

# OPEN FORUM

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## Why "The Hook" Is *Not* a Contemporary Legend

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Those of us who work with contemporary legends owe a debt to Linda Dégh for launching the empirical study of the genre. During the late 1960s and early 1970s she wrote and edited an extraordinary spate of legend studies for *Indiana Folklore*. Her work and those of her students drew attention to the wealth of traditional adolescents' lore, and the articles remain valuable treasuries of both concepts and primary material.

Recently, however, Dégh seems to have backed away from the implications of her groundbreaking work: in a recent article in *Contemporary Legend* she refers to interpretations of legends as "impressionistic and subjective" (1991:22). Returning to this point in a 1992 AFS forum, she suggested that folklorists ought not to interpret at all. In this stand she follows, to some extent, Heda Jason, who called for a moratorium on finding "meanings" in contemporary legends, warning: "Interpretations will have to wait until the data is assembled" (1990:222).

No one would deny that the discipline of folklore has been tarnished in the United States by the eagerness of folklorists to use the term "urban legend" to cover a wide range of materials, and to base wide-ranging interpretations on small samples of truncated, rewritten texts. But Dégh's stand seems as extreme as the abuse she seeks to correct. Our perception of narratives, and indeed our construction of genres like "urban" or "contemporary legend," assumes interpretation, our own and that of our

sources. We do not assemble data in a seemingly "objective" way; rather, we make preliminary guesses about meaning, then gather material that speaks to these questions. Unless we objectify our interpretations, they will remain behind our data, silently bedeviling our field.

Paul Smith began the 1992 forum by demanding why "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" was considered a "classic" contemporary legend. He suggested that perhaps the early identification of this narrative had in some way skewed our perception of the story, which in many ways did not fit the rest of the canon. While I disagree about this particular challenge, I feel that Smith is right in insisting that we examine and set firmer limits to the genre. Jason, too, complains that the list of items claimed as "contemporary legends" in fact contains many narratives better considered jokes, novella, and so forth (1990:221).

Among these "classic urban legends" that deserve reconsideration is "The Hook." Although this is a narrative that has many content features that seem to link it to the rest of the canon, it is *not* a contemporary legend. These apparent links are in fact illusory, and contextual details noted by Dégh herself refer to dynamics exactly opposite to those of most contemporary legends.

In the very first issue of *Indiana Folklore*, Dégh published an important article on "The Hook" (1968) that helped canonize it as one of the "classic" automobile-related contemporary or urban legends. Interpretation was not Dégh's main purpose here: she presented and discussed the patterns of variation and stability in the forty-four variants she located in the Indiana University Folklore Archives. But she mentioned briefly that some unusually dramatic variants "emphasize the horrible looks of the hook-man, elaborating on the natural dread of the handicapped" (98). This reading drew an unusually sharp response from Alan Dundes, who called it "totally devoid of any real discussion of the psychological significance of the content" (1971:30-31). The correct interpretation of the story, he argued, was to express female fears about male sexuality, the hook representing the boyfriend's "erect, aggressive phallus." Beyond Rosan Jordan de Caro's brief note defending Dégh (1973), the debate settled there.

I reopened the discussion in my 1987 article, "Why Are Verbatim Texts of Legends Necessary?" with a close transcription and analysis of one variant of "The Hook" in performance. There I suggested the possibility that some versions of the legend may not express fear of sex, but the narrator's "intention to enjoy sex on her terms, not someone else's" (1987:54). The "handicapped person" may thus be seen as a moral custodian, sexually repressed and seeking to repress others' natural drives through an impotent threat. I concluded that Dégh was closer to the mark than Dundes in alluding to fear of "the handicapped," but "she failed only to say who is handicapped where" (1987:56).

In her 1991 essay, Dégh dismisses my interpretation without discussion: "How could Ellis tell who 'failed' and who was right? What is cultural bias if not this? What I see here is a gender-specific difference between my reading and that of the others" (1991:22). Tactfully, Dégh notes that her own reading was subjective too, but uses the same admission to damn my argument as well. Granted, interpretations of data as variable and individualistic as folk performances can never approach "scientific" proof: some texts may stress fear of handicaps, others fear of sex, still others intent to enjoy sex. But even if all interpretations are subjective by nature and subject to cultural bias, are they all equally worthless? Is this the end of it, then, that Alan Dundes and I both find sex relevant because we are both men and Dégh and de Caro don't because they are women? Are we all equally awash in subjectivity, "a known shortcoming of humanistic sciences," as Dégh (1991:22) puts it?

In an essay published while my article was in press, William M. Clements (1986) approached the same narrative from psychoanalytical, psychological, and structural angles. He found that several equally meaningful but distinct readings of "The Hook" could result from the same data. He concluded that we should "decide which approach is most useful. That decision should be made only after the approaches have been applied to the text, not on the basis of *a priori* assumptions about their validity" (1986:45). Rather than asking how our various readings are subjective, then, perhaps we should say in what way they help make sense out of the odd contextual details that Dégh's original article preserved.

Several sources note "girl's camp," "parties," or "slumber parties" as the story's natural context. One elaborated, "They would sit around with the lights out telling stories to scare each other. This is one of them. She doesn't believe it really happened but believes that it could happen and this makes it seem real" (1968:93). Others said it would actually be told by a boy in the actual process of parking: "This tale is told when parked along a dark country road with a girl. The tale is one in which you say that only last night a very strange experience happened to a couple parked in this very same spot" (1968:95). Here is where Dégh's and Dundes's readings are simply not very *useful*: if the story did express fears of male sexuality or handicapped maniacs, why would boys risk bringing their dates to an abrupt end?

In my survey of the Ohio State Folklore Archives, I encountered the story as part of legend-tripping rituals, in a context indicating that boys used the story and its cousin "The Boyfriend's Death" as narrative aphrodisiacs. One commented, "We used to use that one when we would go parkin' out there. You know—to scare chicks and make them want to slide a little closer. (Q: Did it work?) Fuck yea—you'd have to beat 'em off with a stick" (1982-83:66).

Sabina Magliocco has observed a similar dynamic with the community-sponsored haunted house she observed in Bloomington. In response to obviously fictive threats, she found young adolescent girls clinging to each other and somewhat older girls snuggling up to their boyfriends with exaggerated reactions and comments like, "Brian, save me!" She comments, acutely, that interviews later show that women are actually not that frightened by the experience: "what is being expressed is in fact an enactment or a parody of fear" (1985:24).

My interpretation of "The Hook" as a legend *parody* is useful in that it explains why the legend has a strong affinity with other adolescents' activities known to have predominantly entertainment functions. It also helps connect it with other complexes that were regionally distributed and so never reached the canonical state of "The Hook." Sue Samuelson notes that the "White Witch" legend type was popular in California at about the same time (1958-64). Less stereotyped than "The Hook," this narrative complex likewise features a stern moral custodian who tries to frighten adolescents away from parking roads, often with a castrating hatchet, long fingernails—or a "steel hand" or hook. Samuelson, like Dundes and Dégh, interpreted this legend in terms of "adolescent fears about sexuality and anxiety at violating social moral standards" (1979:19). Yet she, too, notes that the circulation of this legend by no means discouraged sexual experimentation on parking roads.

"The Hook," therefore, does not belong to the canon of contemporary legends since its contextual "truth claim" paradoxically implies the opposite: this story is *not* true. Traditional belief legends and most contemporary legends aim to modify the actions of the listener directly: don't gamble on Sundays; watch your children at malls. The contemporary legend, I have argued (1990:2), is essentially an emergent form: "Legends grow out of social contexts, which they intend to alter." By contrast, legends like "The Hook" are static in that they describe and indeed incite the very action they describe as taboo: parking and sexual experimentation. Thus, while "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" continues to emerge in "emergency" situations, predicting some imminent apocalypse or disaster, "The Hook" does not appear to have provoked any real-life panics or hunts for one-armed maniacs.

The niche such legends occupy is close to the narrative complex described by John M. Vlach (1971) as "the humorous anti-legend," stories that inspire first fear, then laughter. In a closely related dynamic, "The Hook" and its fellows inspire first fear, then curiosity, and finally the proscribed act. Such legends are closely related to jokes, but Vlach notes that some fear is acknowledged, even if their performance discredits this fear, so these narratives are still legends (1971:120-121). However, if we discuss "The Hook" as a legend with the same implicit generic expectations

as emergent forms of "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" or "The Castrated Boy," the joke is on us—for in fact these legends incite us to behave in the opposite way as the story suggests. The proper place of "The Hook" is alongside other legend-trip core narratives, which promise dire consequences of visiting spooky sites and performing certain rituals—only to encourage the listeners to carry them out. This placement is confirmed by the frequent use of "The Hook" and its relatives in the context of legend-tripping.

We can't avoid making interpretations: after all, when our sources choose to preserve a story in tradition, this act implies some kind of interpretation. So when we assemble data, we assemble interpretations, and the act of choosing to study a story is also an interpretive act. What is important is that we discuss stories in a *useful* way, revealing ways in which such narratives function or express insights within the adolescent experience. If an interpretation is not very useful, its limitations in explaining the data should be demonstrated, not dismissed with innuendos about "gender-specific differences." To do so is to fall back to the theoretical world that Dégh and her students challenged during the heady days of the 1960s (and it is not accidental that I have repeatedly cited articles that she accepted as editor of *Indiana Folklore*). We have archives of data; we don't need any more theoretical concepts: what we lack is the courage to use our tools to hear what our sources are telling us.

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