

# Urban legend

“Urban tale” redirects here. For the rock band, see [Urban Tales](#). For other uses, see [Urban legend \(disambiguation\)](#).  
An **urban legend**, **popular legend**, **urban myth**, **ur-**



The “Bunny Man Bridge”, a legend tripping destination.

**ban tale**, or **contemporary legend** is a form of modern folklore consisting of fictional stories, often with macabre elements deeply rooted in local popular culture. These legends can be used for entertainment purposes, as well as for semi-serious explanations for random events such as disappearances and strange objects.

Despite its name, an urban legend does not necessarily originate in an urban area. Rather, the term is used to differentiate modern legend from traditional folklore of pre-industrial times. For this reason, sociologists and folklorists prefer the term “contemporary legend”. Because people frequently allege that such tales happened to a “friend of a friend” (FOAF), that phrase has become a commonly used term when recounting this type of story.

Sometimes urban legends are repeated in news stories or distributed by e-mail or social media. Examples include the news story of an alleged mass panic in America in 1938, after a radio drama describing a Martian invasion, or a repeated claim dating from 1972 that a large percentage of people have a biological father who is not their assumed father and are therefore illegitimate.<sup>[1]</sup>

Some urban legends have passed through the years with only minor changes to suit regional variations. One example is the story of a woman killed by spiders nesting in her elaborate hairdo. More recent legends tend to reflect modern circumstances, like the story of people ambushed and anesthetized, who awaken minus one kidney, which was supposedly surgically removed for transplantation (a story which folklorists refer to as “The Kidney Heist”).<sup>[2]</sup>

## 1 Origins and structure

The term “urban legend,” as used by folklorists, has appeared in print since at least 1968.<sup>[3]</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, professor of English at the University of Utah, introduced the term to the general public in a series of popular books published beginning in 1981. Brunvand used his collection of legends, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends & Their Meanings* (1981) to make two points: first, that legends and folklore do not occur exclusively in so-called primitive or traditional societies, and second, that one could learn much about urban and modern culture by studying such tales.

Many urban legends are framed as complete stories with plot and characters. The compelling appeal of a typical urban legend is its elements of mystery, horror, fear or humor. Often they serve as cautionary tales.<sup>[4]</sup> Some urban legends are morality tales that depict someone, usually a child, acting in a disagreeable manner, only to wind up in trouble, hurt, or dead.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2 Propagation and belief

As Jan Brunvand points out<sup>[5]</sup> antecedent legends including some of the motifs, themes and symbolism of these urtexts can readily be identified. Cases in which there is some likelihood that at least a partial inspiration has been located include “The Death Car” (traced by Richard Dorson to Michigan, United States);<sup>[5]</sup> “the Solid Cement Cadillac”<sup>[6]</sup> and the possible origin of “The Hook” in the 1946 series of Lovers’ Lane murders in Texarkana, Texas, USA.<sup>[7][8]</sup> The urban legend that Coca-Cola developed the drink Fanta to sell in Nazi Germany without public backlash originated as the actual tale of German Max Keith, who invented the drink and ran Coca-Cola’s operations in Germany during World War II.<sup>[9]</sup>

The teller of an urban legend may claim it happened to a friend (or to a friend of a friend), which serves to personalize, authenticate and enhance the power of the narrative<sup>[10]</sup> while distancing the teller. Many urban legends depict horrific crimes, contaminated foods, or other situations which would potentially affect many people. Anyone believing such stories might feel compelled to warn loved ones. Not seldom, news organizations, school officials and even police departments have issued warnings concerning the latest threat.<sup>[11]</sup> According to the “Lights Out” rumor, street-gang members would

drive without headlights until a compassionate motorist responded with the traditional flashing of headlights, whereupon a prospective new gang-member would have to murder the citizen as a requirement of initiation.<sup>[12]</sup> A fax received at the Nassau County, Florida fire department was forwarded to police, and from there to all city departments. Even the Minister of Defence for Canada was taken in by the same legend; he forwarded an urgent security warning to all Ontario Members of Parliament.<sup>[12]</sup>

Many urban legends are essentially extended jokes, told as if they were true events.<sup>[13]</sup> Urban legends typically include one or more common elements: the legend is retold on behalf of the original witness or participant; dire warnings are often given for those who might not heed the advice or lesson contained therein (this forms a typical element of many e-mail phishing scams); and the tale is often touted as “something a friend told me”, while the friend is identified by first name only or not identified at all.<sup>[14]</sup> One of the classic hallmarks of false urban legends is a lack of specific information regarding the incident, such as names, dates, locations, or similar information.

Persistent urban legends, however unlikely, often maintain at least a degree of plausibility, for instance a serial killer deliberately hiding in the back seat of a car. One such example since the 1970s has been the recurring rumor that the Procter & Gamble Company was associated with Satan-worshippers because of details within its nineteenth-century trademark.<sup>[15]</sup> The legend interrupted the company’s business to the point that it stopped using the trademark.<sup>[16]</sup>

### 3 Belief and relation to mythology

The earliest term by which these narratives were known, “urban belief tales,” highlights what was then thought to be a key property: they were held, by their tellers, to be true accounts, and the device of the FOAF (acronym for Friend Of A Friend invented by English writer and folklorist Rodney Dale) was a spurious but significant effort at authentication.<sup>[17]</sup> The coinage leads in turn to the terms “FOAFlore” and “FOAFtale”. While at least one classic legend, the “Death Car”, has been shown to have some basis in fact,<sup>[18]</sup> folklorists as such are interested in debunking these narratives only to the degree that establishing non-factuality warrants the assumption that there must be some other reason why the tales are told and believed.<sup>[19]</sup> As in the case of myth, these narratives are believed because they construct and reinforce the worldview of the group within which they are told, or “because they provide us with coherent and convincing explanations of complex events”.<sup>[20]</sup>

Recently, social scientists have started to draw on urban legends in order to help explain complex socio-psychological beliefs, such as attitudes to crime,

childcare, fast food, SUVs and other “family” choices.<sup>[21]</sup> Here the authors make an explicit connection between urban legends and popular folklore, such as Grimm’s Fairy Tales where similar themes and motifs arise. For this reason, it is characteristic of groups within which a given narrative circulates to react very negatively to claims or demonstrations of non-factuality; an example would be the expressions of outrage by police officers who are told that adulteration of Halloween treats by strangers (the subject of periodic moral panics) is extremely rare, if it has occurred at all.<sup>[19][22]</sup>

## 4 Other terminology

The term *urban myth* is also used. Brunvand feels that *urban legend* is less stigmatizing because *myth* is commonly used to describe things that are widely accepted as untrue. The more academic definitions of myth usually refer to a supernatural tale involving gods, spirits, the origin of the world, and other symbols that are usually capable of multiple meanings.

The term *urban myth* is preferred in some languages such as Mexican Spanish, where conventional coinage is “mito urbano” rather than “leyenda urbana.” In French, urban legends are usually called *légendes urbaines*; the term *légendes contemporaines* is still preferable because “légendes urbaines” is an improper and meaningless verbatim translation, though used by some French sociologists or journalists. Neither expression is commonly used; for ordinary French speakers, the more genuine terms *rumeur* or *canular*, not to mention more colloquial and expressive words, describe this phenomenon of “virally spread tall story” properly enough. The term *hoax* (in “Frenghish”) is known in the Web community.

Some scholars prefer the term *contemporary legend* to highlight those tales with relatively recent or modern origins.<sup>[23]</sup>

## 5 Documenting

### 5.1 Online

The Internet makes it easier to both spread urban legends and debunk them.<sup>[24]</sup> Discussing, tracking, and analyzing urban legends is the topic of the Usenet newsgroup, *alt.folklore.urban* and several web sites, most notably *snopes.com*. The United States Department of Energy had a service, now discontinued, called Hoaxbusters, that dealt with computer-distributed hoaxes and legends.

## 5.2 Television

Television shows such as *Urban Legends*, *Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction*, and later *Mostly True Stories: Urban Legends Revealed*, feature re-enactments of urban legends detailing the accounts of the tales and (typically) later in the show, these programs reveal any factual basis they may have. Since 2003, the Discovery Channel TV show *MythBusters* has tried to prove or disprove urban legends by attempting to reproduce them using the scientific method.

## 5.3 Films

The 1998 film *Urban Legend* featured students extensively discussing popular urban legends while at the same time falling victim to them.

## 5.4 Periodicals

Between 1992 and 1998, *The Guardian* newspaper “Weekend” section published the illustrated “Urban Myths” column by Healey & Glanvill (Phil Healey and Rick Glanvill), with content taken from a series of four books: *Urban Myths*, *The Return Of Urban Myths*, *Urban Myths Unplugged*, and *Now! That’s What I Call Urban Myths*. In 1999 a new collection for reluctant readers – *Stranger Than Fiction* – brought the same apocryphal tales into classrooms. Healey & Glanvill were occasional guests on *This Morning* with Richard & Judy, asked to debunk or add context to viewers’ urban legends.

The British writer Tony Barrell is a collector of modern urban legends, many of which he has explored in a long-running column in *The Sunday Times*. These include the story that Orson Welles began work on a Batman movie in the 1940s, which was to feature James Cagney as The Riddler and Marlene Dietrich as Catwoman;<sup>[25]</sup> the persistent rumour that the rock singer Courtney Love is the granddaughter of Marlon Brando;<sup>[26]</sup> and the idea that in a famous 1970s poster of Farrah Fawcett, there is a subliminal sexual message concealed in the actress’s hair.<sup>[27]</sup>

## 6 Internet

Internet urban legends are folklore stories that are spread through the internet. They may be spread through Usenet or email,<sup>[28]</sup> or more recently by social media.

### 6.1 Types

**Crime stories** As with traditional urban legends, many Internet rumors are about crimes either mythic or based on real events but blown out of proportion.<sup>[29][30]</sup>

**Chain email letters** Chain letters are a variety of urban legends concerning e-mails that tell the reader to make copies of, and redistribute, the e-mail or they will meet a terrible fate.<sup>[31]</sup>

**Fake virus and malware alerts** Fake virus alerts, telling people of non-existent threats to their computer, are commonly distributed by email.<sup>[28]</sup>

## 6.2 Use in marketing

The capacity of the internet to spread rumors has been used in marketing, for instance with the low-budget film *The Blair Witch Project*, which was advertised as if it were about a genuine urban legend, rather than a work of original fiction.<sup>[32]</sup>

## 7 See also

- Creepypasta
- Factoid
- Japanese urban legend
- Woozle effect

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## 9 Further reading

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## 11 External links

- Snopes - Urban Legends Reference Pages
- The AFU And Urban Legends Archive
- Urban Legends at DMOZ

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