

Welcome to the Spring 2003 issue of the Folklore and Education Section newsletter. Despite all the bad news that keeps rolling in these days, we hope you find some good news in these pages, as well as some inspiration for the future.

As with last year's inaugural online edition of the newsletter, you may navigate through this issue by clicking on the section headings to the left. News about last year's section meeting and Saturday workshop at the American Folklore Society conference can be found in the "AFS News" section, along with tentative information about this year's Saturday workshop, the deadline for the section's Dorothy Howard Prize in Folklore and Education, and the Dorothy Howard Prize logo contest. For complete information about the Dorothy Howard Prize, visit the [section home page](#).

Thanks to the many folks who contributed materials for this year's newsletter. We invite your participation, as well: feel free to direct comments, suggestions, and materials for future issues either to the editor, [Rosemary Hathaway](#), or the co-editor, [Gregory Hansen](#).

With this issue, we'd like to introduce a new feature: an op-ed forum titled "Reflections on Folklife and Education." Alongside the great resources and news from the field the publication has always provided, we hope this new feature will give contributors an outlet for more personal, reflective observations about the ways folklore matters in education, at all levels. We invite *your* contributions to this feature for next year's newsletter!

Reflections on Folklife and Education: Folklore and the "Culture of Fear"

In these times of political and economic uncertainty, it's easy to imagine that the problems of the world are far too large for us to make any kind of an impact...especially when, as many of us have probably experienced in recent months, the loudest of protests go unheard. And when arts and education budgets are being slashed across the country, and at all levels (from federal to local, elementary to higher education), it's hard to know where the resources to continue even the most modest of programs will come from.

I've been reminded recently, however, of how germane folklore, and particularly folklore and education, can be in these times, on many levels. I've recently been re-reading folklorist Elissa R. Henken's fine book—co-authored with her sister, Mariamne H. Whatley, a biologist—titled *"Did You Hear About the Girl Who...?": Contemporary Legends, Folklore and Human Sexuality*. In this work, nominated for last year's Dorothy Howard prize, the authors contend that no sex-education program can be truly effective without addressing the wealth of folklore and particularly folk belief that constructs

adolescents' knowledge about sexuality.

The authors don't set out to debunk the "untruths" that adolescents share with each other about sexuality, pregnancy, STDs, and so forth, but rather argue that educators need to understand why adolescents believe these things, and recognize that they are often more powerful "lessons" about sexuality for students than the ones received in the classroom. By embracing and discussing these beliefs and stories in the classroom, students' "folk knowledge" about sexuality can be explored and deconstructed openly, in conjunction with more formal information. The book is a potent reminder of how ideas we might otherwise dismiss can instead serve to open up a whole new level of understanding.

I rediscovered this same lesson while watching Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine*. Living in Colorado and teaching at a university where the majority of students come from metro Denver, I was astonished that when the documentary was recently shown through our campus film series, every screening was sold out. I fully expected that people in Colorado—particularly students who would have been in high school themselves during and just after the shootings—would steer clear of something that might hit a little too close to home, literally.

The events at Columbine, though, are only the inspiration for Moore's much larger exploration of what he terms the "culture of fear" in the U. S., largely created and exploited by the news media. At one point, Moore talks about the contrast between the impression of random violence created by the news media and reality, noting, for example, that while the murder rate has dramatically declined nationwide in the last several years, the rate of reporting of murders on local news programming is up by something like 600%. In the course of this analysis, Moore trots out that chestnut of folklore research, carried out by Bill Ellis, among others, which showed that the panic about drugs and razor blades in Halloween candy was largely unfounded: in every reported instance of such tampering, the tampering was done by a parent or other relative of the child, not a stranger (see Ellis' essay "'Safe' Spooks: New Halloween Traditions in Response to Sadism Legends" in Jack Santino's *Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life*).

I was reminded, at that moment, of just how powerful teaching folklore can be. In my own introduction to folklore classes, we almost always discuss contemporary legends at some point in the semester, and I like to point out to students how the nature of such stories has been changing: whereas the villain in older stories was generally identifiable as a deviant, and most often was eventually caught and punished, many legends these days feature unknown and unknowable deviants, who strike at hapless victims who did nothing more to invite assault than to stick their hand in a coin-return slot, sit down in a movie theatre, or pick up a gas pump, as several versions of a recent legend about HIV-infected needles planted in unexpected places have it. The violence in these stories is truly random—unwarned of, undeserved, unstoppable, and unpunished. Doesn't this exactly mirror the culture of fear Moore describes, and which not only the media but at times our own leaders exploit with generic terrorism warnings, "orange alerts," and

advice to buy plastic sheeting and duct tape?

Folk belief is powerful, and in our classrooms (and our arts programming and elsewhere), we have the expertise to help students of all ages discover what their beliefs are, and begin to understand why and how they are constructed. I'm certainly not suggesting that we try to "debunk" or undo students' beliefs, any more than Henken and Whatley wish to, but I do believe that in articulating and interrogating those beliefs, students can come to understand how, in their own storytelling and listening, they participate in that "culture of fear." Discussing these fearful legends can perhaps give students tools for recognizing and resisting unfounded fears, and for understanding the potent folk beliefs underlying those fears. Such a process has the potential to be tremendously enlightening and liberating...and at the manageable cost of a few hours' time spent in discussion, with the only required resources being a sensitive, challenging teacher and willing, thoughtful students.

--Rosemary Hathaway