

Introduction

Border crossings: legend, literature, mass media, and cultural ephemera

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This special issue of *Contemporary Legend* began as two paper sessions (Contemporary Legend, Literature, Art, and Mass Media I and II) at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in October 1994 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sponsored by the Folklore and Literature Section of the American Folklore Society, those paper sessions might have been framed solely in terms of the intersection between folk and literary narrative, but such a framing quickly dispersed into discussions of a broader range of forms of cultural production, in part because what emerged (as the sessions were being conceptualized and then, to an even greater degree, as the sessions materialized) was the sense that legend performances enact and are the product of border crossings, what Sylvia Grider—in her essay, “The Haunted House in Literature, Popular Culture, and Tradition” (this volume)—calls a “dynamic sharing across genres and across media.” Of the initial conference presentations, those by Marcia Gaudet, Carl Lindahl, Cathy Preston, Mike Preston, and Paul Smith have been reworked over the intervening five years into the more

extended essays that appear in this volume. To these have been added essays by Ann Kibbey, Diane Goldstein, Sylvia Grider, and Mikel Koven.

The extent to which legend performances are constituted within a “dynamic sharing across genres and across media” is suggested by the range of genres and media forms which are alluded to in some cases and addressed in detail in others in this set of essays: fiction (literary and popular books and short stories) marketed to children, adolescents, and adults; parodic narratives on the Internet; contemporary church and school bulletins and medieval catechism and penitential manuals; TV shows; movies; contemporary journalism (from major metropolitan dailies to tabloid weeklies); comic strips and cartoons; greeting cards; advertisements; children’s toys; and amusement park rides.

The first three essays—those by Marcia Gaudet, Diane Goldstein, and Carl Lindahl—present the reader with discussions of contemporary legend in relation to three different historical forms of inscription (a formally published short story, a medieval manuscript, and the informally published narratives and dialogues that appear on Internet discussion lists) and three different genres (a literary ghost story in a larger collection of short stories, a cautionary tale that is one of several such tales “set inside the severe frame of a catechism and penitential manual,” and a series of folk parodies that circulate in the midst of examples and discussions of “serious” contemporary legends). These three essays also provide the reader with three different discussions of reflexivity in relation to legend performances.

Marcia Gaudet’s essay, “Robert Olen Butler’s ‘A Ghost Story’: Contemporary Legend as Literature,” addresses the intersection of and contested boundaries between folk and literary forms of cultural production¹ by focusing on a literary ghost story about a Vietnamese immigrant to Louisiana. Gaudet’s analysis situates the author in relation to the community inscribed within the story, identifies the folk textual traditions (“a conflation of ‘The Vanishing Hitchhiker’ legend with a demon in female form who devours men”) that form the emotional core of the story and that metonymically produce a discourse of social critique. The essay analyzes Butler’s use of

slippages among narrative genres and performance registers (orally performed legend and personal narrative and the written short story) to create a tale that, as Gaudet argues, “relates a contemporary legend and holds a self-reflective mirror to oral narrative tradition.”

In “‘Please Send Your Used Rolodex Cards to the Muppet Wish Foundation’: Folk Parody, Generic Sensibility, Literalization and Contemporary Legend,” Diane Goldstein takes up the problem of folk parody in relation to genre (“serious” contemporary legend), media (the Internet), and the nexus of performer and audience (enthusiasts’ networks) by focusing attention on “multiple merged legend” texts and the stories circulating about Bert and Ernie, two puppets on the children’s television program *Sesame Street*. As a self-conscious form of artistic communication, parody becomes a reflexive performance that, as Goldstein argues, provides the legend scholar “insight into such issues as belief, authority, transmission, and aesthetics.” In her discussion of how a parodic performance might have been the source of a serious legend, through a literal interpretation of the parody, which in turn provided a textual tradition that could be further parodied, Goldstein offers a way of thinking about the relationship between legends performed and understood as jokes and legends performed and understood in relation to folk belief.

And Carl Lindahl’s essay, “The Re-oralized Legends of Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne*,” taking as its example the legend “The Stuck Couple,” addresses the shifts in a tale’s meaning based on performance context as well as the methods by which one author attempts to achieve a sense of orality in the midst of a written performance. Lindahl argues that medieval inscription of legends might be used as a non-complementary comparative body of texts for examining our contemporary legend anthologies which, in the process of inscription (a process that increasingly presents readers with plot summaries), ignore the “oral and artistic dimensions” of legend performance. In other words, medieval manuscripts and contemporary anthologies of legends, when read together, provide a moment of reflexivity and, in doing so, a potential critique of

contemporary performance. Here I cannot help but note one of my own students' comments on anthologized legends: "When you're told one of these stories or sent it on e-mail, it sounds true, but when you read a bunch of them pulled together in a book, they become jokes"—a comment that might return us to the contexts in which legend parodies blossom, discussed by Goldstein in her essay.

The next three essays (those by Michael Preston, Ann Kibbey, and Cathy Preston) discuss the process and function of legend formation in relation to local and national constructions of fear. In "Never Talk to Strangers: Parental Warnings, Contemporary Legends, and Popular Fiction," Michael Preston draws on children's books, a comic strip, church and school bulletins, milk cartons, grocery bags, ephemeral flyers that appear in the mail, popular novels and the movies based on them, and syndicated news items to discuss the "intersection of fiction and folklore" and the relationship of that nexus to the "real world, which both literature and folklore represent to varying extents."

In "Who Incidented That Little Girl? Stories as Pollution Rites in the Ramsey Murder Case," Ann Kibbey draws on Mary Douglas's work (1966) on pollution beliefs and purification rituals to discuss legend formation in relation to the "critical factors in the social conditions of the [oral and print-based] storytelling that ensued," locally and nationally, after the murder of a six-year-old girl in Boulder, Colorado, on Christmas Eve or Day in 1996. To do so, Kibbey turns to a detailed analysis of the contested interplay between a local oral narrative and the story as constructed in major metropolitan daily newspapers and national tabloids, arguing that lacking the fulfillment of legal process, "people turned to one of the oldest of pollution rites" (storytelling) as a mechanism for restoring "conceptual order" to a "community that was deeply disrupted at a cultural and ideological level." In other words, as Kibbey astutely documents, in the JonBenet Ramsey case, legend formation replaced legal process.

And in "Babysitting and the Man Upstairs: Negotiating the 'Politics of Everyday Fear,'" I explore legend performances in relation to Brian Massumi's theorizing of "the consequences of

saturation of social space” by technologies of fear (1993). In this essay, a short ethnography of babysitting, babysitters, the stories babysitters tell about babysitting, and the ways in which babysitters use mediated babysitting stories is framed by analyses of a short story by Robert Coover and three juvenile novels by R. L. Stine in an attempt to discuss the ways in which subjecthood, in contemporary modern/postmodern society, is increasingly constructed by and in relation to fear, and to argue that legend performances must be understood in relation to the myriad forms of storytelling that take place in contemporary society.

The final three essays of this volume, those by Paul Smith, Mikel Koven, and Sylvia Grider, complete and cumulatively pull together a sense of just what might be meant by the “the myriad forms of storytelling that take place in contemporary society.” Paul Smith’s essay, “Contemporary Legend on Film and Television: Some Observations,” outlines a typology of the ways in which broadcast news and documentaries as well as TV and movie fiction become sites for contemporary legend performances. By focusing through exemplification on “the variety of presentational forms in which contemporary legends are to be found in film and television presentations,” Smith’s essay also forcefully argues our “need to be aware of the power of the media as an agent of communication—particularly in the case of contemporary legends.”

Mikel Koven’s essay, “*Candyman* Can: Film and Ostension,” focuses the reader on the relationship between contemporary legend and film through an in-depth analysis of a particular film—the 1992 Bernard Rose horror film *Candyman*. Pulling together contemporary film theory and folkloristic discussions of ostension (and its sub-forms, quasi- and pseudo-ostension), Koven moves the reader beyond the metaphorical butterfly collecting of “folklore in films”² (just as Gaudet’s essay moves the reader beyond “folklore in literature”) toward a sophisticated analysis of film as ostensive action.

Finally, in “The Haunted House in Literature, Popular Culture, and Tradition: A Consistent Image,” Sylvia Grider takes the reader into the liminal space between legend and folktale. Mapping a history of the genre and media forms that have cumulatively constructed the

contemporary image and meaning of the haunted house—literary tales from classical Rome through contemporary horror fiction, movies, TV programs, cartoons, Internet sites, material items marketed at Halloween and images used in seasonal advertising, a psychologist's dream, student drawings, vernacular and commercialized haunted houses, legend trips to locally renowned haunted houses, and folk performances of contemporary legends, Grider illustrates and analyzes the ways in which the haunted house “has become a shared cultural icon that [in the English-speaking world] is almost universally recognized.” The haunted house, as she explains, has come to represent “the point of contact, the transition, the threshold between the legend and folktale.”

Contemporary legend does not exist solely within the rarified space of folk culture. As John Dorst has explained in reference to a definition of postmodernism, “The point here is not, as in the old mass culture argument, that folklore is disappearing under the onslaught of homogenized, highly mediated cultural productions but rather that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the distinctly vernacular sphere one normally associates with folk culture from everything else” (Dorst 1997). Perhaps more than any other genre folklorists study, contemporary legend blurs the boundaries between cultural and performance registers while simultaneously existing as a genre that is itself defined by blurred boundaries. It is these blurred boundaries—border crossings among genres and media—that the essays in this issue of *Contemporary Legend* address.

Notes

¹ Eric Montenyohl has succinctly summarized the historical treatment of the questions raised by this intersection:

In the past, the primary focus and methodology for studies in folklore and literature lay in the identification of items of folklore within works of literature. Over the last several decades, scholars have urged that both identification and interpretation be part of the process: that is, if folklore is indeed part of a written work, how and why is that relevant? How does the folklore influence the

audience's associations and perceptions? Most recently, the area of folklore and literature has expanded to include the complex interactions between the two related expressive forms. This includes not just the identification of, and relationships between, particular texts, but also the choices that artists make when creating a work in a particular medium or tradition. In some cases, issues such as form (genre), style, structure, and tone may be just as significant as the text. (1996:290)

For further discussion of the relationship between folklore and literature, see Dorson 1957, Dundes 1965, Jones 1984, Rosenberg 1991, and Preston 1995.

²For a critique of the "folklore in film" approach, see Jackson 1989.

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