

Reality bites

Reports of a 'vampire' prowling the streets of Birmingham have struck terror into the locals, even though police say it is a myth. Why do people continue to believe in it? Because, says Stuart Jeffries, they need to

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The Guardian

A vampire is on the loose in Birmingham. And an inept one, if reports are to be believed. Which they aren't. Last month, this "vampire" went on a "rampage" in Glen Park Road, Ward End. The attacker reportedly bit a male pedestrian and then bit neighbours who came to the man's aid. One woman had "chunks" bitten out of her hand, according to reports, which feature lots of one-word "quotes" and very little in the way of named sources.

No matter. The Birmingham Evening Mail has been flooded with calls from "terrified" families, community leaders and schools. Oliver Luft of the Birmingham news agency Newsteam reported: "As the sun dips below the rooftops of sleepy terraced streets, residents rush home, quickly gathering up playing children, because after night falls a vampire hungry for blood stalks. Reports of a Dracula-style attacker on the loose biting innocent people has spread terror throughout neighbourhoods in Birmingham, causing many to fear the darkness of the night."

Such reports themselves spread fear. Thus, a spokeswoman for City Road primary school in Ladywood said: "We have had many parents coming in concerned because they had heard somebody has been going around biting people."

But police in Birmingham have not investigated this "case". Nor have any hospitals in the city reported treating more than the usual number of hard-bitten Brummies. A police spokesman said: "To date we have not received any reports from people stating they have been bitten and this appears to be an urban myth which is being fuelled by rumours."

Urban myths are always fuelled by rumours. Only last year, virtual inboxes throughout the US teemed with photographs of so-called camel spiders that were allegedly attacking US soldiers in Iraq. An anonymous caption read: "With a vertical leap that would make a pro basketball player weep with envy, these bastards latch on and inject you with a local anaesthetic so you can't feel it feeding on you." Entomologists later pointed out that camel spiders are neither venomous nor a threat to humans or camels.

The photograph of a camel spider was chosen as the top urban legend of 2004 by a US site that gleefully collects such faux photos, dodgy global emails and questionable stories that have spread across the land of the free and the home of the credulous. Here are some others that made it into the urbanlegends.com 2004 top 10:

Terrorists are buying up UPS (United Parcel Service) uniforms on eBay. A scary story, if true - but it was not: the FBI investigated the claim that \$32,000 of UPS uniforms had been bought from eBay in the previous 30 days, and found it to have no substance.

Altoids mints help you perform fellatio. This myth gained notoriety when the 1988 Starr report stated that Monica Lewinsky handed to then president Clinton a printout of an email including this story during a secret White House rendezvous the previous year. Apparently, they don't.

Bracelets. Last year US parents were alarmed by stories that a middle school had banned girls wearing coloured bracelets. Each colour, it was widely claimed, indicated what kind of sexual favour they would perform. Despite the ban, the bracelet phenomenon was spreading nationwide. Reportedly.

[...]

David Emery, chronicler of folklore for urbanlegends.com, defines urban legends as "apocryphal stories, told as true and plausible enough to be believed, about horrific, embarrassing, exasperating or ironic things that have supposedly happened to real people. In lieu of evidence, the teller of an urban legend is apt to rely upon good storytelling and the naming of allegedly trustworthy sources (eg a friend of a friend who swears it is true) to bolster its credibility. Legends tend to arise spontaneously and are rarely traceable to a single point of origin." No wonder, then, that the once-bitten of Birmingham have since become so publicity-shy. If, that is, they existed in the first place.

In this age of emails and texts, urban legends can spread faster and more widely than in the 1980s, when such books as *The Choking Doberman and Other "New" Urban Legends* by folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand became bestsellers. Emery offers tips on how to spot an email hoax. USE OF UPPERCASE LETTERS IS A DEAD GIVEAWAY. As is the use of exclamation marks!!!! If the text seems to be more about emotionally affecting you than communicating accurate information, it is likely to be a hoax. Finally, he suggests, ask yourself whether the information seems plausible.

I applied the last test to a video purportedly of the "Beast of Bodmin Moor" posted on news.bbc.co.uk website in July 1998. This "document" followed a 1995 government report in which zoologists concluded there was no evidence to support the claim that big cats lived wild in Cornwall. Since 1983, there had been 60 sightings of the beast in and around Cornwall. I remain sceptical: the image of the "big cat" I saw, though it purported to be of a three and a half foot long "beast", just needed the addition of a flea collar to be a dead ringer for the cat who sprays our front door. But how did he get all the way from Finsbury Park to Cornwall?

Urban legends pre-date emails and video footage. In the 1830s, a character appeared in the London streets called Spring-Heeled Jack. One woman reported to the police that she was attacked by a "tall thin man, enveloped in a long black cloak. With one bound he was in front of her, and before she had the chance to move, he belched blue flames from his mouth into her face." Jack was repeatedly "sighted" in London and identified as the offspring of the devil, with some "witnesses" reporting he had horns and cloven feet.

Peter Ackroyd writes in London - The Biography: "It is almost as if this bizarre figure emerged from the streets themselves, like a 'golem' which is supposed to be made from the mud and dust of a certain vicinity. The fact that 'Jack', like a latter and more notorious 'Jack', was never apprehended serves only to deepen that sense of anonymity which suggests the monstrous figure to be some token or representation of London itself." Similarly, the Birmingham vampire will surely never be found - because the symbolic need for such a figure is infinitely greater than any forensic evidence that could be compiled.

Ackroyd's account of this urban legend is surely more interesting than those by people who have tried to explain away the uncanny nature of Spring-heeled Jack. In *The Legends and Bizarre Crimes of Spring Heeled Jack*, Peter Haining suggested that 'Jack' was a fire-eater who wore a mask to protect his face and had shoes with springs in their heels for leaping. This account, like Patricia Cornwell's "solving" of the Ripper case (pinning the murders on the painter Walter Sickert), is surely uninteresting because it doesn't account for the psychic need that makes such legends so richly embroidered and enduring.

Vampires, as Christopher Frayling, chairman of Arts Council England, points out, are the most enduring of urban myths - although "urban" hardly does vampires justice. He writes in *The Vampire: Lord Ruthven to Count Dracula* that vampires were part of rural 18th-century folklore. At that time, these bloodsuckers were inarticulate peasants "who attacked sheep and cows as often as their relatives". Lord Byron changed vampire legend for ever when, staying at a rented house on the shores of Lake Geneva in 1816, he suggested to guests - who included his physician, Dr Polidori, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Shelley's future wife, Mary - that they each write a ghost story. The most famous result of these is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, but more relevant for us is Dr Polidori's novel *The Vampyre*, inspired by the story Byron told the assembled guests on an inclement day.

The story deals with a man's encounter with Lord Ruthven, a libertine killed in Greece who becomes a vampire. Ruthven has a "dead grey eye" and a "deadly hue of his face" - a description that became a stereotype of the vampire look. The book inspired great interest in vampirism in London and Paris, and profoundly influenced Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*.

But vampires needed to mutate again before they were fit to prowl the streets of Birmingham. One such change was effected by Anne Rice and Stephen King, who domesticated the legend (King's *Christine*, for example, was a vampire car). Vampires were no longer on the fringes of civilised Europe or decadent aristos. At this moment, says Frayling, "the vampire enters our bloodstream".

It has never really left, though vampires have changed again: now they are not ghoulish Transylvanian counts, but hip, sexy, immortal teens from southern California. (cf. "bracelets")

What does the vampire represent now? "It's about multiculturalism," says Frayling. "It's about how we view the Other. You can't demonise a group as was done in America in the 30s or England in the 50s." Instead, the modern vampire incarnates many things - sexual fantasies, fears of urban anomie, especially for teenagers. "It's an amazing myth. It's so flexible."

It is also a hellish myth, which is no doubt why Father Marcus Stock, director of schools for Birmingham's Catholic diocese, warned in 2003 that parents should be vigilant in letting their children watch programmes such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Sabrina the Teenage Witch. "They seem to be appealing to a spiritual element which perhaps they are not finding from traditional faiths," Stock said at the time. "It is significant that the supernatural element of these programmes is finding fascination with these young minds."

And it is also no doubt why, whatever real human beasts may be stalking the streets of Birmingham, stories of a vampire hungry for blood will be chilling and thrilling its citizens for some time yet.

Reality bites /

Voc.:

1	inept	incompetent
2	go on a rampage	make a lot of noise and cause damage while going through an area
3	chunk	piece
8	terraced street (!)	<i>false friend</i> (!), street with houses built wall to wall with no space between
9	to stalk	to walk around looking for victims
	on the loose	moving freely
12	to spread, spread, spread	(irregular)
16	Brummies	inhabitants of Birmingham
18	rumour	something that people repeat and tell others without knowing if it is true
19	virtual inbox	site for letters on the internet
	to teem with	wimmeln von
21	pro	professional
22	to latch on	to attach, to become connected, to stay close
	entomologist	expert in insects
24	gleeful	schadenfroh, hämisch
25	dodgy	dishonest, unreliable
26	the credulous (pl. !!)	people who believe things uncritically and are easily deceived
27	scary	something that is scary gives you reason to be afraid
30	Altoids	brand name of peppermint sweets
36	apócrifal	probably not true though often told and believed by some people
37	exasperating	ärgerlich; making you annoyed
38	in lieu of	(frz) instead of
40	to bolster	to boost, to make stronger
41	the once-bitten	Plural!!
42	in the first place	überhaupt
43	text (to text) !!!!!	Kurznachricht auf dem Mobilfon — nicht SM(S) / short message (service)
46	it's a dead giveaway	es verrät sich sofort
49	purported	angeblich
54	a dead ringer for	the term doppelgänger is sometimes used to mean 'a (living or dead) person who closely resembles someone else'. The term dead ringer has the same meaning, but it's not a literary term. For example maybe your boyfriend is a "dead ringer" for Brad Pitt.
	Finsbury Park	Teil von (Nord-)London
59	to belch	aufstoßen, rülpsen
60	cleave, clove, cloven	(ge)spalten
62	golem	in Jewish folklore, an image endowed with life. It assumed its present connotation in the Middle Ages, when many legends arose of wise men who could bring effigies to life by means of a charm concerned with medical research in crimes
66	forensic, adj	to decorate (eigentlich: sticken)
72	to embroider	fictitious character created by Polidori; model for Dracula
74	Lord Ruthven	1788 -1824; engl. Dichter, hielt sich häufig im Ausland auf, starb in Griechenland an Malaria, als er den grch. Freiheitskampf unterstützen wollte
76	Lord Byron	ungemütlich (unpleasant, cold or stormy)
81	in-clement	a man who has many sexual affairs
82	libertine	unpleasant and frightening (gruselig)
90	ghoulish	lack of moral or social principles
94	anomie	watchful, observant
97	vigilant	

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1. Analyze the headline and comment on it, please
2. What kind of text is this? Find evidence and quote the lines, please.
3. What kind of attitude does the writer seem to have? (make reference to the text)
4. What is behind the Birmingham vampire, in your opinion?
5. Why do people spread "urban legends" such as the story of the camel spider or the UPS uniforms?
6. Why are such legends believed?
7. Jeffries gives examples of historic monster tales (p.2). What do they illustrate?
8. Why are Catholic authorities worried about TV programmes centering around vampires and witches?