



Digital Folklore

DF Unplugged: Dr. Jeana Jorgensen

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Perry: Hi, I'm Perry Carpenter, one of the hosts of the Digital Folklore podcast. And this is Digital Folklore Unplugged. Unplugged editions are where we ditch all the fancy production and the story elements and bring you the raw, or only slightly edited interviews with our folklore experts. On today's episode, my cohost, Mason, and I got to speak with Dr. Jeana Jorgensen.

Jeana: I'm Dr. Jeana Jorgensen. I am a lecturer at Butler University. And with a PhD in folklore, I study all sorts of human interactions around tradition, storytelling, and identity.

Perry: We touch on several key themes in this interview, everything from the multidisciplinary nature of folklore studies to the value of studying folklore, the dark side of folklore, and how it can be weaponized, and a whole lot more.

Okay, let's get unplugged.

Perry: For you, what was your path into folklore as a lifelong thing that you spend all your time thinking about and working towards?

Jeana: So, I was a bookworm as a child. I read pretty much everything I could get my hands on, and some of my favorite things to read were these really thick world book of folktales, world book of mythology, those kinds of things, as well as a lot of fairy tales and fantasy and fairy tale, fantasy retellings, lots of things in that vein. So, that was my first love. And I went to UC Berkeley as an undergraduate, thinking, "All right, I want to be a writer. I'll get a day job. I'll probably teach history or something." I'd had a really influential history teacher in high school, so I'm probably going to major in history and then do whatever I want on the side. But my first semester at Berkeley, I took four classes, I took an intro to cultural anthropology, intro to linguistics, intro to religious studies, and a freshman seminar on fairy tales. And by the end of that, I was like, "I want all these things combined as one thing forever." And it turns out that's kind of what folklore is.

And then, I went on to discover that Berkeley had a major folklorist, Alan Dundes, working there. And so, he became my mentor and took a bunch of classes with him, including graduate classes while I was an undergrad. And I just sort of got bit by the folklore bug and decided that this is the most interesting thing in the world because by studying folklore, I'm studying what people actually care about and what people actually do in their spare time, not



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under compulsion from capitalism or religion or their jobs necessarily. There can be social pressures involved in folklore. And because folklore exists in all time periods and all regions of the world and all groups of people, also, I'll never be bored, I will never run out of stuff to study. So, I just sort of decided, I'm going to do this for the rest of my life. I better go get the PhD. Oh, looks like my main option is Indiana University. And so, as a California girl, this led to a little bit of culture shock, which was itself an interesting thing from this perspective. And I've just been studying folklore ever since.

Perry: Super cool.

Mason: That gets into something. So, you mentioned, of course, there's a diversity of ideas that you get to study. And looking at the things that people are naturally producing on their own, rather than being coerced into producing by whatever governmental entities or economic pressures-- Well, I guess folklore can come out of economic pressure as well. But as you think about this, do you see folklore in some ways as a group of people leaving behind true representations of themselves rather than what is expected by entity X?

Jeana: To some degree, yes. So, I would stay away from phrasing like "true representations" or "accurate" or "authentic," maybe because it just depends on how you're measuring things. But folklore is something that is often done by the people for themselves. So, we have terminology like folk group, meaning a group of people who have some unifying factor in common, whether it's small or large. So, a folk group might be as big as a nationality, an ethnicity, people who share a language, people who share a religion. A folk group might be as small as a family, people who have the same hobby, people who have the same very small workplace and everything in between. So, this idea of folk group is that you have something in common, but that something leads to shared values and shared experiences. And as a result of that, shared folklore.

So, when people within a folk group are performing folklore or maintaining and sharing folklore with each other, yeah, it often is for insiders of that group. It's not always for outsiders. So, the stuff that we make and do for ourselves within small groups oftentimes is a very accurate representation of our values and how we see ourselves. But then, there's also what we call differential folklore, which is folklore that we have about them or those other people, which can be anything from the rivalries in a neighborhood or in a career. Lots of jokes, for example, are about one nationality making fun of another nationality. There's a lot



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of examples of those. So, folklore reflects identity on any number of levels. And again, oftentimes it is closer to the source. It is often less mediated than other types of culture.

So, for example, I do not have the budget or the connections to make a multimillion-dollar blockbuster movie that millions of people around the world will see. I don't have that capability. That is not going to happen in my lifetime. But I can reach people around me with a really well-thought-out joke or personal narrative or something along those lines. So, it is partly a question of scale, and I have to go through fewer steps to relay folklore to the people who are immediately in my spheres. So, whether that makes it more authentic is sort of another question, because authenticity is often a social construct at some level as well, but it is often less mediated by others.

Perry: Yeah, that's super insightful.

Mason: Really well put.

Perry: When you consider the study of folklore, let's say somebody is kind of standing on the outside looking in at folklore, and they don't understand the value of it as an academic discipline or as a life pursuit, what would you say the true value of studying folklore and being able to do research around it and speak conversantly about folklore as a concept is?

Jeana: Yeah, I'd say there's a lot of value. I'd class it primarily at two levels to communicate to people. First is, no matter what you enjoy in life, it is probably influenced by folklore on some level. If you are a foodie, well, what do you think people were doing before we could get mass-market preserved foods and order foods? It was recipes in your family that were passed down folklorically. What did we do before refrigeration? It was preserving things, whether by canning or putting things in a cellar. That all came from folklore that is traditionally passed along informal modes of knowledge.

So, no matter what you enjoy, if you like Marvel movies, a lot of those stories connect to fairy tales, legends and myths. So again, no matter what you like as a person, as a hobbyist, as someone who's into creative things, I guarantee you there's a connection to folklore somehow. So, that would be my first bid for value.



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My second bid for value is more scholarly in nature, and it's more about how humans interact with each other in the world. So, I think of folklore as social glue because we have these folk groups or these identity-related groups that we all get sorted into. It's kind of like a Sorting Hat, but we're all wearing multiple hats at the same time. There's the nationality that you are associated with. Perhaps you have a religion. Maybe there's some family folklore that you have. Maybe in your career, there's a set of insider knowledge and jokes and things like that, that kind of folklore. So, by looking at someone's multiple identities or folk groups, we can also start to see how people affiliate with one another and how we learn to communicate and share our value systems and things of that nature.

So, on a more serious note, folklore can not only be social glue in sort of a positive, constructive way, but folklore can be the dark side of that as well. Folklore is also found in stereotypes, in moral panics, in urban legends, in conspiracy theories, in rumors, things of that nature that create barriers between self and other that delineate, "We are the good, protected class. Those people are out to get us."

So, that's very much the dark side of folklore, is that it can maintain and construct social identities in groups. It can also tear those down and create villains that then sometimes face real-world consequences for being othered. So, by studying folklore, we can tap into these processes, how they're happening, when and where, and maybe intervene.

Perry: So, that is the most amazing answer we've gotten for that question so far.

Mason: Yeah.

Perry: Because it goes so deep into that, a lot of the social issues that are plaguing the world today, and I guess have always plagued the world, but we see it at a different scale than we ever have.

We've skirted an issue of definition up until now. So, I do want to go ahead and get from your perspective what is a workable definition for folklore? And then, I think we'll go into a little bit more meat, just so that we have multiple people also giving definitions and can show the diversity of ways that people try to classify what folklore is, I think that'd be valuable.



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Mason: And if possible, I know that a lot of the people who will be tuning in, just immediately associate old stories or specifically just fairy tales or something like that with folklore. So, how do you lure someone into the pool who only knows the word and not what it actually represents?

Perry: Well, I know you have a passion around fairy tales as well. So, I want to give you a chance in just a bit also to go really deep into the significance of fairy tales and what they've played over the course of human history and the value that they bring too. So, it's not just the Disneyfication of things, but the roots of that and what social issues they're trying to drive at. And we can do the same for contemporary legends and other areas as well. But yeah, let's start with kind of a base-level definition and then work from there.

Jeana: I really like the definition that my colleague, Lynne McNeil, gives of folklore in her book, *Folklore Rules*. Folklore is informally transmitted, traditional culture, and we do have to kind of break those parts down a little bit as well. So, culture is everything that we have to know and learn and understand to thrive in a society and know its unspoken rules. A couple of important facets of culture. Culture is transmitted rather than inherited. Nobody is born with culture. Nobody pops out of the womb knowing what's polite versus what's impolite. Culture is not in our genes. It's something we learn through human interaction from the moment we are brought into this world. So, culture is transmitted. Culture is learned. Culture is shared. Culture is also not universal.

Culture is something again that is going to be really shaped by historical and geographical factors depending on where and when you are in the world. So, with those ideas in mind about culture, if we think that culture is this whole big web of knowledge, it includes how we learn things about our economy and about technology and so many different kinds of things. And culture is also maintained and enforced in different ways. At least in the Modern West, we have a number of institutions that maintain culture. We have the government, we have education, we have medicine, we have the criminal justice system, all of these things that are responsible for enforcing norms and rules.

Now, in contrast to all of that, folklore is informal. Folklore is less institutional. If you decide to break the law for some reason, there might be severe consequences for that. If you tell a joke badly, there's may be not severe consequences for that. I don't know. I mean, maybe you just revealed that you're a bigot, and that does have some consequences for you. But



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you're not going to land in jail for telling a joke the wrong way or messing up a proverb or whatever. So, when we say that folklore is informally transmitted, traditional culture, we're saying folklore is a very important part of culture, but it's not transmitted and maintained by institutions the same way that education is, the same way that medicine is, the same way that the law is. So, folklore is informal. That's what that means.

We also mean that folklore is traditional, as in, it is passed along intentionally, rather than something that is completely new every single time. Tradition often has this connotation of being centuries old or millennia old, and that is just not true. Traditions can be new, traditions can be emergent. But what traditions do have is some form of continuity or stability over time. You can point at dots on a line at different texts that we have collected and say, "That and that and that. Look at that, those things are really similar. Those things are in the same type of thing. They're the same genre perhaps. They're the same kind of urban legend, or holiday custom," or whatever. So, when we say that folklore is traditional, we really just mean it's been passed along for some period of time, and we have documented that.

So, my favorite definition, folklore, is informally transmitted, traditional culture. I also like a couple other definitions. Dan Ben-Amos says, "Artistic communication in small groups." So, again, it's accessing that idea of groups of people who share something, share an identity, share values, share again some kind of linking factor. And the fact that it's artistic communication means, again, it's marked off from other types of culture. It's marked off from other types of interaction. And we say instead, "Aha. When you say a priest and a rabbi walk into a bar, I am signaling with this linguistic framing, I'm not just going to tell you any old anecdote. This one is special. This one is a joke. This is going to be funny." Or if I say, "Once upon a time," again, there's a marker or a formula that says we are shifting out of everyday conversation into something like magical, like a different realm.

One important note that I like to include along with these thoughts on what folklore is that none of these definitions include anything about truth value. The definition of folklore does not hinge on whether it's true or not. It hinges on how it's transmitted, the fact that it's more face to face and peer to peer than top-down forms of culture. Like, you have to have a lot of money to make a movie, or you have to have a literary agent to publish a novel through traditional press and so on. There's very little in the way of gatekeeping or institutional barriers with folklore.



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Now, there's some. There's always going to be some, because the audience for a lot of folklore is people just like us in our groups. If you get a reputation of cooking a really bad Thanksgiving dinner, people aren't going to want to come to your house for Thanksgiving anymore. So, there are standards, there is a community presence, there is community evaluation, but there's not straight up gatekeeping like Hollywood gatekeepers who can release movies and things of that nature.

And going back to the truth value thing, some genres of folklore are inherently marked off as true or untrue just by way of what their genre is. So, when I say, "Once upon a time," I'm keying you to expect a fairy tale. Fairy tales are fictional, formulaic narratives about magic and transformation and all that good stuff. So, you know we're not speaking of something that's true, but there might be emotional truths or emotional resonances or truths about the family or the self or something like that, but it's not literally-- like, Cinderella is not a real person. We all kind of understand that.

And in contrast, some kinds of folklore might actually be true. Certain forms of folk medicine have been documented to work, but we call it folk medicine because it's transmitted by the folk rather than by a doctor's prescription. So, again, calling something folklore is more about how it is transmitted than what the content of it actually is. And so, this is part of how we can link really disparate genres of folklore. What does it actually have in common when I say quilting is a kind of folklore, fairy tales are a kind of folklore, folk medicine is a kind of folklore? These things look drastically different from one another. Like, quilting is a material thing that exists in the world that's made of fabric. Fairy tales are verbal artistry with lots of magic in them and so on.

So, even the genres of folklore, different examples of folklore, might look very different than one another. What links them and what makes them all folklore, is that they are transmitted in these informal ways and they are tapping into tradition every time they are told.

Perry: Yeah, I love that. I think that some people trip over that word "traditional" whenever they see that definition, and they do think generational, or hundreds of years, when it really is-- could even be really short iterations on a cat meme or something over the period of days.



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Jeana: Yes, exactly. So, the existence of internet folklore is very short and emergent, but it's there. I was collecting memes during the 2016 presidential election cycle here in the US, showing Biden as a trickster figure, when then Vice President Biden was going to vacate the White House for then incoming President Trump. And these memes showed Biden doing things like stuffing shrimp shells in the White House curtain rods and setting the HBO and whatever else, TV, all of it to be in Spanish and all this stuff, like classic trickster things. Those were very new. A lot of them emerged within the course of like a handful of days. But you look at them and they're all clearly linked to one another by the idea of Biden as a trickster figure. And yeah, it's a recent tradition.

And that's another important thing I think about the definition of folklore is relevant. So, because folklore is not a type of culture that is maintained by institutions, if it ceases to be relevant to people's lives, it dies. It just dies. It just goes away. People might preserve it for funsies, for nostalgia, but we're not really hearing Challenger jokes anymore. So, disaster jokes and joke cycles, political joke cycles are a great example of this. No one is telling Dan Quayle jokes anymore. And I know I just dated myself by saying that, [chuckles] but it's not relevant. So, they just kind of drop off the radar. And, again, that's because they're folklore. Folklore must be relevant to be maintained.

Mason: I wonder if there's a way to clarify, because I think because it's so broad and can cover so many things, people might get tripped up on what isn't folklore. And it's obvious that top-down media and things like that is not folklore. But where is the delineation, I guess, between just any communication and what is folklore? Is it in that caching of subtext and meaning that is understood unspokenly?

Jeana: Yes. Good question. So, I tend to use two criteria to determine if something is folklore, multiple existence and variation. So, you need to document something existing in more than one time and place to have multiple existence. And this goes back to tradition. Tradition is establishing continuity and stability of a thing existing. So, if somebody tells me a really intriguing story, but that's the only version of it in existence, that's probably not folklore. No, folklore needs to be transmitted within and by a folk group. So, I need to see some kind of traditional existence, even if it's a very small group of people with this particular item of folklore. If it only exists in one place, ever told by one person, it may not be folklore. So, it just failed the multiple existence test.



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Variation is the other test. Tradition and variation are kind of twin or pair concepts in folklore. Tradition is continuity and variation is novelty. And we see this because somebody could tell a joke and I could retell the same joke and be like, okay, that's recognizably the same joke, the priest and the rabbi walking to the bar, whatever. But I can mix up the words and still have the same meaning and hopefully still hit the punchline. There's no joke police coming to get you if you use two different adverbs in your joke. So, tradition and variation mean that you are conveying the same idea or the same traditional side of things, while variation gives you the freedom to put your own spin on it. And again, the community will be the judge of this. Maybe you told a good version of the joke, maybe you told a bad version of the joke. I don't know.

And we see this essentially differentiating folklore from pop culture and the mass media, because for the most part, once a movie has been filmed, it is the same text. It doesn't matter whether I see it in the movie theater or I watch it on Netflix or some other streaming service. I'm watching frame for frame, the same exact thing that everyone else is. Now, there's a handful of exceptions, director's cut, 20-year retroactive, whatever. We get those sometimes. Same thing with if you are publishing a newspaper article or a novel or something like that, no matter where you read it, read on your Kindle, read it on a website, read it in print, you're probably reading the same word for word text, literally, no matter which medium you're seeing it in. So, those fail the variation test. So, it is the same static text. There's no room to put your own spin on it. It has been mediated by gatekeepers rather than by the folk.

And of course, we do get interesting sort of gray area case studies, like fan fiction, which is where someone takes a pop culture text and says, "Well, I think so-and-so should have actually got together with this other character instead, and they write it," or do whatever. That is more participatory, that is more people putting their own variation on something that has been composed by someone else. So, there are always going to be a couple of gray areas, I guess. Culture is inherently kind of messy, and we like to have categories in academic studies, but it doesn't always pan out to the real world.

But for the most part, if you are just sort of new to the study of folklore, you're like, "Wow, is everything folklore?" The answer is probably no. Look for multiple existence and look for variation. And maybe you have found a true edge case, in which case, that's pretty interesting. But we do have standards for what is considered folklore.



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Perry: Extremely good. Those two tools to use for that. Thank you. That was perfect. So then, one of the fun things, I guess, to contemplate is-- and I've heard people talk about this, so I think I know your answer as well, is the first iteration of something, the founding of that first telling of that joke, or the first time somebody said, "Once upon a time," is that considered folklore? Or is it only after there's significant variation and pattern establishment?

Jeana: It's an interesting question, but I don't know if it's an answerable question because so much of folklore comes from oral tradition that unless somebody has a time machine, we don't know when the first instance of something was. We can only document it after the fact and after it's become popular. In the internet age, yes, we might actually be able to pin down a first iteration of some kind of new text or new genre. That could definitely happen. So, whether that first one counts as folklore or not, um, I don't know. I'm not sure what I think about that because I work so much on fairy tales and genres, which is like, that is just lost to the mist of time. Sorry, I've gotten out of the habit of thinking about it.

I know, some of my colleagues study Slenderman and that one, there is a documented history of it appearing on creepypasta forums and then disseminating through various folkloric channels. So, I would probably want to pause this conversation and go look up what they've written about Slenderman. But yeah, my impression is that you would look at that first text as something that is definitely interesting and definitely influential, and then we would start to talk about it as folklore as it spread.

Perry: That's the consensus that I've seen too. And if you go back to something as early as-- or as easily to create a beginning of and to potentially trace it as like a meme, first time that meme shows up, it's considered a founder's meme. And then after that, only once there's significant variation does it become memed the way that we think about it in folklore. So, it's an interesting chicken-and-egg type of thing to toss around in our heads.

Mason: I didn't know if we wanted to just quickly hit like how did the internet change folklore, but totally up to you.

Jeana: Yeah, I can try to take a stab at that one. I think the internet changed folklore in a handful of ways. It made communication more rapid and accessible for larger numbers of people than ever before, in some ways. So, it was a game changer. There are a number of



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small folk groups that existed prior to the internet that still exist, but we would have to find fellow science fiction fans and other little niche groups through like newsletters and physically mailing out things to try to find your people and going to little conventions and gatherings and so on. So, if you think about all of these niche hobby groups that do share folklore and are a folk group, suddenly you meet thousands of people worldwide and you can just all instantaneously be in touch with each other.

So, I would say one significant thing the internet has done is allowed folk groups to more rapidly reach each other and establish shared identity and values and create new shared folklore. I guarantee you, for any niche hobby group or whatever, they've now got a Reddit page, they've got a Facebook page, they've got a whatever, they're on Twitter, they're sharing and making memes. So, that's been really interesting to observe. There are a number of folk groups that are inherently as well kind of isolated, either because the groups themselves are very stigmatized. So, people who are into more marginalized aspects of things such as LGBTQ identities, kink identities, non-monogamous identities, and so on. It's easier to find each other using pseudonyms on the internet now, as well as people who are isolated for just more logistics reasons, like people who are disabled or perhaps immunocompromised. So, the internet has been a major source of community and connection for a lot of these folk groups. That's been pretty notable.

The advance in technology sort of adjacent to the internet as well has, I think, facilitated the creation of folklore. So, could I draw a cat meme? I don't know. I could try. It wouldn't look too good. I'm not an artist, but I can use a click of something on a website, a few clicks later, and I've got a cat meme, and it's been recaptioned the way I want it, or the Morpheus Matrix meme or whatever. So, in terms of making tools accessible to people, the sort of adjacent to the internet technologies, the fact that you can do voice recordings now, the fact that you can create a video using your phone rather than need to go out and buy a camcorder. So, I think that there are a lot of ways in which the Internet and its adjacent technologies have revolutionized the making and sharing of folklore and the connection of folk groups.

Mason: The adjacent technologies and tools was not something that had occurred to me. Seems obvious in retrospect, but that's really neat.

Perry: So then, for you, what are your favorite types of folklore to study or to speak about?



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Jeana: I've been into fairy tales since day one. That's definitely one of my favorites. I enjoy the study of fairy tales in part because they are one of the sort of legacy folklore examples. A lot of people immediately jump to fairy tales when they're trying to think, "What is folklore? Like unicorns, Greek mythology, and, uh, fairy tales." So, I do kind of have that association going for me when I talk about fairy tales. I enjoy them because on the one hand, they are very trivialized. And I was like, "Oh, well, that's just fairy tales, the modern day." "Oh, that's just Disney crap, or that's just whatever." It's very easily dismissed, even as it's a very lucrative market for the right people to be producing certain things right now.

And in the past as well, in the past maybe 400 or 500 years of solid fairy tale history that we have documented, fairy tales have largely been by and for adults rather than for children, which is again a shift away from the current beliefs about them. And as such, fairy tales have always been used to have conversations about power and identity and gender and things of that nature. So, that makes them really interesting to me as well. So, yeah, I've always been into fairy tales. It's a very rich field of study. I could talk fairy tales all day.

I also enjoy urban legends, or contemporary legends, as we tend to call them. Those also have a lot of good recognition value among the general public, and they also connect very closely to people's fears and anxieties in the modern day. So, I find them really interesting for that.

I enjoy personal narrative, which is one of the sort of almost an edge case of folklore genres, because we talk about folklore as informally transmitted, traditional culture as needing to show multiple existence and variation. But personal narratives are very personal. It's a person telling their life story, "This is when I graduated from college, and I went to Europe for the first time. Blah, blah, blah." So, it's like first person narratives about your life experiences. They're traditional to you. They're going to have variation as you retell them over the course of your lifetime, but they're not going to have the same widespread existence and performance as something like a fairy tale or an urban legend.

But they're still interesting to folklorists, because even the way that we conceptualize storytelling varies by culture. And so, the types of personal narrative that you tell is going to be, on the one hand, very unique to you, but also very patterned by the culture and the time period that you live in. So, for me, growing up in the US, in the 80s and 90s so on, a lot of my peers have personal narratives about traveling abroad for the first time or what it was like



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to go to college and things like that. Whereas an older or younger generation, they might have slightly different personal narratives emphasizing the different stages of life and identity that they went through. So, that's another one I like.

I enjoy jokes. Those are often also very recognizable to the general public. Ironically, I am bad at telling jokes. I mess up the punchline half the time. That just makes it funnier, in my opinion. But jokes also highlight these tensions between different identities. Jokes can punch up or they can punch down, and what kind of joke do you like? Might say something about you. So, I tend to enjoy those. I like body art. I like folk dance. These are things that I am involved in my personal life. I mean, everyone is involved in body art because everybody makes choices about what to put on your body because we don't live in a nudist society. And the things that wear show lots of aspects of our identity. So, those are genres that I enjoy.

And then probably the last one I enjoy that I've deliberately not done a lot of scholarship on is traditional foods and food ways, because I decide at some point that I am not going to monetize every single thing I enjoy. [chuckles] But as someone who comes from a robust line of family cooks and also enjoys cooking myself, this is something that if you really want to dig into it, you will find so many aspects of culture, history, gender, religion and so on just in the daily foods we eat and prepare. So, I find that one really fascinating as well.

Perry: So, I wonder with things like fairy tales and contemporary legends, and maybe even jokes to an extent as well, there is this aspect of a central truth that is often either being hidden or being highlighted in those types of things. Can you talk about how that tends to work and maybe the significance of that? Rather than saying, "Oh, that's just an urban legend," or, "That's just a fairy tale," there's usually something that we can find in there that's pretty interesting and maybe significant culturally.

Jeana: Yeah, I think the phrasing you use, like, "Oh, that's just a fairy tale," or, "Just an urban legend," "Oh, that's just folklore," that's interesting to me because, again, in our scholarly definition of folklore, whether it's true or not really has no bearing on whether we consider it to be transmitted as folklore. But, yeah, when I think about why these genres are transmitted and what sort of kernel of truth they might have in them, I think we need to aggregate a lot of texts from kind of a similar time period or region of the world so that we can start to connect the text to the context. So, again, folklore never exists in a vacuum. It's



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always told by specific people for specific reasons, and they may or may not be able to articulate those reasons.

A lot of people aren't necessarily trained to elaborate on why we do things sort of almost by reflex. But the example would be that in a lot of the earliest contemporary legends that were first starting to be collected in the 60s, 70s and 80s, a lot of them revolved around cars and inside versus outside the city. So, I'm thinking of ones like the hook where this boy and girl are out driving around and making out in a car or whatever, and the radio is on, tells you how old it is, and the report of a crazed serial killer who escaped from the insane asylum with a hook for a hand, blah, blah, blah. The girl gets scared and wants to go home. The boy finally relents and drives her home, and he gets out and walks around the side of the car to open her door. Again, this is an older story. Embedded in the car door handle is a hook. And there's a lot of variations on that one. Sometimes they stay, but he gets out to go look for the mysterious sound, and then he's killed. There's all this stuff going on.

But given when these were sort of told and collected in aggregate, 60s, 70s, and so on, these are reflecting a kernel of social truth or a social anxiety around sex, around teenagers becoming adults, around social outsiders and things of that nature. So, that's one of the things that I enjoy kind of looking at, is how these stories were connected to their social context. Like, what were the motifs or elements that you're starting to see reflected in the storytelling for the first time? And then, what significance would that have had to the tellers?

Perry: Well, and it sounds like there are these clusters of maybe reasons why we can see some of these emerge. And in the fairy tale world, you have like the ATU system to categorize a lot of those thematically. Are you aware of anything in the urban legend realm that is creating that kind of categorization?

Jeana: Well, for the more traditional migratory legends that emerged in Europe from the Middle Ages and onward, we have the Migratory Legend Index, I believe, by Scandinavian scholar Reidar Christiansen, I believe. I do not have a copy of that, but those are from older, more like supernatural legends. So, saints legends, encounters with the fairies, encounters with witches and werewolves and vampires and so on. Those are used a lot in European legend studies. But it has not, to my knowledge, been updated to include the contemporary legends.



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Mason: I somehow actually have not heard migratory legends. I've not heard that phrasing.

Jeana: Well, the interesting thing about migratory legends is that you'll see, again, kind of like the same story passed around, but with the serial numbers shaved off. So, in a lot of Swedish and Norwegian and Danish legends about encounters with a witch or something, the witch is Finnish. But then you go to Finland, and the witch is like a Laplander. [laughs] So, it's the same plot. You can see the tradition, like, "Oh, this is basically the same thing being retold." But then who they make the villain, or the outsider figure will vary depending on which culture it's landed in at the moment.

Mason: Gotcha. Yeah, it's just a different coat of paint based on where it has migrated to.

Jeana: Yep.

Mason: That is really interesting.

I think something that interests me too is the folklore on a very small scale, like gossip, I guess, or like, those very small interpersonal things or like family folklore. And also, you briefly touched on food and food traditions and things like that are all areas that I don't know too much about.

Jeana: Yeah, I know. And with Hanukah coming up as well. My family is Jewish on my mom's side, so when we think of small things like family folklore and holidays and traditional foods and so on, that's a really interesting area where you can see, again, a variety of factors emerging. My family were more secular Jewish, and so Hanukkah is really like, "Well, will everyone be in the same state at the time?" I live in Indiana. My family's mostly in California. So, our celebrations have really become toggled around people's schedules and things like that, and travel, which, again, would be an innovation upon the tradition of back when people would maybe not stray as far from their hometown, things like that. We will make latkes, we will do a lot of the traditional foods. But at the same time, we don't keep kosher. So, that's a variation. That's a shift away from the modes in which certain people are really going to be more tied to the tradition.

Again, one of the case studies for food ways is looking at how people's religion influences their food choices. So, for a lot of people who have religious food restrictions, sometimes it's



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something you observe at home, but not while you're out. Sometimes, it's a 24/7 thing. Sometimes, you suddenly have a vegetarian in the family. You don't know how to handle that. So, there are a lot of ways in which, again, people's traditional ideas about food are going to encounter newer things, like what do we do when so and so is away at college and then they come back? What do we do when somebody has a new food allergy? How do we accommodate these things? But a lot of our food traditions are being impacted by newer technologies. They get to return to this idea of technology, refrigeration, pretty new in human history. The ability to preserve things, to mass market things of that nature.

Another thing I'm interested in is home food preservation techniques because, again, I don't need to make jam or pickles. I can go buy jam or pickles. But you see this big resurgence, I see it called sometimes cottagecore, where people are really into like, "Hey, I found Grandma's old canning book. Let's give it a try." And I view that as a desire to reconnect with one's heritage, especially here in the US, where so many of us are some kind of white European mutt of some variety, like, "Oh, I'm, you know, one-eighth German and one-sixth this," and something, something. I think a lot of white Americans feel disconnected from heritage history in the past, and food can be a pretty simple way of interacting with that and trying to sort of reconnect with that, as opposed to the more pernicious ways.

I sometimes see that encounter happening with white supremacist groups wanting to appropriate folklore and some of the neopagan religions and things of that nature. And most academic folklorists are appalled and confused by this trend because folklore is everchanging and it's connected to people's identities and heritages and things. And like, folklore isn't necessarily inherently racist, but if people are being racist, their folklore will reflect that. So, to want to recruit folklore into someone being racist or fascist or whatever, it's just like, "Why are you coming into our playground to do this? Really? There weren't enough tools at your disposal to be a jerk to your fellow humans?"

Perry: Yeah, that's a really, really good, poignant point, and timely. It's only going to be more over the next couple of years as we ramp up towards this next election cycle, I'm sure.

Jeana: And actually, if I can just keep talking briefly. It's like not an accident that I brought up my family's Hanukkah traditions with, like, "Oh, yeah, by the way, folklore gets used by fascist groups," because there's a lot of anti-Semitic stereotypes and beliefs and legends and conspiracy theorists circulating these days, and some of them are almost a thousand



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years old. So, if you've heard of the Blood Libel Legend, my mentor, Alan Dundes, wrote a book about the blood libel, and it's this medieval Christian belief. We have documentation going back as far as the 11th century AD, I believe. This totally false belief that Jewish people were using the blood of Christian babies in their rituals. Again, like, not true. Actually, there are a lot of taboos against consuming blood if you're Jewish, but it was circulating throughout medieval Christendom with such great frequency and severity that oftentimes Jews were, like, tried and executed as a result of this supposed crime. And it's just coming back. I mean, if you think about Marjorie Taylor Greene's Jewish space lasers thing, what is that but a reiteration of the legend? "The Jews are stealing our future. Maybe not literally killing our babies, but they are stealing our future."

So, I am really disturbed by the amount of anti-Semitic beliefs and superstitions out there that I'm seeing and stereotypes. And that is, again, the dark side of folklore is if somebody tells a compelling enough story, people are going to buy it.

Perry: Yeah. And I think you can see that spread out a little bit, like in the QAnon stuff that really exploded for a while. And you did hear people talk about eating babies and the adrenochrome type of stuff that they were talking about. Weird, weird mythology that does seem to all go back into the core of that you just talked about, which is over thousand years old. It's crazy and disheartening to see that we keep doing the same thing again and having to bring those same prejudices and biases.

Mason: And it can also be sneaky. I found out the other day, people always joke about lizard people or like Mark Zuckerberg is a lizard, I did not know that had roots in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and stuff, but it totally just comes out of that, and I was shocked.

Jeana: Yeah, it. The other thing is the health food and wellness and spirituality pipeline to QAnon is also a thing.

Mason: Right. Which is so strange but yeah.

Perry: It was really weird when you saw like 2016 to 2018, the whole Instagram influencer thing, a lot of that started pushing that way when it came to nutrition and health stuff, when you would have figured that it would have leaned more towards the opposite side of the political spectrum. But filter bubbles are weird things too.



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Mason: And the other thing, that truth obviously doesn't matter in terms of the potency of a narrative and its ability to spread. Who is benefiting from continuing these and passing them along? It's usually people in positions of power or structures of power. But why?

Jeana: Yeah, I know. A lot of dissent in America is racially motivated. So, I think back to Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, which documents how in the actual Jim Crow days, there was almost a coalition of the poor Southern whites with the newly freed Southern African Americans, and they could have become a major voting bloc and actually pushed for a lot of change. A lot of richer white people were like, "Oh, this is trouble. We better start sowing dissent." The seeds of white supremacy aren't about maintaining power and control and convincing people to vote against their best interests.

Another book is *Dying of Whiteness* by Dr. Jonathan Metz. It's about three different case studies, public schools and education in Kansas, healthcare, the ACA exchanges in either Kentucky or Tennessee, and then gun control in a nearby state. And in all these states, it used to be more like, "Oh, we had stricter gun control. We had really good public education. We're going to accept the ACA exchanges." But then white people were convinced to vote against their own interests. So, you'd see interview upon interview and stat upon stat about white people who are disabled from diabetes, from being veterans, whatever, saying, "But I don't want no Obamacare," even though it would have substantially improved their lives. You get looser gun control so that because white men have been fed the lie, you have to protect your family and your jobs from these dirty immigrants or whatever. And suddenly, who's dying the most by gun homicide? White men by their own hands.

It's stunning just how much people can be fed these narratives, some of which have folkloric quantities to them because not of a literal truth, but of a value system that they have been taught is more important than anything, even their lives and their physical comfort and dignity. It's amazing.

Mason: It's shocking. Well, it's propaganda and then when it works well enough to get people to start spreading it on their own.

Perry: Yeah. Well, I was coming from a cybersecurity background, and having done a little bit of work in disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, I was really interested to see



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kind of the intersection between studying that and studying folklore and some of the fakelore, these negative aspects of folklore that you talk about, which is basically 4Chan, I think, is a haven for that kind of stuff. You see a lot of folklore spin up. It's just not great folklore that you want out in the world. It's very, very damaging.

Jeana: Recently, I've been really interested in helping disseminate folklore information to the general public. This is because I've written almost 30 peer-reviewed academic articles and book chapters, and those tend to live behind paywalls where nobody can read them unless you happen to have a login at a university library. So, I decided about a year and a half ago to just gather a lot of my writings on folklore and write some new stuff and put it all together in a book called *Folklore 101*, aimed at the general public. And so, I did that and I published it. Next up was *Fairy Tales 101* to share a lot of my information about and passion for fairy tales. And my hope is that these books will just be really intriguing and a fun, easy read for anyone who's interested in these subjects.

Not everyone gets to take a class on folklore when they're in college or if they're finding an online class to take over the summer or whatever. So, not everyone has access to this based on where they live in the country or the world. So, my hope is that these books will at least be a starting point to get you part of the way there. And then, there's a bunch of resources and so on, so you can pursue further studies yourself.

Perry: Yeah, I love, as I was going through it, just how it doesn't feel intimidating to open the book. The chapters are really short, the subject, each of them are very, very well segmented. There's a good hierarchy that's there. And so, I love going through it because it has all the same material, but it doesn't feel like a weighty academic text. So, you get the same knowledge, but without feeling intimidated by the material. And I thought that it takes a lot of talent to write that way and to structure things that way. So, I really, really appreciated the work.

Jeana: Thank you. That was the hope. I've also been blogging for over a decade now, because, again, I just have a lot of thoughts. I need somewhere to put them. So, I've always just kind of had this outlet outside of formal academic writing that's been sort of a companion for much of my time in academia. So, I think that probably helped me with formulating my thoughts in a way that's not too jargony.



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Mason: Yes, really, the flow is great. It's really easy just to breeze through and feel like you're learning something, but not like you're struggling to.

Perry: Thanks so much for listening. And thank you to Dr. Jeana Jorgensen for spending time with us. Check out our show notes to find more information about Dr. Jorgensen. We'll also have links to her books, *Folklore 101*, *Fairy Tales 101*, and *Sex Education 101*, all of which are fun, accessible and highly recommended.

If you have any questions, feedback or ideas for a future episode, you can reach us at hello@8thlayermedia.com. Or if you'd like information about sponsoring an episode, a few episodes, or an entire season, hit us up. We'd love to hear from you.

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