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# The Truth Never Stands In Way Of A Good Story



## Synopsis

"My sister's boyfriend knows a family who...", "One of my wife's colleagues has a friend who knows someone who...", "This is a true story that was forwarded to me by...", "This is not a joke!". In this lively and engaging book, the nation's foremost expert on urban legends explores the spontaneous germination of these bizarre, yet plausible, narratives that play on the absurdities and prey on the fears of modern life. Through voluminous correspondence from readers of his books and syndicated newspaper column, Jan Harold Brunvand has become something of a clearinghouse for evolving versions of urban legends. Here, he looks in detail at a dozen rampant and long-lived examples of this vigorous category of contemporary folklore, tracing their histories, variations, sources, and meanings. Brunvand tracks the various permutations-by fax, by e-mail, by newspaper, by word of mouth - of such legends as "The Red Velvet Cake", "The Brain Drain", and "The Baby Roast". He points out their common elements - notably, their insistence on the truth of the story and their attribution to a "friend of a friend". His son Erik Brunvand, an associate professor of computer science at the University of Utah, contributes his own view of computer hacker legends traded across the Internet. Captivating and thought-provoking, "The Truth Never Stands in the Way of a Good Story" pins down the qualities that give urban legends their air of authenticity and make them hard to believe, yet impossible to dismiss. For those interested in popular culture and current events, as well as those wary of being taken in by false information, Brunvand's book reinforces his most basic piece of advice: "Don't believe everything you hear".

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Verbally transmitted stories that have influenced history, beliefs, morals, and humor, folktales usually derive from a retelling by a "friend-of-a-friend" through which the tale has become accepted as fact. In the past half-century, the study of these brief vignettes--which range in theme from animal horror stories to accidents, business and professional events, and pranks--has achieved academic status. These two anthologies recount legends from the oral American tradition, using classic and contemporary sources. Brunvand, the unchallenged master of narratives that incorporate the absurdities and fears of modern urban life, adds another tome to his impressive collections of urban tales and humor. Along with more esoteric entries, familiar nuggets of oral fiction are included, such as title pieces from "The Mexican Pet" and "The Vanishing Hitchhiker." Equally valuable is Canadian raconteur Genge's anthology. His work is a remarkable collection of myths that make the rounds in offices, college dorms, and wherever people swap stories that spring from our deepest fears and fascinations. Including tales like "Scare Me!" and "Corporate Convulsions," these legends have appeared in the popular press and circulated via photocopies, faxes, and computer links. Well crafted and riveting, these anthologies are essential to Americana collections. Recommended for all libraries.-Richard K. Burns, MSLS, Hatboro, PA Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Folklore professor Brunvand has delivered another sprightly study of urban folktales. This time around, Brunvand tracks the various versions of such legends as 'The Red Velvet Cake' (one variation is the Mrs. Fields Cookies recipe story), 'The Exploding Toilet' (Dave Barry should find this chapter interesting) and 'Lights Out!' (a false gang-initiation story spread by fax... The work is delightfully up-to-date." -- Today's Librarian "Brunvand, the unchallenged master of narratives that incorporate the absurdities and fears of modern urban life, adds another tome to his impressive collections of urban tales and humor. Along with more esoteric entries, familiar nuggets of oral fiction are included, such as title pieces from 'The Mexican Pet' and 'The Vanishing Hitchhiker.' ... Well crafted and riveting." -- Library Journal "An in-depth exploration of urban legends... [Brunvand] has made a career of collecting, analyzing, and cataloguing these legends, from stories of alligators in the sewers to tales of spider-egg-infested bubble gum." -- The New Yorker "Urban legends can travel by word of mouth or by print, and lately the Internet has become a prime vehicle for dissemination... However they are spread, Mr. Brunvand says, they all share some characteristics. The 'insistence on the truth of the story, the attribution to specific friends of friends, the age of the story and (most of all) the variations in details among the different versions are all hallmarks of the modern urban legend.'" -- New York Times "Is it true that a penny dropped from the Empire State

Building would make a dent in the pavement? That bath water runs out in opposite directions in different hemispheres, due to the Coriolis effect? That Post-it notes were invented by accident? Who could put their hand on their heart and claim they knew all along that 'Thomas Crapper invented the flush toilet' was false, but that 'military planes are tested by firing chickens at them from a special cannon' was true? ... [Brunvand], a slightly reluctant global 'expert' on the [urban legends] phenomenon ... continues his series of mildly jocular academic studies of oral repetition and variation." -- Mike Jay, Times Literary Supplement "The nation's foremost expert on urban legends here explores the spontaneous germination of these bizarre yet plausible narratives that play on the fears and absurdities of modern life." -- Skeptical Inquirer ADVANCE PRAISE Brunvand has the ability to be both scholarly and charming at the same time. This is his best legend book since *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*." -- Patricia A. Turner, author of *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* "Urban legends cut through society in countless ways, and tracing their history is a daunting task that only an experienced scholar-adventurer like Jan Brunvand can handle. In his latest work, he guides the reader through many examples of how old forms of folklore leap with ease into the world of international travel and communication, and even into the realm of cyberspace." -- Bill Ellis, president of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research

More text-bookish than previous endeavors, Brunvand brings us yet another urban legend anthology. Perhaps "anthology" isn't the best word. "The Truth Never Stands..." is more of a work of research, delving into the origins and travel patterns of the legends rather than legends (and variations of the legends) themselves. I do recommend this book, but only to die-hard UL enthusiasts and folklore aficionados. If you don't really care about where the urban legend came from, then this book will be a bore. As for the casual UL reader, I recommend any of Brunvand's other books.

This is the first Brunvand book that I've read. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. I'm usually very skeptical and don't believe Urban Legend stories that I hear but I must admit this book debunked a few tales I assumed to be true. This book does tend to have an academic tone to it at times and I didn't mind this. Some readers may not want this much detail however. If you are at all interested in Urban Legend, folklore, or even those ubiquitous internet rumors then you'll enjoy this book.

I frequently receive urgent warnings from friends and colleagues via e-mail. They always provide me with crucial information, e.g. do not use your cell phone near a gas pump (the pump will explode); do not open certain e-mail messages (your drive will be wiped); and of course - do not

flash your headlights in San Jose (you will be murdered to facilitate a gang initiation). Thanks to the works of Brunvand, I amaze and mystify my friends by my ability to recognize these electronic urban legends. This book carries on the urban legend tradition of the author's other works: "The Mexican Pet", "Curses! Broiled Again", for example . I recommend this new book without reservation. You too can become an urban legend spotter.

Urban myth is positioned at one end of the very same continuum which contains great mythic heroes and sagas like King Arthur and The Illiad and The Odyssey in its middle and the great religions of our world at its other end. In that way, urban legends have the potential to tell us a great deal about what types of story may ultimately gain steam to capture the public imagination. Left long enough, like with the legend of the saucer crash at Roswell, New Mexico, urban myth can gestate into full fledged legend. That's why whenever one of these books comes out I always like to pick it and see if the author has some novel take on the myths treated and how they arose. I think any book on urban giving it a thorough treatment would touch on the following topics: 1) The neuroscience behind the study: Two excellent examples of this are Pascal Boyer's Religion Explained and Justin Barrett's Why Would Anyone Believe in God? In both cases, the books demonstrated that while "gods" may morphologically differ they HAVE TO share certain basic characteristics like possessing human like motivations with superhuman abilities to carry them out. That's why no popular religion features belief in a God who knows all but can be counted on to do nothing. 2) A good historical treatment of the myth in question: A very good example of this was the Air Force's response to the Roswell myth called Roswell Case Closed. Treating several decades of high altitude balloon work out of Roswell New Mexico the book masterfully showed how over time an inadvertent error by a Roswell press officer ballooned (pardon the pun) into a myth about an alien saucer crash...ultimately together with dissected aliens. 3) And finally some commentary about whether someone stands to benefit from the perpetuation of the myth. Though Brunvand was serviceable in touching on concerns related to historical treatment issues he didn't even make an attempt to touch on either the neuroscience or the economics of the thing. A good case in point is his treatment of the urban myth about a woman driving when a can Pillsbury dough explodes in her back seat exploding its goo on her head and making her think she was shot. Though Brunvand serviceably talks about various restatements of the myth and its ultimate popularization by then TV star Brett Butler he fails to really plum the depths of why the thing would get so often repeated in the first place. So why would such a myth get so often repeated? Other neuroscience seems to suggest that we maintain various concept templates in our head like the identities of different animals. And our myths seem to focus on entries to those

templates that have some template defying qualities. One case in point is the mythical Phoenix bird which can be burned but when one does so it arises alive again from its own ashes. The Phoenix sticks more in ones head owing to the novelty of its ability to regenerate itself. In linguistics commonly used verbs are often irregular in form. I am now eating but I will eat and after that I will have eaten. Such irregulars only number about 20 whereas the regulars, made past tense by simply adding "ed" by far outnumber their irregular counterparts. Across brain systems there seems to be something unique about the retention of novel information. It's this quality which separates the forgettable such as the lady went to the store from the novel the lady thought she was shot by her Pillsbury dough. And in my respectful opinion it's this inquiry which is the most important part of the study of urban legends, an inquiry lacking from this present book.

Those who have read Brunvand's other books, or various compilations of urban legends, will likely be most interested in this collection of articles and essays. Each of the 13 articles generally focuses on an individual legend, and Brunvand thoroughly researches the tales by tracking down numerous versions of the stories and positing how they may have originated. The style is scholarly, but accessible and interesting. His writing is a good introduction to more advanced ways of studying folklore, and the analysis and commentary adds to our understanding of how these stories develop and why they have become part of various communities' cultures. Compilations of ULs do document good stories, but just reading lots of the same old ULs can become a bit boring after a while. This book shows that there are interesting histories to the tales and that understanding these histories and cultural contexts enrich our understanding of folklore in contemporary life.

Unlike Brunvand's other collections of urban legends, this book, as several other reviewers have noted, is more textbook-like in its approach, with chapters that trace the author's research about major urban legends and their potential origins rather than a wide variety of legends and analysis of those stories. This book may appeal to some hardcore urban legend-ologists, but I found some chapters tedious. I think some strenuous editing could have eliminated what felt like a lot of fact-checking and superfluous detail and still made a convincing case for Brunvand and the thoroughness of his research. I missed his humor and the lighter tone of the previous book.

I agree with the Olympia reader, below. If you want a collection of stories, you're better off with his 1999 book, "Too Good to Be True." But if you are more deeply interested in this subject, this is the book for you. The only down side is that he has tackled most of these legends already in previous

books. The upside is that he goes more into depth, in some cases tracking them all the way back to a person named in the story and finding out how that person is connected to it.

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