

## CONTEMPORARY LEGEND

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Most of us, if asked to describe just what it is that the study of folklore involves, would probably end up talking about the preservation of relics and traditions of a bygone era as exemplified in something like the recording of old-timey songs and stories collected from the mountain folk of Appalachia. Although such a description does, it is true, go a long way toward defining the domain of the folklorist, it is apt to have the unfortunate result of blinding us to a whole body of bonafide folklore which is reflected almost daily in our urban, industrialized, mass-media-oriented society.

As a matter of fact, one of the most prominent types of folklore currently in active circulation—and one which has much to reveal about contemporary urban life—is the modern legend. The term “legend,” as used by the professional folklorist, differs somewhat in meaning from the popularly accepted sense. It is, in Richard M. Dorson’s words, “a traditional narrative regarded as true by its teller and by many members of the society in which it circulates. . . .” The modern legend, as Patrick B. Mullen has recently pointed out, shares a number of striking resemblances with rumor, and like rumor, it frequently reveals more of our fears and anxieties than we would perhaps like to think.

Consider, for example, the belief current among many that President John F. Kennedy is alive, though a helpless invalid, and living in heavily guarded seclusion on the island of Scorpis. Strikingly similar in many ways to earlier recorded legends about Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and more recently, Amelia Earhart, the “JFK is alive” legend gains popular support from several conditions and circumstances: the Warren Commission’s failure to dispel widespread doubts surround-

ing the assassination; the necessity for a “closed casket,” which inevitably leads many to speculate that it could have been empty; and, most important, the American people’s difficulty in understanding why Mrs. Kennedy subsequently married Aristotle Onassis. In short, the legend offers “plausible” explanations for otherwise inexplicable actions or conditions.

If some legends maintain that a famous dead man is actually living, there are others—just as firmly believed in—which hold that famous living persons are actually dead. Recent interest in the whereabouts of millionaire Howard Hughes has led many to conclude that he has either died of natural causes, and for business reasons his death has been kept secret, or (the more popular view) that he has been murdered by one or more of his associates in an attempt to gain control of his empire while taking advantage of his widely publicized mania for privacy.

Similarly, the supposed death of singer Paul McCartney, of Beatles fame, has provoked, among other things, symbolic readings of record album photos: the license plate number of a Volkswagen displayed on the cover of the Beatles album *Abbey Road*—“281F”—is widely interpreted as meaning “Paul would be 28 years old, if he were alive,” and a photograph of McCartney wearing an arm patch with the letters “OPD” on his left sleeve, included in the album *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, is said to constitute proof to the initiated that he has been “Officially Pronounced Dead.” Some avid fans-turned-mourners have steadfastly maintained that playing a certain Beatles recording backwards (or at a slower speed) will result in John Lennon’s admission that he “buried Paul;” others point out that recent recordings have been analyzed by modern electronic methods that have proved beyond a doubt that McCartney has been replaced by a double whose voice pattern, though similar to the dead Beatle’s is definitely not the same.

There are numerous contemporary legends which have to do, not with famous people, but with the

everyday, ordinary man on the street—or the girl next door. They are told virtually throughout the country, and in the course of transmission they frequently pick up characteristics intended to identify them with a specific locale and often a particular person. The reasons for this are not difficult to fathom: since these legends make their appeal in large part to our propensity for fear and anxiety, the closer to home they hit, the more frightening and the more plausible they become.

Finally, there are numerous other legends that attach themselves to particular firms and places of business. The “Department Store Snake,” which recounts the experience of a woman bitten by a snake while shopping for a rug (sometimes a sweater or a blanket), has been reported in Texas, New York, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., among other places. The legend nearly always identifies a specific store: in Buffalo, New York, for example, the story is set in Two Guys Furniture Store; in Columbus, Ohio, it’s Gold Circle, a major discount house. One suspects that, unlike the legend of the \$500 recipe for “Red Velvet Cake,” which has for several years been associated exclusively with New York City’s Waldorf Astoria Hotel, this legend will continue to be told of various department stores and discount houses throughout the country.

All of these examples indicate that the contemporary legend is of continuing interest to the folklorist and the student of popular culture alike. It is also of value to anyone interested in what goes into the making of that curious mixture of wisdom and folly that defines human nature. It reflects our dreams as well as our worst nightmares, our hopes as well as our deepest anxieties. But more than this, the widespread presence of such contemporary legends as these testifies to the richness, diversity, and ubiquity of traditional beliefs in our daily lives. They serve as constant reminders to us that folklore is far from dead: it is everywhere around us.



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