

*Dossier*

## Rumors and Urban Legends

*Edited by Véronique Campion-Vincent*

As an addition to the papers brought together in this special issue here is an informative dossier, which we have tried to make comprehensive, on recent research work (published since 2001)<sup>1</sup> connected with the field of rumors and urban legends.

This dossier includes reviews of eight French publications.

In 2002 came the second edition<sup>2</sup> of Jean-Bruno Renard's *Que Sais-je* volume *Rumeurs et légendes urbaines*; the book by Véronique Campion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard *De source sûre*; and Pascal Froissart's study *La Rumeur, histoire et fantasmes*.

In 2003 there was Gérald Bronner's *L'Empire des croyances*.

The year 2004 saw the publication of a more marginal work by Yves-Marie Bercé, *A la recherche des trésors cachés, du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours*, which highlighted a whole complex of rumors and legends around this universal theme.

In 2005 the following were published: Philippe Aldrin's *Sociologie politique des rumeurs*; Véronique Campion-Vincent's *La Société parano. Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes*; and finally Frédéric Dumerchat and Philippe Veniel's *Forêt de Chizé: attention puma!* focusing on the group of legends about mystery big cats.

In addition, the dossier lists seven English-language publications, among which are two encyclopedias: one on urban legends – Jan Harold Brunvand's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2001); and the other tackling the closely related, and currently very popular, subject of conspiracies – *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Peter Knight (2003).

There are also two essays, by well-known authors in the field, which are close to the folklore perspective: Linda Degh's *Legend and Belief. Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (2001); and Gillian Bennett's *Bodies: Sex, Violence, Disease and Death in Contemporary Legend* (2005).

Two contributions focus on books by the younger generation of writers, who favor the sociological perspective: Adam Burgess's *Cellular Phones, Public Fears and a Culture of Precaution* (2004); and Pamela Donovan's *No Way of Knowing. Crime, Urban Legends and the Internet* (2004). Burgess's book explores the importance of the attitude of institutions that have adopted the 'precautionary principle', and in so doing have accorded great significance to fears which are widespread in certain circles but not validated by careful scientific studies. Donovan's work emphasizes the complexities of belief phenomena, which she explores through a study of discussion forums on that new communication channel, the internet. These two books in effect partially answer the questions posed as a conclusion to the final English-language study in this dossier, *Rumor Mills. The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (2005), edited by Gary Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath.

This 'Rumors and Urban Legends' issue can also be seen as a continuation of the research activities begun at the 2003 Bellagio conference, which resulted in the publication of *Rumor Mills*.

In addition to these French or English publications, the Dossier contains reviews of works in other languages.

There are two titles from the Mexican university teacher Margarita Zires: *Voz, texto e imagen en interacción. El rumor de los pitufos* (2001) and *Del rumor al tejido cultural y saber político* (2005).

Italy is represented by a book about the phantom girl hitchhiker by Stefania Fumagalli, *La ragazza dello Snoopy. La leggenda contemporanea dell'autostoppista fantasma: una ricerca in Valle Brembrana* (2005). There is also the collection of sixteen papers presented at the Turin conference organized by Paolo Toselli, the indefatigable Italian specialist in urban legends, and Stefano Bagnasco: *Le nuove leggende metropolitane. Manuale per detective antibufale* (2005).

From Sweden comes the latest work by the well-known Swedish specialist in urban legends Bengt af Klintberg: *Glitterspray och 99 andra klintbergare*.<sup>3</sup>

Publication of these reviews has been made possible only with the assistance of several researchers, whom I thank for contributing their special skills, particularly the linguistic ones. Readers will find their names (and their email addresses) after each review, which appear in alphabetical order of the book's first author.

We are delighted that the topic of rumors and urban legends has grown into a considerable field. These reviews make a real contribution to the information about it without claiming to be exhaustive, which would be impossible.

We are aware of certain omissions – for instance Alan Kimmel's book on rumor control,<sup>4</sup> Rolf W. Brednich's latest collection of urban legends *Pinguine in Rückenlage!* (published in 2004) and, more marginally, his book on internet humour [www.worldwidewitz.com](http://www.worldwidewitz.com), which came out in 2005.

Inevitably, we will have made omissions we are not aware of. Readers can help us correct these in other contexts by contacting us with their information.

Véronique Campion-Vincent  
Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris

**Philippe Aldrin, *Sociologie politique des rumeurs*. Paris: PUF, 2005**

Many books on rumors mention 'political rumors', but Philippe Aldrin's work is the first to deal exclusively with the issue. The author draws on a rich bibliography, a varied corpus of rumors and fieldwork (observations and interviews in several towns in the south of France).

Aldrin outlines the theoretical framework of his research, positioning himself in relation to three paradigms of rumor.

The *psycho-pathological paradigm*, which is heir to a moralizing conception of rumors, is set aside with the opinion, following M.-L. Rouquette, that rumor is a normal phenomenon of social communication.

The *transactional paradigm* sees rumor as an exchange of information, a product of social interactions. Aldrin makes this paradigm his own – it comes directly out of T. Shibutani's work on the role of informal communication (rumors) compared with formal communication (authority, media) – enriching it with Raymond Boudon's analyses of the 'good reasons for believing' that make people act intentionally on the information market: 'Each social actor taking part in a rumor process does so for personal reasons determined by their own history, their social relations and the precise context they then find themselves in' (p. 46). This very 'individualizing' vision leads the author to underestimate, as between individuals and global society, the intermediate level of groups, networks, 'active minorities' (S. Moscovici), whose role is decisive in the creation and spread of rumors for ideological ends.

Finally Aldrin expresses his reservations as to the *semiological paradigm*, which sees rumors as the expression of mythical thought, for example, the area of study of urban legends. He attacks 'interpretations arrived at through a supposedly collective psychoanalysis' (p. 129). However, again and again the author shows an evident interest in 'political myths', 'social imaginaries' and the 'exemplary symbolic dimension' (p. 34) of rumors.

The 'Diana rumor' [the car accident is alleged to be a killing ordered by the British and the Israelis to prevent Diana marrying Dodi Al Fayed] illustrates how social actors draw from the common imaginary pool to construct a counter-version of the event. Alongside borrowings from the universal, or at least classical, repertoire of myths (the princess led astray, impossible love persecuted, conspiracies) the narrative is rooted in the present time by borrowings from the ad hoc contemporary stock of mythologies (European countries' contempt for Muslims, the power of Mossad) (p. 32).

'Exchange of rumours throws light on the upsurge of the imaginary and *pathos* in those societies that are thought to be rationalized, individualistic and technological' (p. 276). But, paradoxically, classic authors on the imaginary (G. Durand) and the political imaginary (A. Reszler, R. Girardet, J.-P. Sironneau) are quoted sparsely or not at all. The writer probably wishes, by this decision, to set himself apart from a hermeneutic approach to rumors, and also because of a certain misunderstanding of the sociology of the imaginary and the theoretical mistrust of the imaginary that is common in political science, even more than in sociology. What a gap to be filled in the analysis of political rumors!

We find this out with the first rumor studied by Aldrin in his 'Prologue' (the

heir-apparent to Defferre is alleged to have caused his death indirectly), in which there appears the mythical figure of the Traitor (Brutus, Judas, Ganelon . . .). This is another reason why the author has not used, mistakenly in all likelihood, the heuristic approach suggested by Kapferer (*Rumeurs*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, ch. 17) showing that the function of political rumors – like funny stories – is to build up a *stereotypical image* of a political personality. And, finally, to state (p. 77) that studies of urban legends do not pay attention to the motives of the rumor-mongers or the reactions they provoke in their audience is a wilful simplification.

These objections do not place a question-mark over the results obtained by Aldrin. He proposes an illuminating typology of uses of political rumors, and probably rumors in general, with three registers (pp. 86–7 and 270–4):

1. 'A routine register getting round the rules of speech.' This is a parallel market in political information, different from the media and official statements, where it is possible to say rude things without really believing them. This 'gossip', akin to funny stories, reveals information that is supposed to be hidden – on the universal themes of sex, money and health – and reinforces the feeling of belonging (in French *entre-soi*).
2. 'A register of adjusting to political upsets' where, in crisis situations, official sources of information are not enough and rumors respond to urgent questions from the public.
3. 'An alternative register when public truth is lacking', when rumor fills the gap in official information, or replaces information thought to be unsatisfactory, by revealing a hidden truth.

Some political rumors clearly belong to one register or the other: for instance Jean Tibéri's appointment as ambassador to the Vatican falls into the first register, while the Carpentras affair belongs to the third. Still more interesting is the fact, well demonstrated by Aldrin, that the same political rumor can come into all three registers depending on the degree of involvement of those spreading the rumor. So the rumor that Diana's death was a contract killing is a strange theory for most people (*register 1*), an important piece of information for the princess's fans, who were shocked by her sudden violent death and urgently demanded information (*register 2*) and a certainty for a minority who, for various reasons, did not believe official information and clung to the conspiracy theory (*register 3*). Philippe Aldrin is proposing a veritable theory of rumor reception.

The author is also interested in the content of rumors since he draws up (p. 106) a typology of political rumors: stories of perversion (departures from morality or the norm), stories of betrayal (friendship destroyed, vows broken), stories of plotting (hidden intentions, secret contacts, unnatural alliances) and stories of bad things concealed (illnesses, a troubled past).

The pages on antisemitism and the Carpentras affair are rather weak: errors of fact (1868 is not the date the tsarist secret police fabricated the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* but the publication date of the pamphlet by Maurice Joly which directly inspired them); gaps (for example, it is a pity there are no quotations from Michaël Prazan and Tristan Mendès-France's study of the antisemitic rumors in Paris in 1920 – *La Maladie no. 9* [Paris: Berg International, 2001] – or Patrick Rateau's article on the

socio-cognitive mechanisms at work in the Carpentras rumor – ‘Pensée sociale, mémoire collective et saillance d’un événement: l’affaire de Carpentras’ [*Psychologie & Société*, no. 4, 2002]; generalizations (the demonstration of the influence of Israel’s image after the 1967 Arab–Israeli war on the Orléans rumor is unconvincing). On the other hand Aldrin deploys all his analytical finesse as a political commentator in the chapters on rumors as political weapons, for instance, stigmatizing women politicians, and the connections between rumors and opinions, in particular the unlikely rumor of soviet tanks arriving in France in May 1981 was a fantastical upwelling of opinion by a section of the population that had been spooked by the socialist–communist coalition getting into government.

Finally, Aldrin’s book enriches the study of rumors by showing the process whereby rumor crystallizes into belief, ‘rumour’s conservation phase’ (p. 270), for example, as regards the death of Defferre or the Carpentras affair, a process already observed by René Domergue concerning rumors about the true number of deaths caused by the Nîmes flood in 1988 – *La Rumeur de Nîmes* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1998).

Jean-Bruno Renard  
<jean-bruno.renard@univ-montp3.fr>

**Gillian Bennett, *Bodies: Sex, Violence, Disease, and Death in Contemporary Legend*. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2005**

Some readers may become a little apprehensive when they read, in the introduction to *Bodies*, that Gillian Bennett regards her approach to contemporary legends as analogous to Paul Klee’s famous description of drawing as ‘taking a line for a walk’. (Surely there are differences in the requirements of scholarship and those of artistic creativity?) However, the author is simply forewarning the reader that, in discussing a given legend, she will move across the boundaries that are often seen to exist between folklore, history, literature and current events.

The reader may be assured that in this volume their guide is deeply steeped in the literature of contemporary legend scholarship. She belongs to what is sometimes called the Sheffield School of contemporary legend studies. This takes its name from a series of annual seminars first held in Sheffield, England, in 1982. The Sheffield School has no common theory of contemporary legends, but has treated them as worthy of carefully scrutiny in all their variant forms. Members have also shown a certain distrust of anyone who attempted to force legends into a predetermined model. Gillian Bennett participated in that first seminar and has served legend scholarship in many ways since, not only by her own writing but as conference organizer, anthologist and editor. The reader picking up *Bodies* may be assured that it is the product of many years of deep, thoughtful and thorough study.

The book is not a systematic investigation of the whole field of contemporary legend. Instead it is a series of case studies of legends that deal with the topics outlined in the book’s subtitle: sex, violence, disease and death. The book jacket may exaggerate, but only slightly, when it refers to the book as covering ‘the most gruesome tales in contemporary legend’. In any case, they appear to have been chosen for

inclusion not because they are 'gruesome' but because they have the character to illuminate ways in which people think about their own bodies, about illness and death and about the ordinary person's relationship with medicine. The author's basic position is that these short stories are not trivial but 'spring from the human psyche'. After reading this book, will anyone disagree?

Throughout the book, the author contextualizes contemporary legends in two main ways. First, she demonstrates that, although these stories are 'modern' in the sense that they are currently told, they often have long histories. For example, she outlines 120 versions of the type of story to which she gives most detailed attention, the so-called Bosom Serpent, moving backwards in time from 1995 to the 12th century of the modern era. There are also some undated examples which may be even older. As is often the case, scholars have accepted as a matter of convenience a name for this legend which is not particularly appropriate. The inaccurate 'Bosom Serpent' perhaps gains prestige from being derived from the title of a literary work by Nathaniel Hawthorne. These stories have in common the fact that they involve people who have snakes or frogs or other creatures lodged within their stomachs or elsewhere in their bodies, although how this is interpreted may vary with time, society and the individual teller. Hawthorne employed the serpent concept as a metaphor for selfish pride. For Gillian Bennett, it not only demonstrated a 'folk view of the body' but also preserved a 'traditional cure for a traditional condition'.

The second sense in which she can be said to place the legends in a 'context' is when she links the legends to other aspects of life beyond the relatively brief narratives which are usually considered to be their defining characteristic. One chapter deals with what the author calls 'AIDS aggressors', stories in which someone appears to set out to deliberately infect others. One particularly pithy example is where a man wakes after a sexual encounter with a stranger to find 'Welcome to the world of AIDS' written on the bedroom mirror. This story, like the Bosom Serpent, has earlier analogues. Gillian Bennett quotes examples from, amongst other sources, the medieval text *Gesta Romanorum* and a 17th-century English work, Daniel Defoe's *Diary of the Plague Year*. In interpreting it, she notes that some writers have suggested it is essentially a cautionary tale, but whilst acknowledging that it may sometimes be used in that way, she argues that to see it only in that light is 'too slick'. She commends a fellow founder of the Sheffield School, Paul Smith, for linking AIDS legends not only to other folkloric forms such as jokes, rumors, graffiti and popular fallacies, but also to literature and political comment. Having reviewed a number of ways in which stories of AIDS aggressors appear to function, she concludes that they touch on a deeper aspect of the human condition: 'There is nothing one can do to protect oneself from the randomness of attack and disease. There is no such thing as "risky behavior", because it's life itself that is risky.'

Some readers might disagree, but Gillian Bennett has given a clear account of other interpretations and has explained how she has come to her own conclusion. In general she opts for deep and general interpretations of the stories. For example, she cites a story which in one form involves a young woman who is attending a social function in a dress bought from a department store. During the evening she becomes ill and is taken home. A doctor is called but she dies before he arrives. An autopsy shows that the girl has formaldehyde in her veins, absorbed from the dress. It

emerges that the store had sold the dress for a corpse, accepted it back and then sold it again. One interpretation of such a story is that it represents what Gary Alan Fine has called the 'Goliath Effect', the suspicion that ordinary people have of large, faceless organizations, as exemplified by the department store. However, Gillian Bennett groups this story with examples of *Poisonous Brides* and *Poisonous Sex*, some of them dating far back in time. They have in common the fact that they deal with skin-to-skin contact, either direct, as in sexual intercourse, or indirect, with the dress as an intermediate agent.

When this reviewer set out to investigate modern legends many years ago, one hypothesis considered was that they gained their power from the use of dramatic irony. As a general explanation of the legends this proved to be quite inadequate, but it certainly applies to the story called 'The Killing of the Prodigal Son'. The central notion is that a son, who many years before had set out to make his fortune, returns home to his parents' inn. They do not recognize him and kill him for his apparent wealth. Gillian Bennett reviews many examples of this story, some of them literary. Albert Camus used the story twice, first in *L'Étranger*, as an item on a scrap of newspaper found by the hero, and then as the central plot of the play, *Le Malentendu*. Bennett concludes her review of the stories with *Le Malentendu*, whose ending she rightly characterizes as 'bleak'. She notes that no new versions of this once common story have appeared since the middle of the 20th century and suggests that, given the wars and social upheaval of the last 50 years, this is surprising. Perhaps folklorists have simply overlooked such stories and they will eventually come to light.

The final two chapters of *Bodies* deal with particularly delicate issues. The legends covered include stories of organ theft and of satanic abuse of children. Also discussed is the 'Blood Libel', the centuries-old belief that Jews make use of the blood of Christian children in some of their religious rituals. Complexities arise when analysing these stories in part because many of them deal with children, about whom adults have deep-seated protective feelings. The stories also play a part in ongoing public debates. How does one distinguish between a probably false story about children being stolen for their body parts and an accredited case where a hospital stores the body parts of dead children without their parents' consent? Gillian Bennett guides us carefully through situations where folklorists may, on the one hand, be praised for helping to expose false accusations and, on the other hand, be blamed for encouraging the denial of real abuses.

Having enthusiastically followed Gillian Bennett through thoughtful, insightful and knowledgeable analyses of these stories, this reviewer found her brief 'Afterword' rather perplexing. Perhaps feeling a need to go beyond the specific judgements she has made in various chapters, she makes some general statements which, in this reviewer's opinion, do not add to the value of the book. In part the tone is rather defensive. These stories are 'in no way trivial', 'no way merely trivial warning'. Of course, she has been arguing that, with specific examples, in the body of the book. This point has already been established. In this 'Afterword', however, she abandons specific concrete examples and replaces them with unhelpful rhetoric. Rather surprisingly, she asserts that the legends are not merely 'indicators of social fears and pressures', but rather they are 'fear itself'. But what is the difference between being 'indicators' of fear and being 'fear itself'. Perhaps the answer is con-

nected to the fact that some legends have 'led to fearful actions', but this is not clear. Whatever point is intended here needs to be laid out much more fully.

The other surprising aspect of this Afterword is the attack on those of her fellow folklorists who adopt a psychosocial approach to contemporary legends, who seek to be 'good citizens' and who risk becoming 'thought police' for established views. Here the author's aim may be to ensure that proper respect is paid to the perspective of the poor and the powerless, but that can only be inferred from remarks which are too cryptic to be convincing. And does she really wish the phrase 'good citizen' to be a term of disapproval? However, it must be stressed that these five or six pages make up only a small fraction of the book and do not detract from the many merits of the main chapters.

Sandy Hobbs  
<sandyhobbs10@hotmail.com>

**Yves-Marie Bercé, *A la découverte des trésors cachés. Du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours.*  
Paris: Perrin, 2004**

This book on the 'eternal dream of sudden wealth' draws up a catalogue of marvelous beliefs concerning treasure but also shows the link between these quests and the growth of lotteries and games of chance from the 17th century. Nowadays this 'consumption of the past', whose learned and popular levels the author refuses to order in a hierarchy, acknowledging the legitimacy of each, fascinates treasure hunters, be they deep-sea divers or amateur archaeologists armed with metal detectors. Those circles have their legends, recounted with empathy, and as such this book is of interest to the field of contemporary legends.

Véronique Campion-Vincent  
<campionv@msh-paris.fr>

**Gérald Bronner, *L'Empire des croyances.* Paris: PUF, 2003**

Though it does not deal directly with rumor, Gérald Bronner's excellent book is extremely interesting for that research area: on the one hand, because many examples set out by the author are drawn from the corpus of rumors and urban legends, and on the other, because the theoretical approach suggested for the study of beliefs may be a model for the analysis of rumors. The phrase 'empire of beliefs' should be understood in the two senses of the word 'empire': first, beliefs form a *vast domain* stretching from scientific representations to superstitions through parascientific beliefs, received ideas, rumors, ideologies, magical and religious beliefs; second, beliefs exert a *power* over our ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

Part 1, entitled 'la logique des croyances' (the logic of beliefs – p. 11), defines the nature of believing. In Bronner's view a belief may be examined according to two criteria: a content, whose probable veracity can be measured, and the individual's



relationship to the content through a more or less complete set of arguments. There is therefore a *continuum* in beliefs between the pole of knowledge – or ‘true beliefs’ (p. 12) with a complete argument – and the pole of superstitions, whose content is probably false and whose argument is incomplete. Bronner picks up the idea, developed in his writings by Raymond Boudon, that there is ‘subjective rationality’ of beliefs and that it is blindness that makes us judge whether (other people’s!) beliefs are irrational or motivated by feeling. The logic underlying beliefs is opaque to us because of the cultural distance between different but equally coherent representations of the world, because of non-recognition of the often probabilistic nature of beliefs (gamblers who bet do not believe they are definitely going to win – this is also Pascal’s ‘wager’ as to the existence of God) and finally because an individual belief has a history (entry into a system of beliefs occurs gradually, with each moment being perceived by the individual as reasonable, even if eventually it reaches ‘the incredible’ as far as other people are concerned).

Part 2 of Bronner’s book is devoted to the ‘conditions of emergence of beliefs’ (p. 83). Only an all-knowing person would have no need to believe. Beliefs arise when our access to information is limited. This idea, which is familiar to those specializing in rumor, here takes on a general value. The author distinguishes three types of limitation. *Dimensional limits* (space, time, range of possibilities) encourage us to think up causes – for example, belief in a ‘famine conspiracy’ will explain a shortage whose economic causes its victims cannot fathom – or places such as utopias, or times such as beyond death or the future. *Cultural limits* make us misinterpret correct information: for instance, in 1986 a North Korean airforce plane entered South Korean airspace, which was perceived as an attack, whereas its occupants were coming to ask for political asylum. *Cognitive limits*, that is, our pseudo-reasoning and statistical intuitions (all of them biased judgements, studied especially by the American psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman) explain our acceptance of false ideas such as overestimating the number of orphans left by the 9/11 attacks on New York, overestimating the incidence of depression among teachers, or underestimating hospital-generated diseases. Bronner explains that the cost of verifying a piece of information is high, while the cost of a belief thought acceptable is low. The popular expression ‘You never know . . .’ as well as the political ‘precautionary principle’ both lead us to accept quite a lot of beliefs, at least provisionally.

This approach in terms of cost is developed in the book’s third and final part where the author presents an economic model of beliefs: ‘the cognitive market’ (p. 173). This is where the metaphor is slipped in according to which beliefs replace economic goods: cognitive supply (beliefs and their supporters), cognitive demand (need for beliefs), cognitive competition (several beliefs responding to the same demand), cognitive monopoly (a single mode of interpreting reality), cognitive protectionism or free trade (policies closing or opening the cognitive market), and so on. In opposition to the external determination of beliefs by a ‘collective consciousness’ (Durkheim, Marx, Bourdieu) Bronner adopts the viewpoint of methodological individualism (Weber, Simmel, Boudon), which holds that interactions between people explain the emergence, disappearance or survival of beliefs. Thus research on rumors is looked at again through the prism of the ‘cognitive market’. A piece of

information whose source is credible will be 'bought' because its 'price' is affordable; but a scarcely credible source offers information at a 'prohibitive price' because it requires verification. This is why a majority belief, through 'group effect', offers a low-cost belief that will tend to be maintained. Accepting a minority belief means expecting to pay dearly for it (being socially marginalized, needing to verify it). As a priority people will also seek out information that affects them (the 'involvement' dear to M.-L. Rouquette) and is cognitively coherent (L. Festinger) with their system of representations. A belief standing in contradiction to a person's ideas will seem to have a 'prohibitive price' because it will require a reorganization of that person's cognitive system.

Bronner criticizes 'functionalist' theories that explain beliefs by their social function, arguing that there are functionless or socially harmful beliefs. In my view this is to reduce the notion of function to that of beneficial utility, which does not match the use functionalists make of it. In the area of Richard Dawkins's work on cultural transmission Bronner suggests a 'Darwinian' conception of the emergence of beliefs by a process of selection enabling the most adapted beliefs to survive. This idea is open to the same criticisms as those levelled at functionalism: in what way are counter-productive, socially harmful beliefs more 'adapted'? The critique of 'functionalist' interpretations of urban legends (p. 213) is not accompanied by an alternative analysis of these rumors in terms of improved adaptation unless it is the idea, well known to specialists in the matter, that a legend will have more success the more it possesses a 'good shape' to its narrative and emotional power. Some British authors have shown that the approach to contemporary legends in terms of selection of 'memes' (which, according to Dawkins, are to culture what genes are to biology) is no more appropriate than the classic behavioural approach (B. F. Skinner) in terms of 'reinforced conditioning' (a belief is taken on board because it reinforces a prior belief) (Sandy Hobbs and David Cornwell, 'The Meme and the Operant', *Letters to Ambrose Merton: A Quarterly Folklore Miscellany*, no. 27, 2003: 2-11). In particular, supporters of the meme theory cannot provide proof that individuals have the choice, at a given moment, between competing variants of the same rumor. In actual fact the existence of variants of a rumor has nothing to do with a process of variability, of 'changes', but with a process of transformation of content according to context, for example, an American urban legend is modified when it comes into French culture. And what does it matter whether this phenomenon is 'Lamarckian' rather than 'Darwinian'?

This is a sign of how much this absorbing book speaks to researchers interested in the category of beliefs formed by rumors. Bronner invites us to discover a *cognitive sociology of rumors* that is a perfect complement to the social and cognitive psychology initiated by M.-L. Rouquette.

Jean-Bruno Renard

**Jan Harold Brunvand, *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001 (and New York, Norton, 2002, spiral-bound edition)**

The five books published by Jan Harold Brunvand between 1981 and 1993 – *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, *American Urban Legends and Their Meaning* (1981), *The Choking Doberman* (1984), *The Mexican Pet* (1986), *Curses! Broiled Again!* (1989) and *The Baby Train* (1993) – established the dominance of the phrase ‘urban legends’, which he invented and introduced to a wide audience. The phrase has replaced ‘contemporary legends’, as suggested by the Sheffield group. We may think ‘contemporary legends’ is more precise because these stories are also found in remote villages, but urban legends is shorter and expresses the predominance of towns in today’s societies.

Brunvand, who was in contact with a very wide circle of informants and wrote a popular newspaper column between 1987 and 1992, aimed at and reached the general public: he was clear, told a good story, had fun and amused his readers, collected anecdotes and commented on them tirelessly. The four books after *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* drew to a large extent on those contacts, and in a lively manner pointed up the disappointment of Brunvand’s readers when they found out that the fascinating and novel true story they thought was genuine was only an urban legend. Those books contain briefer analyses and are sometimes more akin to a simple catalogue. But Brunvand kept up his activities as an academic folklorist, bringing out four editions, from 1968 to 1998, of a textbook – *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* – and editing an important encyclopedia bringing together 260 contributors – *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (1996).

In the area of urban legends a second period of activity followed the first when his newspaper column ended. Publication of collections of texts – *Too Good to Be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends* (1999) – and articles – *The Truth Never Stands in the Way of a Good Story* (2000) – came before an encyclopedia, of which he is the sole editor – *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2001). (A popular anthology of texts, *Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid*, was published in 2004.)

The encyclopedia is an extensive piece of work, very clearly presented (alphabetical table to start with, pp. v–xx, and index to finish up, pp. 501–24), which attempts to introduce readers to both serious high-level study and entertaining commercial exploitation of the genre. Three-quarters of the entries are devoted to legends presented in alphabetical order by their ‘conventional’ titles, which means generally attributed to Brunvand. More often than not they are mentioned via simple summaries. Readers who are curious about the versions told or written are referred to Brunvand’s books, especially the recent *Too Good to be True*, which publishes 200 legends.

Some entries mention the favourite topics of urban legends: accidents, animals, atrocities, automobiles, babies, contamination, crimes, shopping malls, sex, societies, violence, thefts, and so on. These subjects, selected by Brunvand, link with his proposal for a classification of urban legends as set out in *The Baby Train*. Other series of entries are connected to the study of urban legends: friend of a friend (FOAF), analysis and interpretation, classification, collection, Goliath effect, Gremlin effect, motif, ostension (the re-enactment of legends), performance, proto-legend, style, etc.

Entries link with comparative interpretations such as Freudian, historical, linguistic, memetic, sociological and symbolic, as presented by the main publications in the field. (Memetic is a term akin to gene/genetic introduced in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins to refer to replicating units transmitting specific aspects of cultures. Its application to urban legends is often associated with a negative idea of them seen as viruses of the mind. In France the term has been used by the cognitive philosopher Dan Sperber.) Some folklore genres akin to urban legends are presented: funny stories, myths, rumors – but not anecdotes.

The reciprocal influences of urban legends and popular culture are reviewed: strip cartoon, cinema, literature, music, popular press (tabloids), radio, talk shows (often quoted as authorities validating an urban legend, with revelations supposedly made on them about satanic links to companies such as MacDonald's or Procter & Gamble), television, etc.

In Brunvand's view urban legends are above all an American phenomenon. So he tends to ignore non-American origins or developments of groups such as legends of organ theft. However, he has made an effort to cover the international aspect and compilations and studies from 24 countries are presented. (One of the 'countries' is Scotland. In Romania Brunvand cites his own observations – when he stayed in the then communist country to study vernacular architecture. In Japan he does not quote any studies but notes that all his books have been translated into Japanese and that he has received many letters from readers.) In the introduction Brunvand stresses the changes brought to the circulation of urban legends by the advent of the internet, and also by their popularity and their use by professionals. Today the genre is less oral but its development is not at an end.

The *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* is an essential but insufficient work tool. Even a major researcher in the field cannot on their own write an encyclopedia that covers the full spectrum of approaches; several people need to be involved in such an undertaking.

Véronique Campion-Vincent

**Adam Burgess, *Cellular Phones, Public Fears and a Culture of Precaution*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004**

Why have we included a book whose index does not contain the term 'rumor'? Because Adam Burgess's remarkable work on public fears in the face of the risks that mobile phones (also called cellular phones) are said to present is a thorough analysis of the social conditions encouraging expression of the technophobia that is rife nowadays, with the mushrooming of rumors about the supposed harmful effects of many new technologies.

Taking the opposite tack to current received ideas, this courageous book demolishes all the more firmly the arbitrary theories at the root of the risk culture and the precautionary principle because it avoids any condemnation of the moralists exploiting risk, whom no scientific study could convince. In fact fears of mobile phones are

not based on proven scientific facts – the author reminds us that all the large-scale studies have exonerated them – but on the possible future appearance of harmful consequences.

The author's approach is close to moderate constructionism, according to which social problems are constructed more by actors than by events. Burgess emphasizes the importance of 'suspicious sensibilities vis-à-vis the "contaminations" of modernity' (p. 16). Alarmists are quick to accuse reassuring scientific results of being biased because they are financed by manufacturers thought to be careless of risks to health; however, it is striking that such questions about actual motives are never asked of them and they are assumed to be altruistic and irreproachable. 'The heightened perception of risk appears to be connected with the growth of individualization and the decline of beliefs, social institutions and practices' (p. 28), more than mechanically determined by the state of our environment.

Then, describing the revolution brought about by mobile phones, which blur the boundaries between public and private, work and play, and have become a significant element in the socialization of teenagers, the book traces the genealogy of these fears along a path from x-rays, power lines and microwaves up to low-frequency waves of all kinds. A rapid study of the main routes for the international dissemination of fears about mobile phones emphasizes the focus on the supposed dangers of masts and reminds us that these campaigns have had no effect on the increase in the use of mobiles. The two final chapters return to the culture of precaution encouraged by the authorities who, in Adam Burgess's view, have abdicated in the face of the alarmists, who set themselves up as representative of public opinion but are in the comfortable situation of not being accountable to those they are supposed to represent.

This is a book that will make its mark. However, two criticisms may be advanced. First, a piece of research in which only English-language sources are cited is bound to be limited when it mentions non-English-speaking countries. When Adam Burgess states, after a rapid presentation of a French expert's 2001 report called the *Rapport Zmirou*, that there is no serious concern about mobile phones or masts in France (p. 174), he passes too swiftly over the successes of organizations battling against the erection of relay masts (see [www.priartem.com](http://www.priartem.com)) or the activities of politicians (see [www.mouans-sartoux.net/aschieri](http://www.mouans-sartoux.net/aschieri)), leading to the setting up of the Agence Française de Sécurité Sanitaire de l'Environnement et du Travail (see [www.afsse.fr/afsse1024](http://www.afsse.fr/afsse1024)). Adam Burgess is well aware of the significance in France of the case of contaminated blood in the loss of the authorities' legitimacy, but he did not find anyone there to analyse the situation.

This is not the case for Italy, where he carries out a real analysis of the controversy around Radio Vatican's masts and the precautionary measures taken against *elettrosmog* (pp. 194–203).

Second – and this is only a minor methodological observation – the abbreviation EMF used from page 6 onwards is not defined until page 134, which says that it stands for non-ionizing electromagnetic fields. It does not figure in the list of abbreviations, nor the index.

Véronique Campion-Vincent

**Véronique Campion-Vincent, *La Société parano. Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes*. Paris: Payot, 2005**

*La Société parano* belongs to the category of useful texts; its intention is to 'identify the main lines, current tendencies' of what are commonly called *conspiracy theories*. What are they? – a paranoid universe that can be defined by phrases like 'it's all connected'; 'nothing happens by chance' or 'things aren't what they seem'.

This volume will prove useful to all who are interested in perversions of contemporary thinking; in it they will find a living museum of the weirdest conspiracy beliefs. It is also useful because the conspiracy myth is continually changing and could today be an undercover and increasingly intrusive passenger on our relationship trip with the world.

In Véronique Campion-Vincent's view this is in fact one of the specificities of the conspiracy myth's contemporary form: when we were thinking it was limited to reactionary thinking, it is on the contrary rife in all sections of the population and extends beyond political topics. The second aspect of current conspiracy thinking is imagining the existence of 'mega-conspiracies', plots whose ambitions are thought to be world-wide. It is as if imaginative themes, like everything else, were becoming global.

Though they may seem different from one another, the many examples provided by the book appear to converge on a common condemnation. A strong impression emerges from the book, which parallels an underlying concern, that the categories of collective anxiety have altered during the last few decades. In this overview one example stands out as emblematic – John F. Kennedy's assassination (75 percent of Americans said in 1992 that they supported the theory of a conspiracy in that affair). Who was responsible for that murder? There are different answers: the KKK, people from outer space, the mafia, etc., but the body that keeps coming to the surface like a sea-snake is the CIA. The American government agency's implication is in fact not fortuitous, it turns up as the ideal culprit in every plot, since it represents the poisonous figure of American governmental power.

It is at this point that Véronique Campion-Vincent reveals the full scope and importance of the subject she is dealing with. She explains that two malevolent entities emerge from the contemporary imagination concerning conspiracies: science and the USA. Previously the ideal culprits were deviants or minorities, in other words, *other people*. Fantasy fears provide new actors for the theatre of hate, and these actors could very well be other selves, as an expression of self-hate, since science, like the USA, is one of the paradigmatic figures of western contemporary life. It is an idea, suggested by reading this book, that deserves to be studied further.

In conclusion the author quite accurately reminds us that chance is the unwanted host of conspiracy theories that claim to reveal how disparate elements of human history fit together. In a sense the world's complexity is always denied in favour of a search for a single cause. Maybe it is not illegitimate to worry that contemporary thinking sees doubt and widespread suspicion as a mark of intelligence rather than a weakness of judgement. And so, rather paradoxically, we feel like quoting Nietzsche, one of the great figures of the philosophy of suspicion: 'Let chance come to me.'

Gérald Bronner  
<gerald.bronner@univ.nancy2.fr>

Véronique Champion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard, *De source sûre. Nouvelles rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Payot, 2002

Legend is presented in this book as a 'daughter of History impregnated by Myth' (p. 19). Through this clever phrase we can measure the road travelled since the late 19th century, when it was possible to read, from the pen of a disillusioned poet, that to make history live we should 'kill off legend' (Catulle Mendès, *La Légende du Parnasse Contemporain*, Brussels, 1884, p. 266).

Despite that aphorism legend has lost none of its vitality. It has conquered new areas and still runs around just as freely. Rumor is its best representative in the contemporary world. It is a relatively brief statement which is subject to frequent manipulation along the chain of transmission. And because it is lightweight the message can be disseminated very rapidly among the population. Because the spread of information is facilitated by modern channels of communication, the internet has become the tool of a new folklore chiefly made up of urban legends. These *rumors of today* are defined by Véronique Champion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard as 'anecdotes from modern life, of unknown origin, related as true, but false or doubtful' (p. 20). They are connected with belief, whose function is not to alert individual consciousness to historical, scientific or objective knowledge of facts. Rumors target group thinking, which finds in them elements for putting feelings into words and expressing a socially shared emotional state. Therefore it is important not to avoid semantic issues when studying rumors because analysis of their content can help us both to pin down the symbolic dimension of the message and to understand the reasons for its seductive power.

What do today's rumors tell us and what older narrative motifs can we link them with? These are the first questions to which Véronique Champion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard give us substantial answers using an exemplary methodology. Having assembled a first corpus in their previous book on urban legends (*Légendes urbaines. Rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*. Paris, 1992 [2002]), they have collected some new data with a view to drawing up a veritable *catalogue raisonné* of modern folklore. Over several months they gleaned the most diverse messages, making sure they did not neglect any of the channels on which suspicious information circulates. Then they worked at separating true from false by subjecting the content of each to a well-documented evaluation. The results of their lengthy meticulous study are contained in this book. In it we find the whole spectrum of fears, desires and temptations that characterize our times, and also the very varied forms these feelings or tensions can assume in the discourse of our contemporaries. And so almost 150 rumors with their variants are laid out before our eyes in carefully arranged boxes. These inset descriptions often reflect back to us virtual or fantastic worlds modelled on the internet or dominated by sexual performance. But most frequently it is the cry of a mind tormented by fears around food, technophobia, urban violence and the return of wild animals that breaks through; and while some statements depict fantasy situations or at times even funny ones, other pictures show a real fascination with the supernatural. This themed review is backed up by a study of sources and a table of ideas, both of which increase the book's academic interest. Reading these we are tempted to conclude that rumor in cities is seldom a legend *sui generis*. Indeed for the authors urban rumor

reactivates a familiar narrative motif, adapting it for a modern situation. Old and new seem to intermingle to produce a recast version of reality that is more often than not distorted. As the content of the message borrows as much from the past as from the present, it might be said that it partakes of a bipolar temporality. This temporal coupling is the work of an implicit thought process involving symbolic forms, which draw their raw material from collective memory and imagination to reconstruct the data the attention is focused on. In other words, cognitive functions that are attending to a current event at the same time facilitate the 'return of cultural elements left behind' into the field of consciousness. Since the mental representation of an event does not involve any special effort of consciousness or reasoning, we can understand more easily that belief in rumors is unrelated to educational level, as the authors discovered.

Cognitive mediation therefore plays an essential part in the life of rumors. It intervenes not only when they are created but also when they are passed on, modifying the content of messages. And so participants quite involuntarily alter in their discourse events they may have witnessed or been told about. The most frequent distortions result from three operations, which Véronique Campion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard describe most precisely. There is *amplification*, which amounts to exaggerating details; *transposition*, which is moving information to an unaccustomed context; and *reconstruction*, which affects the overall structure of the item. These manipulations explain the success of urban legends because they allow everyone to graft on personal elements. However, there is another explanation for their spread. It rests on the more sociological arguments provided in this book. If rumor arouses so much interest among the urban population, this is also because of its social utility. In this case spreading a false piece of information reveals a genuine problem. Sometimes it is even the way to cope with it. It is true that the anecdote of the radioactive diamonds sold by the Russian or Albanian mafia repeats the legendary theme of the evil-bearing necklace (pp. 51–3). But given recent events, this story may be understood as a symbolic warning of the risk of nuclear pollution, which, since the Chernobyl disaster, has become one of our contemporaries' chief preoccupations. The ideology of security may also have something to do with it, as is shown by the paragraph devoted to the legend called 'the compassionate terrorist' (pp. 242–8). In this story, traces of which are found in traditional folklore, a suspicious person warns someone to whom he feels he owes something about an imminent criminal act he is preparing to commit, so that he/she can avoid the danger. What should we think of such a rumor resurfacing in French cities at the very moment when the government was announcing in December 2002 that the 'Vigipirate' measures were being strengthened to combat threats of attack? Whether deliberate or not, the spread of that message, perfectly synchronized with the preventive measures, was part of the campaign to raise awareness about the rise in urban violence. From that example we can understand that the authorities have no interest in putting an end to some rumors. In the end it matters little to them whether the rumor is false, unlikely or immoral if it makes their job easier. It is then a combination, legitimized by circumstances, of rationality and belief, an unnatural marriage that, in the view of the book's authors, demonstrates an appreciable development in public behaviour: 'Scorned and resisted in the past by self-confident



public officials, who expatiated on the infantilism of an ignorant public, deriding and deploring it, rumors . . . and the legends that flesh them out, are often listened to today, nay even respected as legitimate warnings forecasting a disaster which they might help to limit' (p. 336). In these circumstances can we really 'kill off legend'?

Jean-Marc Ramos  
<jean-marc.ramos@univ-montp3.fr>

**Linda Degh, *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001**

Linda Degh is a great name in research on modern legends, especially for the important theoretical articles she wrote with Andrew Vázsonyi between 1971 and 1983 on the dialectics of legend, 'memorates', the multiple channel hypothesis, truth status and ostensive action. In this comprehensive volume published in 2001 she returns to her earlier work on the folklore genre of legend in the contemporary western world, and extends it. As the title indicates, the book focuses on the debate around belief fostered by legend, to which she gives a central place while positioning it in the irrational. Though she insists on the need for folklorists themselves to do the collecting, Linda Degh uncovers the presence of legend (she uses the term only in the singular) in the most varied material: interviews, visits to memorial sites, articles in the popular press, fictional mysteries. She concludes the first chapter, which reviews definitions of legend proposed by the different folklore schools (pp. 23–97), by taking the term legend to mean 'an overarching concept linking all the long or short stories that may have been artificially classified in subcategories without being based on essential features' and by stating: 'the exchange of contradictory information is what makes a legend a legend' (p. 97).

In the following chapter 'The legend as text in context' (pp. 98–203) the legend is defined minimally as 'a unit of plot, however weak the coherence of its variations' (p. 102); it is thus possible to find its essence even in quite impoverished versions. The 'text' is by no means limited to the oral version from the past but includes communications through all channels – written and/or electronic – as well as the mass-culture ones with commercial purposes. The analyst's task is to contextualize, 'that is, to situate the legend in the cultural system that produced it' (p. 203) and gives it its meaning. The chapter on 'the legend's narrators' (pp. 203–310) presents the everyday story-tellers – reminding us of the importance of beliefs in UFOs in the American cultural landscape – and also the personalities, clairvoyants and healers, seen above all as storytellers. Finally, groups – children, teenagers, adults who carry on family traditions of spiritualism, media representatives – are looked at.

In the chapter 'Landscape and climate of legend' (pp. 311–99) belief is likened to elements of a religion and legend is considered in all its variations as a consoling messenger of immortality. We may think this interpretation is far from exhausting the meanings of contemporary legend. However, in Linda Degh's view, it is the one an empathetic attitude towards legend's narrators leads us to – and she criticizes most folklorists for keeping their distance from those they study by taking refuge in

the 'elitist ivory tower of objective truth' (p. 317). In the last chapter, 'Texts put into context and processed' (pp. 400–42), Linda Degh begins by saying that traces of legend may be found in the most ordinary rituals and she interprets as a 'condensed or postulated legend' (p. 402) her own family's tradition of placing the bread on the 'right' side before being cut. Then she enthusiastically presents the concept of ostension, that is, acting out of a legend, which may inspire spiritual cures but also copycat crimes of which she gives a number of examples (pp. 422–40). To conclude, she comes back to the duty to empathize: 'legends can only be collected for a monograph by taking part in the life of the community . . . [We need to] assume the narrators' and listeners' point of view in their interpretations and uses of texts' (pp. 440–1).

This book presents a very personal view of 'legend', which can be criticized as too reductive. However, even if we do not agree with it, it is stimulating in the wealth and variety of material presented.

Véronique Campion-Vincent

**Pamela Donovan, *No Way of Knowing: Crime, Urban Legends and the Internet*.  
New York and London: Routledge, 2004**

This study is adapted from a PhD thesis and stands at the crossroads between several disciplines: sociology, criminology, communication (study of the internet, which was still a new medium when the research was being carried out in 1995–9) and folklore. In her brief preface Pamela Donovan contrasts the optimistic climate then with the climate of pessimism and general crisis that followed the 9/11 attacks.

In her introduction the reader learns that the study arose out of three questions posed by Pamela Donovan on: (1) the relevance and fundamental truth that rumors – at first sight an ancient folk genre – still have for many people (pp. vii–viii). Indeed, contrary to forecasts common in the 1950s and 1960s, television, media ubiquity and globalization have by no means made rumors and urban legends disappear. In particular, legends about crime play a significant, though non-institutionalized, part in 21st-century societies (p. 5). (2) Differences between the messages put out by legends about crime and institutionalized information on crime (p. 5). (3) The truth status accorded to legends about crime (p. 6).

The analysis is based on observation of discussions between supporters and opponents of the veracity of crime legends in the discussion forums on the *alt.folklore.urban* website, which was the most active site for the study of urban legends at the time of the research. The analysis was backed up by questionnaires and interviews and examination of press articles and academic studies of three crime legends. They were selected because they are old and have been directly denied in the media and by the authorities. The cases are of violent crimes committed against people, which arouse dramatic reactions very different from the reactions to crimes against property (p. 7).

Following Linda Degh (*Legend and Belief*, 2001, reviewed in this dossier) and Tamotsu Shibutani (*Improvvised News*, 1966), Pamela Donovan sees the legend as a

'public conversation' involving not only the text of the legend but also the reactions of the supporters and opponents of its veracity, as well as those of the authorities. The meaning and truth status of a rumor or legend are the result of a 'group transaction' continually being negotiated by those who recount and discuss them (p. 9). Pamela Donovan rules out a sterile quest for the origins of these crime legends, which cannot be attributed to malicious operators, but asks questions about the modes of believing in their veracity and the links between the legends and fears of violent crime or the very widespread feeling of being exposed to danger in the present-day world. (pp. 10–11).

The case studies deal with three crime legends, which take up the next three chapters:

- snuff movies – the legend states that real murders have been shot and sold for a very high price to aficionados of arousing films, whether as films, videos on cassette or online
- organ thefts – more often than not the legend features young male victims who wake up in a hotel room minus a kidney (or even both) having been drugged by a seductive blonde. These versions circulate in rich countries (and differ from the versions in poor countries, where the victims are very young, adopted or street children)
- kidnappings – the legend has women and children kidnapped at random in shops, malls, or amusement parks in order to force them into prostitution.

The legend about snuff movies appeared in the USA in the late 1960s. It was taken up again in the mid-1970s by spokesmen for virtue: first moral crusaders saying that snuff movies were the ultimate and logical form of pornography, then radical feminists who also considered their existence logical in a macho world polluted by pornography, where women were treated as sex objects. Newspaper investigations, often dealing with serial killers, also say today that this legend is true and (this is one of its main features) it has generated an impressive number of fictions (novels and films). It is the legend that is most discussed in the groups observed and those who criticize its content often use an extended cognate definition of it to include films of extreme violence – collections of executions, torture, bloody accidents – and sado-masochistic pornography, which really do exist. Like certain feminist moralists, believers frequently say that it is impossible to know whether snuff movies exist or not, so ambiguity persists. In fact this view, which is found in the three cases studied, gives the book its title. Its protective function is obvious.

As for the legend about kidney thefts, people are lukewarm believers and it is the sceptics who are the moralists. They stress the damaging effects of such stories on the donations needed for sick people awaiting transplants. In the American context the legend probably allows anxieties to be expressed about a very high-quality medical system that is fully accessible only to those who have sufficient means.

We refer readers to Pamela Donovan's article in this issue of *Diogenes* – 'How Idle is Idle Talk?' – both for the presentation of the third case studied and for the study of the forms of belief and scepticism that take up the following three chapters.

The last chapter stresses the function of these crime legends. They tame the fear of becoming a victim by describing organized crime as extremely complex and ever-

present, but saying that we can always protect ourselves with the help of the knowledge provided by legends, knowledge that circulates in familiar channels. The relationship between the 'official discourse' of the news and the mass fictions transmitted by the media on the one hand and the 'ordinary discourse' of crime legends and folklore on the other is more complex than we thought: the world of folklore is not a cut-off romantic refuge but reflects and interacts with the media world.

Crime legends, which display many archaic features, among them the omnipotence accorded to the agents of evil, are nevertheless rational and their supporters insist on their veracity, appealing to many authorities (hospitals, police, journalists) to back up what they say. Knowledge passed on is akin to a protective shield against a world of anarchy and widespread selfishness. That knowledge remains relatively impregnable to sceptics' attacks because it carries meaning.

This innovative study is written in a dense but agreeable style.

Véronique Campion-Vincent

**Frédéric Dumerchat and Philippe Véniel, *Forêt de Chizé: attention puma! La Crèche (79260): Geste Editions, 2005***

From 1995 to 1997 the forest of Chizé in the Deux-Sèvres department of France was subject to close surveillance after a group of hunters reported having glimpsed a puma there in October. Several other eye-witnesses caught sight of the animal and its appearance was an important topic in the media, especially for the local press. The Deux-Sèvres préfecture took impressive and expensive safety measures: the forest was closed to visitors and search parties were organized. But the 'creature' was not caught.

The study carried out by the authors lasted from 1996 to 2004. They met and interviewed witnesses, reviewed and analysed the press and official reports. They present the debates and the many theories worked out and enthusiastically discussed concerning the 'creature'. They concentrate on the arguments of the opposing parties: eye-witnesses, believers and sceptics as to the 'creature'.

This is not an isolated case. For more than 40 years many 'stealthy appearances' of big cats have been recorded in a number of countries. The authors provide several similar cases, linking them with the emergence of novel pets – snakes, spiders, big cats – as well as the reappearance of other 'creatures' such as lynx and wolves, accompanied by sometimes justified rumors of deliberate introduction.

Véronique Campion-Vincent

**Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds), *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*. New Brunswick and London: Aldine Transaction, 2005**

*Rumor Mills*, a collection of essays developed from papers given at the 2003 'Social Impact of Rumor and Legend' conference funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, meets the goal of its editors (also the organizers of the conference) 'to explore the social and political dynamics of rumor and the related concept of urban or contemporary legend' in almost every way (p. 2). It does so by bringing together the work of specialists in a multidisciplinary and multinational forum/format to explore the social implications of these interrelated communication genres, especially as they pertain to issues of racial prejudice and ethnic conflict, riots and wars, and global changes in the marketplace. How and why rumors and legends are transmitted, in what contexts, and how they are construed in terms of plausibility by participants and by researchers are also addressed.

Recognizing that a volume edited from conference proceedings can have 'a somewhat fragmentary quality' (p. 6), the editors frame the book with a general introduction by sociologist Gary Alan Fine, and with a general conclusion offering a set of seven detailed questions designed as guides for further research developed by Fine and the other two editors, Véronique Campion-Vincent, a folklorist, and Chip Heath, an organizational psychologist, from conference themes. Furthermore, the three main sections of the book, each containing four to five chapters, are also individually introduced: Part I 'The Social Production of Conflict and Prejudice' by Campion-Vincent; Part II 'The Spread of Rumor' by Heath; and Part III 'The Creation of Plausibility' by folklorist Patricia A. Turner.

Although the framing mechanisms are essential for giving readers vantage points into the text, individual chapters spill out of their boundaries, sometimes complementing and sometimes contradicting the general frame and each other. The tension between *Rumor Mills*' structured outline and the luxuriant growth of its 14 chapters, however, is not detrimental, but evocative of the richness of the topic and the complexity of the communication processes discussed in multiple ways. Time and space constraints will not allow an evaluation of each chapter's relation to the whole, so representative examples must suffice. Looking at two of the seven concluding questions the editors present, in conjunction with selected chapters, illustrates the thought-provoking nature of the volume.

On 'What Does Truth Have to Do With It?', the first question the editors propose, they write, in part:

A common belief among the public is that rumor is inevitably and inherently false, yet the scholarly definition of rumor as 'unsecured information' does not assume that rumors must be false. Should rumor theorists focus on determining the facticity of claims or is it sufficient for us to understand the social and psychological dynamics of belief? Put another way, is it necessary that rumors be false or simply that they be believed without secure evidence? (p. 255)

*Rumor Mills* contributors take a variety of stances on this question and its corollaries. Social psychologist and legend scholar Sandy Hobbs clearly labels as false the stories

about psychologist B. F. Skinner's keeping his children in his famous 'Box' when he makes his critique of psychology textbooks' perpetuation of Skinner anecdotes in his 'Beyond Rumor and Legend: Some Aspects of Academic Communication' (Ch. 12). His analysis, in fact, depends 'on determining the facticity of claims'.

Most of the other contributors, however, appear to take it as a given that rumors are at least 'unsecured information', and go on to analyze the possible causes and effects of these communication patterns within psychological and/or social-scientific paradigms to be discussed below. Yet authors of two of the most detailed chapters in the volume do 'not assume that rumors must be false' or even that they are 'believed without secure evidence'. Anthropologists Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg and Flavien T. Ndonko with sociologist Song Yang suggest in their 'How Rumor Begets Rumor: Collective Memory, Ethnic Conflict, and Reproductive Rumors in Cameroon' that past historical situations in which ethnic genocide was a reality *is* a relevant matrix for Cameroonian young women fearing sterilization at the hands of the government (Ch. 8). Historian Luise White explicitly critiques Allport and Postman's classic definition of rumor in her 'Social Construction and Social Consequences: Rumors and Evidence' by suggesting that *talk* about blood-sucking vampire-like officials in East Africa *does* constitute secure evidence for those discussing these events (Ch. 14).

Some of the differences in approaches discussed above depends, of course, on just the differences that brought the contributors together, and on whether quantitative or qualitative methods are used in gathering data, and on whether participants' or researchers' definitions of truth are paramount in the resulting analyses. The same complex variation is evident in considering the fifth question the editors present: 'What *Explains* a Rumor?' They write, again in part:

Clearly scholars have a powerful drive to determine what factors *explain* rumor. Should we appeal to universal characteristics of psychological processes? Or should we focus on a particular constellation of historical, cultural and social factors? (p. 259)

They supplement this most famous conundrum of interpretation and theory in the behavioral arts and sciences by stating that 'On one side is the recognition that rumors often appear contextualized' and 'on the other side is evidence that rumors from different times and locations share a strong family resemblance' (p. 260).

*Rumor Mills* is organized in a way that both presents this divide and syncretizes it. As the editors note, contributors who are anthropologists, folklorists or historians tend towards examining the particular and the local first. All the chapters in Part I on the social production of conflict and prejudice begin inductive analyses in this way. Folklorist Ingo Schneider's 'Mafia in Meran?: Rumors and Legends Surrounding the "Leather Connection": A Case Study', for example, examines rumors of organized crime in a northern Italian town before branching out to more general theoretical concerns (Ch. 4). Contributors with social psychological backgrounds tend towards examining more universal processes in rumor production and transmission. Most of the chapters in Part II on the spread of rumor and in part III on the creation of plausibility start their deductive analyses in this way. Prashant Bordia and Nicholas DiFonzo's study of 'Psychological Motivations in Rumor Spread' (Ch.

5) and Jean-Bruno Renard's study of 'Negatory Rumors: From the Denial of Reality to Conspiracy Theory' (Ch. 13) are cases in point.

Other contributors, however, blend or juxtapose these two analytic processes. Champion-Vincent's study 'From Evil Others to Evil Elites: A Dominant Pattern in Conspiracy Theories Today' (Ch. 6) examines shifts in global patterns in rumors and legends about conspiracy, and then supplements her findings with specific national case studies. Gary Alan Fine and Irfan Khawaja's study 'Celebrating Arabs and Grateful Terrorists: Rumor and the Politics of Plausibility' (Ch. 11), posits a philosophical basis for rumor in time of war or terror, and then examines two specific rumor cycles growing out of the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US World Trade Center and the Pentagon. All the chapters work well for readers who ultimately appreciate 'the gray areas' that emerge in crossing the black and white lines of theoretical differences in emphasis.

Legend studies are not considered fully in *Rumor Mills*, however, despite its subtitle. Fine states that other venues are already in place, especially that of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research among others, as one reason for this asymmetry (p. 1). This reviewer suggests another possible reason as well: much work on legendry has focused on folk belief, especially on folk belief about the supernatural, that does not at first glance appear relevant to issues of social impact. Fruitful comparisons could be made, however, between White's discussion of vampire rumors and the nature of evidence discussed earlier (Ch. 14) with folklorist/medical humanist David J. Hufford's discussion of ghost stories and tellers' reasonable inferences in his 'Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits', in *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, for example. Might the editors consider a sequel?

A general bibliography of references would also be useful, but this request is subject, too, to disciplinary differences. It is possible that the style of references after each chapter is more the norm for Aldine/Transaction Publications.

Ironically, this review has done precisely what *Rumor Mills* editors decided not to do: 'This conclusion avoids the task of concluding. Rather than reviewing what we have discovered, we emphasize what is yet to be done' (p. 263). Yet this review suggests that the editors' concluding hope that 'this volume will challenge researchers to answer the current questions and formulate new ones' (p. 263) has, indeed, been met.

Janet L. Langlois  
<janet\_langlois@wayne.edu>

**Pascal Froissart, *La Rumeur, histoire et fantasmes*. Paris: Belin, 2002**

Pascal Froissart's book fills an important gap in a research field that is otherwise crowded. In fact this volume is not another study of rumor but a book on works about rumors: the author attempts to define the conditions for the possibility of the study of rumors, its assumptions, its instrumentalizing or ideological errors, in

other words a veritable epistemology of rumor studies. Original and intelligent, Froissart's book scratches 'rumorologists' where they itch!

The work unfolds following two complementary approaches: Part 1, which is diachronic, is a 'pre-Allport & Postman' archaeology that digs up studies of rumor before 1945; Part 2, which is synchronic, draws up a critical typology of research hypotheses related to rumor (rumor is false; rumor contains a hidden message; rumor has to be controlled).

Part 1 has the merit of presenting and analysing little-known work, though Allport and Postman, Rosnow and Shibutani cite these forerunners, and the historian of rumor Hans-Joachim Neubauer mentions them in his book *Fama. Eine Geschichte des Gerüchts* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1998, Eng. trans.: *The Rumour. A Cultural History*, London: Free Association Books, 1999). Froissart reminds us of Louis William Stern's (1902) work on the linear, degraded transmission of a message – already noting omission, addition and alteration mechanisms – of work by Rosa Oppenheim (1911) on a press rumor, by Frederick Bartlett (1920) experimenting with the ability to recall folktales and drawings, by Clifford Kirkpatrick (1932) modifying Stern's methodology protocol by eliminating the intermediary role of the experimenter, who became just an observer of successive transmissions.

Froissart's aim is to highlight the emergence of a concept, that of 'rumor', 'a category created . . . recently which is a nonsense when applied in that way before a certain date' (p. 51). If the old notions of 'rumor in circulation' or 'reputation' are ignored in favour of the exclusive idea of 'distorted message', Froissart goes further still by suggesting that rumor is a false concept, vague, often contradictorily defined (for instance, reduction and the 'snowball' effect) and covering a multiplicity of phenomena. A specialist in information and communication science, the author stresses the crucial role of the mass media in disseminating and even creating rumors, so contesting the traditional idea of 'word-of-mouth'.

Froissart rightly criticizes an essentialist conception of rumor – which matches a word with an eternal reality – but in doing so he falls quite naturally into the opposite extreme, nominalism, which says a word corresponds only to a conventional reality, the mind's view. To say it is impossible to talk of rumor before the word appeared ('rumor became a reality', p. 63) would mean, to caricature, that universal attraction, the electron and chromosomes did not exist before the words appeared! Rumor is no more nor less a false concept than all the ideas in the human sciences – for example, intelligence, the unconscious, social class – subjects of constant debate and constant re-evaluation.

In Part 2 the first theory discussed is 'rumorography or the precision fantasy'. Froissart invites researchers to show modesty on the question of the truth of rumors, condemning 'rumorologists' abuse of their position of authority: they pretend to tell the truth regardless of the process that leads to truth and is far from simple to follow' (p. 151). They often forget they are not the ones who hold the absolute truth, but experts putting forward a relative truth. The author catches Allport and Postman in their own trap, revealing that one of the 'realistic' illustrations used by the American psychologists in their experiments on transmitting information contains a crude error: two road signs side by side say 'Cherbourg 50 km' and 'Paris 21.5 km', a bizarre detail since the two cities are 332 km apart! But this



anecdote is emblematic: in order to criticize the pseudo-real Froissart has to rely on another 'real' seen as truer than the first. The relativist position, which denies the possibility of establishing true and false ('impossible veracity', p. 137), is untenable and would end by giving up on distinguishing between correct and incorrect information.

The second theory, 'rumorancy' – a purist would have preferred 'rumoromancy' on the terminological model of the 'mancies' or arts of divination such as cartomancy, chiromancy, necromancy – is the propensity of researchers to interpret rumors, to unveil their 'hidden message'. We are happy to follow the author in his 'criticism of the single meaning' (p. 182) and his suspicion of symbolic systems 'steamrolled' onto rumor, as is often the case with psychoanalytical interpretations. The author himself does not avoid dodgy interpretations: what are we to think of the provocative hypothesis, on scarcely any foundation, that the rumor studied by Jung telling of intimate relations between a teenage girl and her teacher concealed a story of sexual abuse (p. 178)? We could not subscribe to the statement that 'there are as many interpretations as speakers [and] rumorologists' (p. 186). This is to forget that interpretation does not arise from individual whim but from a search for symbolic coherence, which is backed up not only by the rumor's content but also by the paratext, the sociocultural context, the militant use of the rumor by the people transmitting it. As Jean-Michel Berthelot clearly demonstrated in his epistemological study of sociology, the hermeneutic paradigm is just as valid as a way of understanding society as causal or dialectical paradigms (*L'Intelligence du social*, Paris: PUF, 1990).

The third theory, 'rumorocracy or the fantasy of control', criticizes the medical metaphor comparing rumor to an epidemic caused by a virus or microbe, and the illusion of measures for combating rumors. Froissart emphasizes the vanity of mathematical models for the spread of rumor, the error in thinking that undifferentiated subjects carry rumors or that they are spread mainly in popular and poorly educated circles, and finally the ineffectiveness of denial: all this has been clearly demonstrated but, *pace* the author, by studies of rumor themselves. It is easy to criticize the baroque herpetological metaphors (the typology of rumors corresponding to kinds of snakebite, depending on whether the prey is killed by a jet of poison, gradually paralysed or swallowed alive) or entomological ones (rumor like insects is said to go through three stages: larva, nymph and imago) presented by Françoise Reumaux as an 'outline for a theory of rumors', but Froissart ignores the theoretical and methodological contribution made by the modelling of rumor by Michel-Louis Rouquette in the 1990s, around the concepts of involvement, attribution, negativity and instability. All three concepts are absent from Froissart's book. He mistakenly writes that experiments on the linear transmission of rumors only measure recall ability (p. 121). This is to neglect studies which show that memory is not the only factor operating in the process of message reduction: reproduction of details is better when subjects have a 'neutral' relationship with the message than when they feel involved (M.-L. Rouquette et al., 'Influence de la pertinence et de la structure sous-jacente sur la mémorisation des énoncés', *Bulletin de Psychologie*, vol. XXX, 1976, pp. 59–64).

For the requirements of his demonstration Froissart writes about 'rumorology',

the (pseudo-)science of rumors, but this amusing neologism is a rhetorical effect since there is no discipline or specialization with that name. As I have written elsewhere, it is lucky for the study of rumors that it is connected to many disciplines (sociology, psychology, folklore, communication, history and so on), so that none of them can claim a monopoly.

Froissart's book, which will be enjoyed by all those specializing in rumor, is a salutary critique of the work being done in that research area. However, it would be ridiculous to conclude from it that no research can be carried out on the subject. Pascal Froissart himself has written a fine monograph on an African rumor that stands comparison with the most traditional research ('La rumeur du chien', in F. Reumaux, ed., *Les Oies du Capitole ou les raisons de la rumeur*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 1999, pp. 105–20). Though he denies it, Froissart is certainly interested in the veracity of the rumor (he encourages his journalism students to investigate events and he cites the police report on the case) and he attempts an interpretation of it in terms of social symbolism ('The rumour about the dog is the best illustration of these social tensions', p. 115).

Finally it is not the smallest virtue of Froissart's book that it offers innovative and illuminating approaches to the social representation of rumors: a bibliometry of works on rumor, a study of metaphors for rumor, analysis of the iconic figurations of rumor (for instance, Norman Rockwell's famous drawing). Pascal Froissart's excellent website, a true French-language 'portal' for the study of rumors, reflects this richness and intellectual curiosity: <<http://pascalfroissart.online.fr>>.

Jean-Bruno Renard

**Stefania Fumagalli, *La ragazza dello Snoopy. La leggenda contemporanea dell'autostoppista fantasma: una ricerca in Valle Brembrana. Quaderni dell'Archivio della Cultura di Base, no. 35. Bergamo: Sistema Bibliotecario Urbano, 2004***

This book, which is the result of research carried out between 1996 and 2002, presents 36 versions of the well-known urban legend 'The phantom hitchhiker'. (A driver picks her up outside the 'Snoopy' discotheque, hence the title.) The stories – reproduced in the appendix – are placed in the context of the popular culture of the region, compared with other road legends, then linked with legends of appearances of the Virgin Mary and diabolical manifestations. Connections to classic themes such as that of The Fearless Boy are researched. Study of the modes of dissemination highlights the role of school and television. For instance, stories about the phantom hitchhiker are used as a trigger in foreign-language conversation classes and an episode of the *Misteri* series, shown in 1994, presented the case of the phantom hitchhiker which occurred in 1981 in Palavas, France. An analysis of storytellers, their motives and their narrative repertoire comes before internal analysis of the corpus collected, which is carried out from a narratological and thematic angle.

Véronique Campion-Vincent

**Bengt af Klintberg, *Glitterspray och 99 andra klintbergare*.  
Stockholm: Atlantis, 2005**

The title of this book, which could be translated as 'Glitterspray and 99 Other Klintbergers', shows the extent to which urban legends are associated with the folklorist Bengt af Klintberg in the minds of the Swedish public. The common noun derived from his surname has already found a place in the supplement to the Swedish National Encyclopedia: ' "klintbergare", after Bengt af Klintberg, popular name for a modern travelling kind of legend that many people consider to be true'. The fact is that for about 30 years now the author, who specializes in traditional as well as modern legends, has been systematically collecting and analysing the urban legends going around in Sweden. His first two collections of urban legends, *Rottan i pizzen* (The rat in the pizza), 1986, and *Den stulna nyuren* (The stolen kidney), 1994, had already made his name familiar to the public. But it was particularly the radio programme *Folkminnen*, which he presented with Christina Mattsson from 1990 to 2004, that made him famous. The legends contained in *Glitterspray* were provided by readers' letters, radio listeners' contributions and comments collected at conferences all over Sweden. Furthermore this third collection, unlike the two previous ones, also includes legends spread on the internet.

*Glitterspray* comprises 100 urban legends, each one represented by a full version (around a fifth of the collection), followed by comments (about four-fifths). Nearly all the genre's common themes are represented: sex, scatology, crime, happy or unhappy accidents, disasters, exotic foods, modern technologies, terrorism, etc. As the author emphasizes, most of these legends are also in circulation in the rest of the western world. Some are great classics, whether relatively recent, like 'The two stolen kidneys' (p. 10), very recent, like 'The grateful terrorist', or with a very long history, like 'The runaway mother-in-law' (p. 11).

However, there are a few exceptions to the international character of *Glitterspray's* repertoire. For example, legends about the sinking of the *Estonia*, which went down in the waters of the Baltic in the space of an hour in 1994, killing 859 passengers, are of necessity known in Scandinavia especially. Some of them began to go around in the days following the disaster, others were still in circulation six months later. The oldest, which tells how a passenger's widow got a phone call from her husband who was shut in his cabin and described the water rising, then was abruptly interrupted, is a fiction in Klintberg's opinion. The details have never been corroborated by anyone close to those who drowned and are technically well-nigh impossible. But they are extremely similar to the stories that did the rounds about the planes involved in the 9/11 attacks.

Other legends exploit the well-known motif of the accident avoided by a chance event or providence: a lorry-driver is late and arrives two minutes after the ship has sailed; another is stopped for speeding, has his licence withdrawn and cannot sail. Another legend has the second-in-command surviving but then crossed off the list of survivors by the ship's owners to stop him revealing compromising details about the *Estonia's* defective safety. Other, more sinister, legends explain the shipwreck as an act deliberately carried out by the Russian mafia, who preferred to see the ship sink rather than have its cargo of cocaine confiscated by the police and the culprits

unmasked; or even by the Swedish state, to drown traces of radioactivity from a top-secret cargo. It is clear that even though legends about the *Estonia* circulate only in Scandinavia, the motifs in these stories and the psychological processes that produced them are fairly universal.

Each type of legend is represented by one of its versions, reproduced in full not just in summary, apparently in the informant's very words. This means that the author, without undertaking an extended stylistic analysis which the size of the repertoire would not allow, can make valuable observations on the gradual crystallization of the narratives into a more dramatic form as they are passed on.

Not only does Klintberg indicate precisely his informants' names and geographical provenance, he also notes their certainties or doubts about the story they are telling. In my view, that may be this book's most valuable contribution. We must alter the far too simplistic received idea that legends are fictional stories that people believe are true. It would be more accurate to say that the legend is a narrative so composed that the issue of the veracity of the events described is relevant, unlike a funny story for instance. As Marie-Louise Tenèze has appositely expressed it, the legend has meaning only in the discourse resulting from it: a discourse that has to do, not only with the lessons to be drawn from the events in the story, but also the degree of faith to be placed in it. It is clear that the line between a particular funny story and a particular urban legend, for example, is not related to their content, which may often be identical, but to the attitude of the speaker and audience to them: should we laugh or should we comment?

Klintberg correctly remarks that an urban legend – which in Scandinavian languages is called *vandrehistorie*, that is, 'wandering story' – is not necessarily fictional. It may very well be based on a true event which was impressive enough to give rise to a dramatized form and thus to be passed on orally. In this regard we should note a definite development in the public's attitude to urban legends. Around 20 years ago, before the word and the concept became commonly known, people tended to be too credulous. Nowadays they tend to be too suspicious. Though Klintberg, in common with all those specializing in urban legends, sometimes has to disabuse informants by proving to them that their story is a 'wandering story' without foundation in reality, he is occasionally forced to take the opposite course, for instance in the case of 'Kevin Costner's au-pair' (p. 71). A Swedish girl who wanted to work for an American family contacted the 'Smiths'. But when she arrived she realized she had been hired by the famous actor Kevin Costner, who had used the pseudonym to begin with in order to ensure that he was taking on a girl who was serious. Klintberg's first informant in 1993 thought this story, which had happened to the daughter of an old classmate's friend, was suspicious: it was like an urban legend. Since then Klintberg has received 15 versions of the same legend and considers it is based on a genuine event. First, it is only attested in Sweden. Second, other details in the first version – the girl's first name, where she lived, the final comment of her mother, who had never heard of Kevin Costner – disappear in subsequent versions, which on the other hand give the story a more dramatic form. Personally I would add another argument in favour of the likely truth of the initial event. Even in its final phase the narrative is only imperfectly 'folklorized', it has not generated any variants as to the employer's real identity. But a folklore text by

definition generates variants. In an entirely fictional urban legend we would expect similar stories also to feature Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt or any other teenage idol.

The comments of *Glitterspray's* author especially concern the likely veracity of the events related and the genealogy and transmission of Swedish legends and the existence of parallels in the USA and Europe, mainly Britain, Germany and France. But the issue of the meaning of these urban legends and the psychological or sociological reasons that encourage their emergence is dealt with too, though more succinctly.

Michèle Simonsen  
<simonsen.michele@gmail.com>

**Peter Knight (editor, with associate editors Robert Alan Goldberg, Jeffrey L. Pasley and Larry Schweikart), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO, Oxford, UK: ABC-Clio, 2003, 2 vols**

This encyclopedia's title is a pointer to its aim: to deal with the role of conspiracy theories in American history. It is a comprehensive work, a substantial large-format publication in two volumes totalling 925 pages. The brief preface by the historian David Brion Davis summarizes its content, highlighting how the situation has developed since the 1960s when excesses of the paranoid style appeared to be aberrations in the past, hangovers that only affected extremists: in the 21st century those excesses are reaching nearly everyone and the abyss of suspicion has opened up while pessimism and cynicism have prepared Americans (and many other countries share this pessimistic view) to believe the worst about the world they live in. For starters we have two analyses of conspiracy theories, by Robert Alan Goldberg, who draws up a historical table of them, and Peter Knight, who attempts an interpretation of their functions.

Then come the 302 entries that make up the meat of the book. At first sight we are far away from rumors and urban legends – terms that appear in the index only when reference is made to Patricia Turner's book on rumors and urban legends among African-Americans (*I Heard it through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American culture*, 1993).

But in fact many of the encyclopedia's entries detail smears circulating as rumors, such as 'Clinton's list' – a roll-call of the president's alleged victims doing the rounds in conservative circles. Otherwise it seems that the groups of conspiracy theories dealing, for example, with –

- plots involving people from space and the American political authorities ('the Roswell affair', 'mutilation of livestock', 'X-Files', 'zone 51' . . .);
- wrongdoing by the secret services: CIA, FBI and their activities such as MKULTRA or CoIntelpro – which are genuine – the Monarch Project or the New World Order – which are imaginary;

- the behaviour of elites: the Bush family or the Rockefeller dynasty and real or supposed organizations through which they pursue their evil designs
- might quite easily be described too as groups of contemporary legends.

Véronique Campion-Vincent

**Jean-Bruno Renard, *Rumeurs et légendes urbaines*, 2nd edn. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002**

The term ‘rumor’, derived from Latin, has long been common in both French and English. Although it is difficult to define precisely, the concept is widely used and familiar. In contrast, ‘urban legend’ is a relatively recent phrase. It is not surprising, therefore, that the sociologist Jean Bruno Renard begins his *Rumeurs et légendes urbaines* with a brief introduction which poses the question ‘What is an urban legend?’ He answers by noting several distinctive characteristics. Urban legends are anonymous and exist in variant forms. They are brief, with surprising outcomes. They are told as true, in social circumstances where they serve to express symbolically fears and hopes. Some scholars might argue about some of the details of this definition but it certainly indicates some of the most common features of the legends we study and some of the functions they appear to serve. Some scholars, including this reviewer, prefer to describe them as ‘contemporary’ rather than ‘urban’ since the latter term implies they are not found in rural communities. However, thanks to its use by the prolific and popular American folklorist, Jan Harold Brunvand, ‘urban legend’ seems to be the name most familiar to the general public.

Chapter I (Precursors) and Chapter II (A new field of research) outline the development of scholarship on urban legends up to 1940 and since 1940 respectively. Initially it is essentially the story of the gradual emergence of a concept. Voltaire is cited as ‘deconstructing’ a military legend. In 1877, Wilhelm Mannhardt wrote a paper on the formation of myths in modern times; in 1886, Gabriel Vicaire asked whether towns did not have folklore just as the country does; and in 1898, Henri Gaidoz employed the phrase ‘contemporary legends’ to describe political anecdotes. These all contributed in their way to a greater sensitivity to the existence of contemporary folklore ‘in the making’. Renard cites a number of stories about politicians, locomotives and war from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which can be seen as precursors of the stories scholars study today.

In the 1940s a number of developments took place that contributed to the emergence of an identifiable field of study. American sociologists and psychologists took a greater interest in rumors, in part because they seemed to have a potentially damaging role to play during a time of war. American folklorists began to publish accounts of particular legends, including the ubiquitous Vanishing Hitchhiker. In France, the psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte published her *Mythes de Guerre*. Renard cites a number of publications in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, which dealt with urban legends, but the field really blossomed in the 1980s. Through his syndicated newspaper column, Brunvand collected a large body of legends, some of which hitherto

had largely escaped the attention of scholars. Brunvand has incorporated discussion of many of them in a series of books, which aimed to combine scholarship and popular appeal, starting with *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* in 1981. The following year saw the first in a series of annual conferences, 'Perspectives on Contemporary Legend'. Out of these grew the clearest sign that a new field of study had truly emerged, the founding of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, which published the journal, *Contemporary Legend*. Renard rightly emphasizes the extent to which the study of urban legends has become international, citing work in Britain, the Netherlands, USA, France, Germany, Italy, Finland and elsewhere.

The reader may read the first two chapters of the book wondering how urban legends relate to the 'rumors' mentioned in the title. Renard deals with this question in the chapter entitled 'Neighbouring genres'. Although acknowledging similarities between the two genres, Renard stresses the fact that legends are generally passed on in the form of narratives. Urban legends also share characteristics in common with forms as diverse as, on the one hand, traditional myths and legends and, on the other hand, 'faits divers', the brief 'general interest' items to be found in newspapers. This latter relationship may seem at first sight unlikely but Renard points out that, although faits divers may originate in actual events, it is the fact that journalists select particular incidents as interesting and present them in ways which enhance that interest which draws them close to legends. The relationship of urban legends to literature is perhaps a more obvious one. Since legends evolve in such a way as to hold the attention and the interest of many listeners, it is natural that novelists and other writers should draw upon them. Indeed, if one considers the early stages of European literature, it is difficult to distinguish the traditional and non-traditional elements in Homer and Aesop.

How may legends be analysed? Renard distinguishes two types of approach, external (Ch. IV) and internal (Ch. V). Both are necessary for the development of a full understanding of legends. By 'external', the author means analysis of the variant forms that legends take, the ways in which they are transmitted and the truth or otherwise of the events they describe. Legends may be collected from many different sources, ranging from oral recitation to the internet. Collection of multiple texts raises many questions. How does one account for variations? Which differences are significant and which merely superficial? Since many legends contain similar motifs, it may also become necessary to decide which texts should be considered versions of the 'same' legend and which are versions of 'similar' legends. As a step towards the systematic approach to such questions, Renard mentions Brunvand's first attempt at establishing a Type-Index of Urban Legends. The relationship between legends and 'facts' is also a complex one. In some cases, it may be possible to establish actual events which have contributed to the formation of legends, but they will have been reconstructed in the legend texts in such ways that we are hardly justified in regarding the legends as 'true'.

The chapter on the internal analysis of legends is the one most likely to be found informative by the general reader and the specialist. Renard briefly discusses the different levels of interpretation possible – the explicit, the sociological and the anthropological – but pays particular attention to what he calls the narrative structure of legends. A brief review cannot do justice to the model he presents. He argues that

typically a legend has a crux that moves the listener from an initial state to a final state. For example, a punk on a train who is subjected to verbal abuse by a respectable lady (initial state) grabs the ticket and eats it (crux) and she is forced to buy another ticket (final state). The relationship between the characters has changed. Renard's suggestion that this model can be applied widely should stimulate further analysis.

Chapter VI deals with the principal themes of urban legends and, in a sense, explains why they are worth studying. Here, as in the rest of the book, the author succeeds in succinctly covering a substantial number of issues in the limited space available. Legends deal with a wide range of aspects of the human condition in the modern world. Stories about the supernatural exist but are comparatively rare. Some legends appear to be about deep-rooted anxieties, such as the fear of strangers and of wild animals. Others might seem at least superficially to concern distinctive products of modern society – urban violence and new technologies. However, there are many legends that do not fit into these categories but deal with social relationships, pretensions and embarrassment.

Renard's brief conclusion aptly sums up contemporary legends as 'manifestations of symbolic thought'. He concludes by arguing that urban legends highlight the fine line between the real and the imaginary, the true and the false. However, his final point is distinctively French and does not translate into English. Where French employs the same word 'histoire' to refer to reality and fiction, English distinguishes between 'history' and 'story'.

To someone living in the English-speaking world, it is difficult to contemplate the collection 'Que sais-je?' without a certain feeling of jealousy. Anglophone publishing has nothing to compare with this series, which for more than half a century has provided scholarly accounts of topics in a form intelligible to the general reader. The coverage is wide; more than three thousand titles have been published, by authors including such notable figures as Jean Rostand, Jean Piaget and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Jean-Bruno Renard's *Rumeurs et légendes urbaines* takes a worthy place in the 'Que sais-je?' collection. The second edition contains some slight changes compared to the successful first edition, first published in 1999. We may look forward to further editions and, we might hope, translation into English, the language in which most scholarly debates on contemporary legend take place. It may be recommended with confidence to any reader unfamiliar with the subject but may also be read with profit by scholars familiar with the field. This is particularly true in the case of researchers in North America and Britain, who may benefit from Renard's references to scholars such as Arnold Van Gennep and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who do not feature much in English-language writings on contemporary legends.

Sandy Hobbs

**Paolo Toselli and Stefano Bagnasco (eds), *Le nuove leggende metropolitane. Manuale per detective antibufale*. Rome: Avverbi, 2005**

This publication derived from the proceedings of a conference on rumors and urban legends held in Turin (6–7 November 2004) and organized by the Centro per la



Raccolta delle Voci e delle Leggende Contemporanee (CeRaVoLC, Centre for the collection of rumors and contemporary legends), whose director is Paolo Toselli, and by the Comitato Italiano per il Controllo delle Affermazioni sul Paranormale (CICAP, Italian committee for investigating claims about the paranormal), the head of whose Piemonte section is Stefano Bagnasco. All the researchers found themselves faced with the classic problems in the study of rumors: demonstrating that allegations are false and understanding why people believe them.

The book brings together 16 contributions, which reflect the variety of objects of study and the dynamism of Italian researchers. Here we refer briefly to the content of some of these 16 papers.

Lorenzo Montale, author of a recent work on technological legends, shows how misunderstood scientific discourse gives rise to false ideas such as the belief, spread by the media, in the creation of a strawberry genetically modified with the genes of a fish. Anthropologist Laura Bonato presents a worksheet for collecting urban legends methodically. Cesare Bermanni, the author in 1991 of one of the first Italian books on urban legends, is particularly interested in war rumors. Jean-Bruno Renard analyses an Israeli urban legend featuring an argument between a skimpily dressed girl and some religious extremists, an allegory of the battle between non-religious and religious people in Israel. Paolo Toselli highlights the role of xenophobic prejudice and fear for the safety of children in creating urban legends. Peter Burger, the great Dutch specialist in rumors and modern legends, raises the issue of the role of the media – firefighters or pyromaniacs? – in the spread of rumors. The journalist and film critic Danilo Arona demonstrates links between contemporary legends and the cinema. Neapolitan anthropologist Marino Niola stresses the symbolic and mythical aspects of urban legends. Paolo Attivissimo, who runs a website demystifying rumors that are doing the rounds on the internet <[www.attivissimo.net/antibufala/index.htm](http://www.attivissimo.net/antibufala/index.htm)>, is interested in conspiracy allegations that contest the ‘official truth’. Nicola Pannofino carries out a semiological analysis of a case of a mystery big cat in Liguria. Fabio Lo Cascio presents the kinds of rumors going around in student circles. And finally Stefano Pace offers an original study in cognitive psychology on the reactions of those receiving a rumor of a bogus computer virus – in fact a system file routinely installed on computers – which circulated on the internet in 2002.

The book also provides an appendix of a selected list of websites on rumors and urban legends, as well as an annotated bibliography of books in Italian (originals and translations) on this research area.

The book’s chief begetter Paolo Toselli, who founded CeRaVoLC in 1990, is the author of several volumes: *La famosa invasione delle vipere volanti e altre leggende metropolitane dell’Italia d’oggi* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1994); *11 settembre. Leggende di Guerra* (Rome: Avverbi, 2002); and *Storie di ordinaria falsità. Leggende metropolitane, notizie inventate, menzogne: i falsi macroscopici raccontati da giornali, televisioni e Internet* (Milan: BUR, 2004). He runs the website <<http://leggende.clab.it>> and its online bulletin *Tutte storie*.

Jean-Bruno Renard

**Margarita Zires, *Voz, texto e imagen en interacción. El rumor de los pitufos*.  
Mexico: Miguel Angel Porrúa and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-  
Xochimilco, 2001**

The rumors, legends, stories and messages communicated through the media constitute a complex network of texts that are ever-present in our modern society. In the book *Voz, texto e imagen en interacción. El rumor de los pitufos* (Voice, text and image in interaction: the Smurf rumor), Margarita Zires analyses the different versions of a rumor that circulated in Mexico in the 1980s. According to the rumor, Smurf figures (that is, the characters of the television show) would come to life and kill children.

Based on an exhaustive amount of research, the author gives us an understanding of the cultural dimension of the rumor, through the formulation of a theoretical-methodological approach that captures the complex process of group communication that, depending on the cultural context, facilitates the production and transformation of rumors.

Rumors, according to Zires, are collective, group phenomena that travel through social groups and sometimes even from one group context to another. By studying the rumors in a given society, one may be able to discern the society's various 'cultural fabrics' as well as their often differing standards for verisimilitude. According to the author, the cultural standards for establishing the verisimilitude of the different versions of a rumor in different cultural contexts are the result of the specific oral, written or audiovisual discourses that circulate within each particular context.

One of the more salient aspects of this work is the vast amount of empirical research undertaken by the author and her thorough analysis of the various versions of one basic rumor that circulated in very different cultural contexts. To this end, she used a broad variety of methodological instruments, the focal point of which are the group interviews she conducted with children from both urban and semi-rural environments. She also includes analyses of television programmes; texts written by the children themselves; questionnaires; field observations; analysis of statistical data and individual interviews with various informants.

By comparing the rumor in three different cultural contexts, the author offers a broad analytical perspective. The first context she studies is Nezahualcóyotl, a marginal and underprivileged town incorporated into the metropolitan area of Mexico City, where audiovisual media have a high impact, and print media a relatively low impact on the population. The second context, El Pedregal, is a residential area of Mexico City with a population that enjoys high socio-economic status. There, print culture is as powerful an influence as audiovisual culture. The third and final cultural context is Valladolid, a semi-urban village 200 kilometres from the city of Mérida, in the Yucatan, where the socio-economic conditions might be characterized as somewhere in the middle range. This region was selected for study because of its strong identification with Mayan traditions and culture, and the relatively weak influence of audiovisual and print-related culture among its population.

Based on the material gathered in interviews and surveys, the author focused on specific versions of the Smurf rumor in each cultural context. In each context, Zires presents an exhaustive analysis of the stories she heard and, most especially, of certain associations that elucidated a great deal about the realm of children and their

stories, which in turn allowed her to extract a variety of definitions of verisimilitude.

In the case of Nezahualcōyotl, the children talked a lot about supernatural occurrences, which were clearly related to the discourses of popular religion, popularly held beliefs, and tales of terror and mystery. A number of different stories emerged from this context, such as the 'Smurf apparition', the 'spiteful Smurf' and the 'Smurf possessed by the devil', the associations of which establish a relationship with a collection of beliefs regarding magic, witchcraft, and the power of God, the devil, the Virgin and the dead. In this context, the rumor became so widespread that several bonfires of Smurf figures were lit in the community.

In the case of the children from the area of El Pedregal, the rumor bore no verisimilitude at all. In this context what predominated was a tendency toward rationalist thought that manifested a rejection of the notion of murderous Smurfs. Despite this, however, the children in this area were well aware of the different versions of the rumor. Some children even expressed mocking, scornful attitudes toward those children who believed the rumor to be plausible. The children in El Pedregal ascribed a certain level of prestige to written documents, reading and writing, whereas they held television in lower esteem. The only version of the rumor that attained any level of credibility among this group was the story of the 'robot Smurf'. In this sense we can see how the figure in question only acquired verisimilitude if it was closely linked to the application of technological advances. The myth regarding the unlimited possibilities of science and technology was quite prevalent in this particular cultural milieu.

The first and most notable aspect of the case of the children in Valladolid, in the Yucatan, was the sheer volume of stories they produced. In the oral narrative that emerged from this context, it is possible to discern elements of a pre-hispanic, Mayan indigenous discourse as well as elements of a popular Catholic religious discourse with Mayan touches. In this context, the author listened as the children talked about rumors of an 'Alux smurf' or an 'X-tabay smurf', both of which are related to characters from Mayan legends which, in turn, are associated with a great many characters such as the wolf-man, the medusa, the fairy, the vampire, the sprite, the devil, and other religious figures. These characters tended to exhibit characteristics similar to those of characters from the Mayan legends, or at least had found themselves similar contexts.

Beyond simply pointing out certain aspects of the cultural heterogeneity that characterizes contemporary Mexican society, the author also considers aspects that have, until now, largely been overlooked by the macro-structural perspectives that fail to consider the particularities of local logics of cultural production. For this reason, Zires' book is truly an ideal source for gaining access to the oral cultures of contemporary Mexico.

Reyna Sánchez Estévez  
<Rsanchez@correo.xoc.uam.mx>

**Margarita Zires, *Del rumor al tejido cultural y saber político*. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco, 2001**

More than 15 years of theoretical and empirical research on rumor has gone into the writing of *Del rumor al tejido cultural y saber político* (From rumor to cultural fabric and political knowledge). The topic of rumor had not been very closely examined in Mexico and Latin America until author Margarita Zires began her studies in the field.

The book is divided into two main sections. In the first four chapters, through the presentation, discussion and critical analysis of the most important research carried out to date on rumors in different social disciplines, the author weaves together a theoretical reflection through which she contests the instrumental and unidirectional notions of communication. These notions are what gave rise to the concept of the rumor as a false, negative and downmarket form of communication. Margarita Zires, however, offers us a new perspective by transforming the aforementioned notion of the rumor into something far broader, redefining it as a form of oral communication that exists through its interaction with other forms of mediated communication, as a kind of space for the collective interaction, discussion, formulation and creation of new social meanings.

In the first chapter, based on a critical analysis of the classic studies that associate rumor with the distortion of reality and political propaganda, and with the aid of the Foucaultian perception of power, Margarita Zires formulates her own perspective regarding the political dimension of the rumor.

In the second chapter, the author analyses the cultural dimension of rumor. To this end, she reconsiders and criticizes the works of functionalist sociologists, social psychologists, structural anthropologists and psychoanalysts. The author concludes that the question of what is true and what is false are not her primary concerns. What she is most interested in are the standards of verisimilitude and the logics of narrative production in different socio-cultural and temporo-spatial contexts.

From the author's perspective, rumors serve not only to analyse cultural constants, they also express contradictions and constitute an exceptionally valuable space for studying the multiplicity of perspectives – sometimes convergent but often contrary – that allow the researcher to identify cultural differences.

In the third chapter Margarita Zires analyses the specificity of the rumor as a form of oral, collective and anonymous communications. The rumor is an oral product that circulates through word of mouth, is produced in institutional interstices, and transmitted through informal channels of communication. In the fourth chapter, the author concludes the first part of her book with a theoretical-methodological proposal for approaching the rumor as an oral communication phenomenon.

In addition to its theoretical-methodological contributions, Zires' text has historical value, for it offers a record of various rumors that were in circulation in Mexico during the latter third of the 20th century: rumors, myths and contemporary legends that express different ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Thanks to this book, we can appreciate a society's myriad ruminations in all their complexity, and understand that discursive fabric that lends substance, density, meaning and foundation to the ways in which different social groups in Mexico think and live.

In the second part of the book the author presents three cases considered to be paradigmatic, in order to understand the different dimensions of the rumor. Through the rumors that circulated in 1994 regarding the murder of the Institutional Revolutionary Party's candidate for the presidency of Mexico, the author offers an analysis of the political dimension of the rumor. Through her analysis of the different versions of the rumors that emerged following Colosio's murder, the author underscores the processes of verbal interaction that gave rise to various different social meanings ascribed to the image of the government in general, and certain politicians in particular. This analysis, as such, also reveals the interviewees' impressions of their own capacity for social action and intervention as political subjects. The discourses present very different definitions of politics and its scope: some are quite categorical whereas others are more tentative and malleable. They also express desires, hopes, fears, values and beliefs in the very process of their creation, formulation and transformation.

On another note, through analysis of the various versions of the Smurf and *Chupacabras* (Goatsuckers) rumors, the author offers an analysis of the cultural dimension of the rumor through an analysis of the discursive mechanisms and norms governing the social construction of verisimilitude. The stories recounted by the people interviewed by the author reveal the voices of different social institutions – religion, science, popular culture – in constant dialogue with one another. In the very act of recounting a story, the storytellers reproduce the voices of the culture that informs them, and they confront those voices, criticizing or recreating them to give meaning to their actions, to create new meanings, and to recreate or reproduce old ones.

From my perspective the book *Del rumor al tejido cultural y saber político* should be mandatory reading for anyone who is interested in what is commonly called 'public opinion', for it is far more than a mere study of rumors; this work is an analysis of the various forms in which new social (political and/or cultural) meanings are created, formulated and learned.

This book has the great virtue of presenting both the author's discoveries (achieved through an exhaustive research process) and her research method. As we read this book, we can experience the dialogue that the author establishes not only with other researchers of rumor but with several generations of students, still going through the education process, with whom she has carried out a serious, meticulous and rigorous group investigation.

Ma. Del Carmen de la Peza  
<cdelapeza@mexis.com>

*The foreword and the reviews by Gérald Bronner, Véronique Champion-Vincent, Jean-Marc Ramos, Jean-Bruno Renard and Michèle Simonsen have been translated from the French by Jean Burrell.*

*The reviews by Reyna Sánchez Estévez and Ma. Del Carmen de la Peza have been translated from the Spanish by Kristina Cordero.*

### Notes

1. We should mention the special issue 'Challenging the Nation-State: Migration, Multiculturalism and Transnationalism' of the journal *Narodna umjetnost* [Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research], 42(1) 2005: 7–124, edited by Jasna Capo Zmegac and Joao Leal, which brings together six studies delivered at the conference of the SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore) held in Marseille in May 2004 with the theme of metaphorical constructions of diasporas.  
A Portuguese folklore journal published an article on panics around incidents of mutilation of livestock (a well-known theme of urban legends, which appeared in the 1970s in the USA) in Argentina in 2002: Martha Blache and Silvia Balzano, 'La cadena de transmisión medianacional en una leyenda contemporánea: el caso de las vacas mutiladas como metáfora de la crisis argentina actual', *Estudos de Literatura Oral*, 9–10, 2003–4: 39–55.
2. The first came out in 1999 and the third is to be published in 2006.
3. In Sweden this is what urban legends are called after the surname of the author, who has for many years had his own radio programme.
4. A. J. Kimmel (2004) *Rumor and Rumor Control: A Manager's Guide to Understanding and Combating Rumors*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.