

Social Selection in The Bunny Man: Research on the Origins of the Legend

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In 1903, there was an insane asylum in the woods of Clifton, Virginia. As the population of Clifton began to grow, residents became uneasy with having an insane asylum near by, so the convicts were transported to a prison in Lorton, Virginia. On the way to Lorton, the bus tipped over and rolled, and the prisoners got out and ran into the woods. By the next day, all the prisoners had been found except two: Marcus A. Wallster and Douglas J. Grifon. As the police searched for the two men, they kept finding skinned, half-eaten rabbits strewn on the ground every so often. About four months later, police found Wallster's body hanging from Fairfax Train Station Bridge with a note attached to his swinging corpse signed "'-*The Bunny Man.*'" On Halloween of that year, three teenagers went out to the bridge. Their gutted bodies were found the next day, with their throats slit, hanging from the bridge. The next Halloween, a few teenagers went to the bridge and waited until midnight. One of the girls, Adrian Hatala, was too scared to go into the tunnel. At midnight, she saw a bright light flash and then her six friends hanging from the bridge. Since then, about 20 other murders have happened at what is now called Bunnyman Bridge.^{1,2}

This is one version of the urban legend that is known today as the Bunny Man. Although there are many versions of the story, almost all take place in the area surrounding the now infamous railroad overpass of Fairfax County Station, officially called Clifton Overpass. Almost all versions also agree on what happens at midnight on Halloween; however, the differences concern who the Bunny Man is. (Some stories say that on Easter, a boy dressed as a bunny went mad, killed his family, and was later found hanging dead from the bridge.) Because there are so many different versions, researchers have had a difficult time coming up with an explanation as to how this urban legend came about.

Fairfax County Public Library's historian archivist, Brian Conley, is a prominent figure in the sphere of this legend and has done extensive research on the Bunny Man. In his paper,

¹ Tom G., "Bunny Man Bridge," *Dark Destinations* (blog), April 23, 2009 (4:37 a.m.), http://www.thecabinet.com/darkdestinations/location.php?sub_id=dark_destinations&letter=b&location_id=bunny_man_bridge.

² Timothy C. Forbes, "The Clifton Bunny Man," *Castle of Spirits*, accessed October 30, 2012, <http://www.castleofspirits.com/clifton.html>.

titled “The Bunny Man Unmasked: The Real Life Origins of an Urban Legend,”³ Conley describes the journey he has gone through, spanning over 20 years, while trying to discern the origins of the Bunny Man legend.

In his paper, Conley states that as soon as he began his research, it did not take very long for him to prove false some of the specifics of the legend mentioned above. After doing research and going through archives, he found that there had never been an insane asylum in Fairfax County, that Lorton Prison was not built until 1910, and that neither Grifon nor Wallster were in the court records of Fairfax County. Despite having debunked some of the most important facts about this story that gave it pseudo-validity, Conley was not satisfied. He writes, “At first I was content to dismiss the Bunny Man as completely fictitious; however, I have learned that many legends do have some basis in factual events.”⁴

In an attempt to find an event that could have been the origin of the Bunny Man legend, Conley, with the help of other librarians, came up with a compilation of every murder reported in Fairfax County from 1872 to 1973. Out of the many cases they found, he said that none of them closely resembled anything like the story of the Bunny Man. The question of where the urban legend of the Bunny Man originated remained unanswered.

However, a *Washington Post* article titled “Man in Bunny Suit Sought in Fairfax”⁵ from October 1970 eventually emerged. The article read as follows:

Fairfax County police said yesterday they are looking for a man who likes to wear a "white bunny rabbit costume" and throw hatchets through car windows. Honest.

³ Brian A. Conley, “The Bunny Man Unmasked,” *Fairfax County, Virginia*, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library/branches/vr/bunny/#>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Air Force Academy Cadet Robert Bennett told police that shortly after midnight last Sunday he and his fiancée were sitting in a car in the 5400 block of Guinea Road when a man "dressed in a white suit with long bunny ears" ran from the nearby bushes and shouted: "You're on private property and I have your tag number."

The "Rabbit" threw a wooden-handled hatchet through the right front [*sic*] car window, the first-year cadet told police. As soon as he threw the hatchet, the "rabbit" skipped off into the night, police said. Bennett and his fiancée were not injured.

Police say they have the hatchet, but no other clues in the case. They say Bennett was visiting an uncle, who lives across the street from the spot where the car was parked. The cadet was in the area to attend last weekend's Air Force-Navy football game.

A few days later, another sighting of the man dressed in a bunny suit was reported. The *Washington Post* again covered the story and called it "The 'Rabbit' Reappears."⁶ It read,

A man wearing a furry rabbit suit with two long ears appeared—again—on Guinea Road in Fairfax County Thursday night, police reported, this time wielding an ax and chopping away at a roof support on a new house.

Less than two weeks ago a man wearing what was described as a rabbit suit accused two persons in a parked car of trespassing and heaved a hatchet through a closed window of the car at 5400 Guinea Rd. They were not hurt.

Thursday night's rabbit, wearing a suit described as gray, black and white, was spotted a block away at 5307 Guinea Rd.

Paul Phillips, a private security guard for a construction company, said he saw the "rabbit" standing on the front porch of a new but unoccupied house.

"I started talking to him," Phillips said, "and that's when he started chopping." "All you people trespass around here," Phillips said the "Rabbit" told him as he whacked eight gashes in the pole. "If you don't get out of here, I'm going to bust you on the head."

Phillips said he walked back to his car to get to get [*sic*] his handgun, but the "Rabbit", [*sic*] carrying the long-handled ax, ran off into the woods.

The security guard said the man was about 5-feet-8, 160 pounds and appeared to be in his early 20s.

⁶ Ibid.

In regards to the reports, Conley says, “It is...plainly evident that the story began to take on the features of an urban legend quite soon after the events were reported. Investigator [W.L.] Johnson was following leads generated by school-yard rumors less than two weeks after the first appearance of the Bunny Man.”⁷ Conley concludes his paper by stating that these sightings must have been the origin of the Bunny Man legend.

However, what Conley leaves unanswered is how these sightings turned into the current story about the Bunny Man who kills people on Halloween, as well as why it has been localized to Clifton Overpass. The questions I sought to answer in my research were the following: How did the supposed unordinary yet plausible occurrence of the man that dressed up in a bunny suit become such a fantastical legend about a mythical spirit that murders people on Halloween?; How did the story become localized to “Bunnyman Bridge,” and how has this contributed to the survival of the myth?

My theory on the answers to these questions lies in the concept of memes, a term coined by Richard Dawkins. In their article “Emotional Selection in Memes: The Case of Urban Legends,” Heath, Bell, and Sternberg discuss urban legends through the lens of memes and propose that “just as biological organisms evolve to fit a physical environment, memes should evolve to fit an environment determined by shared psychological and sociological characteristics.”⁸ I believe that this describes the case of the Bunny Man legend well. The story of the Bunny Man began with the stories in the newspaper about people who encountered a man dressed in a bunny suit; however, over time, details were changed, added, and omitted, and the legend underwent emotional selection as it was retold. Just like Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest, the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Heath, Bell, and Sternberg, “Emotional Selection in Memes: The case of urban legends” quoted in Bradley and Dean, *Terra Incognita: Researching the Weird* (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2012), 121-122.

reason why the versions of the Bunny Man that are told today are so different from the original story is that they are the ones that were passed on; they caused the greatest impact upon people's memory.

It is important to note that all versions of the Bunny Man legend told today contain crude, gory murder, whereas the original story of the encounters with the man dressed in a bunny suit did not include any injuries to people whatsoever. So the question is, how did murder infiltrate and become so prominent in the Bunny Man legend? In their article, Heath, Bell, and Sternberg talk specifically about emotional selection and the role that disgust plays in the retelling of stories. In their study, they found that "in general, people preferred [to retell] the version of the story that produced the highest levels of disgust. It is interesting that when people indicated that they would pass along the most disgusting story, they were also . . . passing along stories that they admitted were less plausible."⁹ This might well explain the reason why versions of the Bunny Man legend that survive today are so gruesome and gory. The story started out with a man dressed in a bunny suit, who had an axe. Someone wanted to make the story a bit more interesting, albeit less plausible, by retelling the story and adding that the Bunny Man used the axe to kill people, which eventually led to the gory details such as skinning, gutting, and hanging. In short, the legend of the Bunny Man needed these details in order to be passed on, retold, and thus survive in society; and it did so even though the legend became less and less plausible.

Furthermore, Heath, Bell, and Sternberg say, "Instead of vague stories that provoke generalized anxiety, we find rumors and legends that seem targeted to provoke specific emotional reactions."¹⁰ It is interesting to note that practically all the current versions of the

⁹ Ibid, 117.

¹⁰ Ibid, 107.

legend not only share the theme of murder, but more specifically the murder of kids and teenagers. Because it is young people who are the victims of the story instead of adults, the story might cause more people to become upset to a higher degree. According to Heath, Bell, and Sternberg, this is what causes the story to get retold and passed on. At the same time, in adding this detail to the story, the storyteller may be increasing the legend's credibility because it is more likely that a group of teenagers, rather than adults, would be out late at night and hanging out at the bridge. This attempt to increase the story's credibility might have been compensation for its decrease in plausibility after the details about murders were added.

Similarly, there are many other details in current versions of the legend that have been added over time to make the story seem more credible. Two of the concepts that apply here, *pseudo-proof* and *pseudo-witnesses*, are concepts coined by John William Johnson. Johnson defines pseudo-proof as "some sort of 'evidence' offered to validate the folk belief or a segment of the narrative, but which in reality does not prove anything conclusively."¹¹ In the Bunny Man legend, for example, one detail included in many versions of the story is that you can see bloodstains on the bridge caused by the bodies that have been hanged there and left swaying in the wind. The function of this detail of the story is to cause the listener to believe the legend is based on observable "facts." Even though bloodstains may not actually be on the bridge, this detail causes the listener to be skeptical in the least, especially if he or she has not yet been to the bridge. This detail in the story presents the listener with the classic "go see it yourself if you don't believe me" argument. The reason this is pseudo-proof is that, even if there *are* marks on the bridge, we cannot prove that they are bloodstains; and, even if they are bloodstains, we

¹¹ Johnson, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker in Africa" quoted in Bradley and Dean, *Terra Incognita: Researching the Weird* (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2012), 28.

cannot prove that they were caused by human corpses hanged there. Therefore, what seems to be an observable “fact” is, in fact, not provable and thus not reliable.

Other examples of pseudo-proof in the previously mentioned version of the legend include specific dates, names, locations, and references to institutions. For example, this variant of the story mentions the men Marcus A. Wallster and Douglas J. Grifon. Because the names include a first, last, and middle initial of the two individuals, it seems that the story may be real, as opposed to a story that references only first names. Similarly, the story makes references to specific institutions such as Lorton Prison, as well as to specific locations such as the Fairfax Train Station Bridge. Even if they are incorrect, as Conley has proved many of them to be, these details serve to boost the ethos of the storyteller because they give the listener the illusion that the story has authority.

Another similar concept that has the same function in the legend is what Johnson refers to as *pseudo-witnesses*. In the Bunny Man legend, one of the pseudo-witnesses is a girl named Adrian Hatala. Again, because both her first and last names are given, it gives the story a false sense of validity. However, it is said that Adrian was charged with the murder of her friends, went mad, and was institutionalized and eventually died;¹² so even if the woman actually existed, people who might want to find out whether or not the story is true would be unable to talk to her. This most likely dampened the legend’s ability to reach its maximum potential of credibility, until eventually another pseudo-witness was added. Later versions of the story say that on Halloween in 1987, a girl named Janet Charletier (again, notice how we get both first and last names) joined her friends at Bunny Man Bridge late that night. She decided to leave right before midnight, but as she was about to get through the tunnel, a light flashed she saw her friends

¹² Timothy C. Forbes, “The Clifton Bunny Man,” *Castle of Spirits*, accessed October 30, 2012, <http://www.castleofspirits.com/clifton.html>.

hanged above her, and she was knocked unconscious. The legend has it that she still lives in Fairfax, a few miles from the bridge, and that you can see her sitting on her balcony every morning looking in the direction of the bridge. Again, whether this is actually true is not as important as the function that this detail serves for the survival of the legend. This detail leaves the listener more likely to believe the story because it has a “real” witness, and it challenges listeners to believe it or go see for themselves if they do not. My assumption is that this detail is added to versions that are told to people who do not live in Virginia, because these people are less likely to go out and look for the “witness” and will therefore have to accept the legend as possibly true. Such details prevent the listener from completely dismissing the story as fiction. The reader might think twice about the story, and this increases the probability that he or she retells the story to someone else.

Most of the details mentioned here have been incorporated over time and add to the localization of the legend. Localization allows people in the area to be more sympathetic with the story, because it causes the story to take place against a backdrop that is familiar to them. Therefore, they are more likely to believe the legend. Furthermore, it is probable that people will be less likely to believe the legend if it took place at “some bridge”; however, the current versions pinpoint the occurrences to a specific bridge, which make the story seem more believable.

Localization has also affected the range of places that the legend has spread to. My guess is that the detail about the location of the Bunny Man legend was added early in the history of the legend because, as Johnson says in his article, in order for a legend to be spread widely, it must have room for adjustments and flexibility in its localization. Guerin and Miyazaki support this view and assert, “The forms [of stories] that are commonly [and widely] identified are merely

those that use some generic property that works across a range of groups . . . [and do not] depend upon a local context of conversation.”¹³ Because the Bunny Man legend is so localized, and because it is said to take place specifically at Clifton Overpass, we see practically no versions of the legend that take place outside of Fairfax.

Despite its implausibility, the legend of the Bunny Man is still very prevalent, especially in Fairfax and its neighboring cities. One might expect these cities to be small towns and that the reason why the legend still survives is due to superstition common among the people of a rural area; however, Fairfax is a developed city and is one of the largest suburbs in Washington D.C. One explanation as to why the Bunny Man legend still exists and is rampant may be associated with the concept of *loss aversion*. In the chapter “Anatomy of an Accident” from their book *Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior*, Ori and Rom Brafman describe loss aversion and explain that people tend to react very vividly to a potential loss, no matter how low the chances are of it actually occurring; and that people will often do irrational things in order to avoid a perceived loss. Brafman and Brafman give one example of this and explain how loss aversion often takes place when a person renting a car is asked whether he or she wants to buy the unnecessary and very expensive “loss damage waiver.” They write, “Normally, we’d [people in general] never dream of taking out an extra policy at an astronomical rate just to be doubly safe, but the threat of a loss makes us reconsider.”¹⁴ This can be applied to the case of the Bunny Man legend. Despite the fact that the stories are very unlikely to have actually occurred, there exists the potential for having a family member, friend, or close loved one killed by the Bunny

¹³ Guerin and Miyazaki, “Analyzing Rumors, Gossip, and Urban Legends Through their Conversational Properties” quoted in Bradley and Dean, *Terra Incognita: Researching the Weird* (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2012), 94.

¹⁴ Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman, “Anatomy of an Accident,” in *Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

Man if he or she is not warned. People may begin to think, “What if the story is true, and my son, daughter, or coworker goes to Bunny Man Bridge and is killed?” In this case, people make the irrational decision of warning their loved ones of the Bunny Man by telling them the story, even when they know that the legend is quite possibly false. The story is retold, loss aversion happens again, and the legend is spread.

The Bunny Man in Movies

As the legend gets passed on and continually accrues new details, it becomes more and more fantastical. Although these details have served to support the retelling of the story, eventually the legend will become so improbable that people might not believe it unless they see some kind of proof. I believe that we have reached that point already. In an era that is so heavily centered on television, we have become more of a “seeing is believing” kind of people than ever before.

This is where movies come in. There have been many movies that have contributed to the continuation of the Bunny Man legend because they include some kind of evil or mysterious bunny character. For example, one of the first movies to have a large bunny in it was Harvey (1950). Although Harvey the bunny is not evil, it is invisible, and this contributes to the mystery of the Bunny Man. Later movies, such as *Night of the Lepus* (1972) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) feature actual bunnies that kill people. The more important movies for furthering the Bunny Man legend include *Sexy Beast* (2000), *Cabin Fever* (2002), *Kottentail* (2007), and *The Bunnyman* (2011), because each of them feature a murderer dressed in a bunny costume. In the movie *Donnie Darko* (2001), Frank is a man dressed in a bunny suit who can transcend time and space. Although Frank does not murder people, his mask is quite disturbing

and evil-looking; he relates to the Bunny Man of Fairfax County because he is more like a spirit, since he can appear and disappear at will. What these movies do for the Bunny Man legend is create an image of the Bunny Man so that when people think of, tell, or listen to the legend, they can more vividly picture the Bunny Man; thus, people are more likely to believe, or at least pass on, the legend.

Despite the fact that we now have images of the Bunny Man to relate to, the legend itself remains fantastical and unbelievable, especially in an era of science. With the current technology that we have, many of the “facts” in the Bunny Man legend are easily refutable. For example, as mentioned earlier, Brian Conley easily found that an insane asylum in Fairfax County never existed, nor did a man named Marcus A. Wallster. People who hear the story and are skeptical about whether it is true only have to go on the Internet and research it to be able to conclude that it is not. But do they conclude this? Based on the popularity of the legend, it is evident that most people do not try to discern its veracity. This is because, if people knew that the “facts” were not true and that the story could be dismissed as false, they would be much more unlikely to retell the story, and thus the Bunny Man legend would not run so rampant.

In fact, urban legends in general are often very unlikely—many times completely false—and yet they continue to be passed on and retold. Most of the time, despite the fact that they know a story is probably not true, people choose not to take the time to figure out whether legends like the Bunny Man are, in fact, fictitious. What does this tell us about human nature and the role that urban legends and mysterious stories play in our society? If urban legends’ survival were based on their veracity, they would not exist for the most part.

One of the main characteristics of urban legends like the Bunny Man is mystery. There is clearly something about this characteristic that transcends people’s rationality and causes them to

think, *What if?* What if, despite science's evidence against ghosts and spirits, there might just be something beyond what our eyes can see? What if, even though Marcus A. Wallster did not exist, the Bunny Man does? There is something intriguing about mystery that causes us to ask these questions, contradicting such a fundamental part of ourselves: our rationality.

Based on the popularity of urban legends such as the Bunny Man, as well as research studies done by Heath, Grant, and Bell, it is evident that stories that include mystery and graphic details are the ones that get passed on and survive in society. However, what we do not know is *why* this is. Further studies could include research on why stories that include gory details like murder intrigue people so much, and what causes people to be so interested in these kinds of stories (as well as what it is about these details that so strongly motivates people to retell the stories). Is it a psychological cause? A physiological cause? I believe that only when we can answer these questions will we be able to have a better understanding of the Bunny Man legend. Although we have been able to trace the origins of the legend and give a possible explanation as to *how* it has changed based on social selection, we still have not answered *why* it has undergone so much change over time or what it is about people's nature that causes them to keep passing on the legend, despite its absurdity. As long as these questions remain unanswered, the Bunny Man remains hidden in the mystery of Clifton Overpass, waiting for his next victims.

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