and with distinctly different end goals for the narrators.

The local reactions to the filmed depiction of the Hellier and Somerset communities has been overwhelmingly negative. They resent, first, that the investigators made claims that

were not true to the local lore: there are no reports of goblins in the caves (at least commonly known ones) in these two areas. The lore that was featured creates an image of locals as rather simpleminded and backward. Ultimately, like Keel before them in *The Mothman Prophecies* (Clarke 2022: 278), the *Hellier* team assumes the role as expert interpreters. Their version of lore and local experience takes precedence over that of Hellier and Somerset residents, who lack the sophistication to interpret their experiences ‘correctly.’ In addition, residents are unhappy with the way that both towns were portrayed in a negative light. For example, Randall (episode 2) describes Hellier as ‘forgotten’ concluding that ‘there’s no reason that anyone would go there.’ Somerset, seemingly rife with satanic cults, corrupt officials, and mental patients, is also portrayed narrowly. When coupled with a pagan ritual to invoke Pan in a local cave, the documentary has provoked a great deal of animosity, particularly among local church congregations. It is one thing to speak of satanic cults and corruption to insiders, but quite another to be featured in a documentary that highlights only those stories as well as painful aspects of Somerset’s past on the 25th anniversary of the murders.

Conclusion

Hellier is a fascinating case study for the folklorist interested in how we create and tell stories today. The complex array of sources (history and news, science and the paranormal, folkloristics and local folklore, Jungian psychology and anthropology), mesh into a complicated web of support for the claim that Kentucky caves are populated by mysterious humanoids. As I mentioned above, there seems to have been no consideration of the reliability or quality of sources. *Hellier* in and of itself is not likely to cause much social upheaval in the broader population, given the viewing numbers cited above. However, the series offers a prime example of the way narratives are constructed in the contemporary world, which can also shed light on the processes used to create stories about COVID19 as a hoax or the 2020 ‘stolen’ election in the United States. Doing research is clearly key to narrative structure these days, but sources likely to be included display the strong

confirmation bias consistent of quasi-ostension. Legend specialists are perhaps best placed to recognize the patterns of kernel legends and how narratives are built from them.

However, the real question remains how can understanding these processes help to offset the potential damage these narratives can create.

Notes

1 *Hellier* is also available on Amazon Prime. Views of the series on YouTube average from 87,000 to 200,000, with only the first episode garnering a sizeable audience of over 600,000. Amazon Prime viewings are not publicly available, but the show has no popularity rating on IMDB.com, which indicates a fairly limited reach (cf. the documentary television show *Ghost Hunters*, which has a popularity rating ranging from 128 to 1776). It has garnered 180 viewer reviews on that site (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9640354/?ref_=tturv_q1).

2 While undoubtedly team members have been able to profit from the show, e.g., in DVD sales or other streaming revenues as well as from speaker fees, based on my conversations with them and on comments in the documentary itself, their main goal is not financial but rather to advance their unified approach to the paranormal and to create a legacy featuring their discoveries in supernatural investigation.

3 I base this conclusion on an Internet search for 'Pan worship caves.' One of the first results is this link: <https://greekgodsandgoddesses.net/gods/pan/>. The unknown author writes 'He is associated with nature, wooded areas and pasturelands, from which his name is derived. The worship of Pan began in rustic areas far from the populated city centers. Therefore, he did not have large temples built to worship him. Rather, worship of Pan centered in nature, often in caves or grottos.' In episode 10, Dana uses similar words to describe veneration of the god Pan: 'He was worshipped out in nature. He was worshipped out in the forest, and he was worshipped in caves specifically.' However, Encyclopedia Mythica, a respected source recommended by academic librarians for online research of Greek mythology, contends that temples did exist to Pan (<https://pantheon.org/articles/p/pan.html>). While the article notes that he was worshipped in

natural settings, including caves, this practice was not exclusive. This site draws on documented ancient Greek texts, while the sources for the site Greek Gods and Goddesses are unclear.

4 Pan's purported death was revealed to a shepherd according to Plutarch in the second century and was a sign that the era of Christ had begun (Bourgead 1983: 254). The author argues (271-272) that this interpretation was based on a mistranslation of the ancient Greek.

5 According to Bourgead (1983:266), this interpretation of the name is a folk etymology that existed already in the ancient world.

6 They are also committed believers in the Jungian concept of synchronicity, or a "meaningful coincidence" (Jung et al. 1964: 226). As detailed in episode 5, the importance of synchronous signs is also reinforced by Colvin (2019) in his description of his first meeting with John Keel, when the Mothman statue was dedicated in Point Pleasant, WV in 2003. That encounter provoked a series of 'paranormal phenomena' with 'stunning' synchronicities. He concludes that 'synchronicity can be used as a research tool.' The importance of synchronicity is reinforced by the Jungian psychologist Moore (2001), who argues that synchronicity is associated with rites of initiation), according to Greg Newkirk (episode 15). Throughout the series, events that are seemingly random but that could relate to the case are ascribed particular weight. For example, in episode 9 Strand travels to North Carolina to GPS coordinates received in a mysterious e-mail message from a man interviewed by Allen Greenfield about aliens. Nearby he finds a house with a Green Man carving on a tree outside the front door, which is taken as a sign that their investigation is on the correct path. In another case, the fact that Julia Somerset (Lady Raglan) published an article (1939) on the Green Man is evidence that another Somerset entirely (in Kentucky) is a place of import for the paranormal.

7 After *Hellier* season 1 was released, the team receive input on the web and in email from various other researchers interested in the paranormal, including from occultists. One particular email asserts that they are involved in a ritual and that Hellier is 'the Altar.'

8 Greg Newkirk highlights an image of Pan surrounded by dancing fey in his discussion of the archetype in episode 13.

9 SLUF is a derogatory term (short little ugly fucker) used to refer to Vietnamese during the US war with that country, but also to small humanoid aliens in Wriste's parlance. A person purporting to be Terry Wriste had also sent Greg Newkirk an email with information related to the Hellier and Mothman cases, including the coordinates that prompted Stand to travel to North Carolina.

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