

Perry Carpenter: I'm Perry Carpenter, one of the hosts of the Digital Folklore Podcast. And this is Digital Folklore Unplugged. Unplugged episodes are where we ditch all the fancy production and storytelling elements and bring you the raw or only slightly edited interviews with our folklore experts.

On today's episode, I got to speak with Dr. Kristina Downs.

Dr. Kristina Downs: My name is Dr. Kristina Downs. I am the Director of the Texas Folklore Society, and I am also a professor at Tarleton State University.

Perry Carpenter: This was a fun one. We talk about conspiracies at the Dallas Zoo, the power of memes and satire accounts, meme warfare, and a ton of fun with urban legends. Okay, let's get unplugged.

So, I mentioned that we do have a little icebreaker that we're trying to introduce this season. So, as we get into this, when you think about it, what emoji do you use way too often, or do you hope nobody else uses ever again?

Dr. Kristina Downs: I really don't use emojis hardly at all. I think I'm a really nonvisual oriented person. So, back a million years ago, when we were still making our emojis with actually a semicolon and a parentheses-

Perry Carpenter: I still do that so much.

Dr. Kristina Downs: I still do as well. [laughs] That was where I stalled out. I think those were emoticons rather than emojis.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: That's where I stalled out. And every now and then, I'll do a smiling face or a winky face if I want to make sure somebody knows something was meant sarcastically or humorously or something like that, if I'm worried about being misunderstood. But I'm really not an emoji person.

Perry Carpenter: Are you like me in that whenever I actually type it out, I get annoyed whenever it translates it to the actual emoji?

Dr. Kristina Downs: I do.

Perry Carpenter: Like, that's not my stated intent, Mr. Computer.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Right. It would have been very easy for me to insert that symbol if I wanted to insert that symbol, and I chose to not though.

Perry Carpenter: Exactly. Any emoji that you wish would go away? Just get wiped out of whatever keyboards allow people to use that?

Dr. Kristina Downs: I don't feel really strongly about this, but one that annoys me is what I think is usually called the prayer hands, and that's because it's so easily misunderstood. Like, "What are we praying for? Or are those applause hands? Or what's sort of going on there?" And there are so many really stupid things that come out of people misunderstanding those. If we could just all agree that emoji is ambiguous and not helpful.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, I mean, speaking of ambiguity, so this is out of the icebreaker, but maybe into something that could be fun to explore later. First of all, are you familiar with Poe's law?

Dr. Kristina Downs: Poe's law? I get them all mixed. Poe's law is that there's no opinion that the internet can't take to the most ridiculous extreme. Is that, that one?

Perry Carpenter: I don't know that may be an extension of it. So, Poe's law the way I understand it is that anything that is said with the intent of sarcasm can be then taken as truth by somebody else and propagated.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Okay.

Perry Carpenter: So, it doesn't sound like you've put a ton of thought into--

Dr. Kristina Downs: [laughs] I have clearly not.

Perry Carpenter: Well, I mean, I think you've seen the extent of it, but maybe not framed around that singular concept. When you think about your search history and if somebody were to go look through that right now, what bit of search history would be embarrassing or hard to explain related to some of the research that you've done?

Dr. Kristina Downs: Because so much of my research deals with crime, I do a lot of research on the intersections of folklore and crime, kind of how contemporary true crime media follows legend patterns. I'm working on a book project right now on serial killers as contemporary monster narratives.

Perry Carpenter: So, I spend a lot of time googling things related to serial killers or famous crime cases or random things related to crime. And then sometimes somebody will use an acronym-- or I look a lot at online true crime communities, and someone will use an acronym and go, "Oh, I don't know what that stands for." And I google it, and it's something I really wish I hadn't ever found out what it meant. [laughs]

Perry Carpenter: Right.

Dr. Kristina Downs: So, a lot of my search history relates to crime, relates to violence, relates to pretty horrific stuff. So, my search history could definitely look incriminating if they came up.

Perry Carpenter: Cool. And then so the last one, what is your favorite, whatever we want to call it, urban legend, contemporary legend? And is that something that you're comfortable telling in a storytelling type of mode?

Dr. Kristina Downs: So, my favorite urban legend, I think, is The Killer in the Backseat, which is an old school one.

Perry Carpenter: Classic

Dr. Kristina Downs: Definitely one that I grew up with.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Part of Why, it's my favorite one because it's a really teachable one. It's really easy to get students to see how it's used in terms of when people are told the story and what message the story is sending. I also like it because I think it gets that as someone

who studies crime and studies the intersections of folklore and crime, it gets at a really uncomfortable truth about crime, which is that in most stories, the danger is the stranger lurking in the bushes. It's distant from you. And part of the point of *The Killer in the Backseat* is that she thinks the danger is this sketchy-looking truck that's following her. And then, it actually turns out that the danger is much closer, which is true in reality, the danger is usually much closer to you than you'd be comfortable with it. Someone in your immediate circle. It's not--

Perry Carpenter: That is a really good point. We hadn't mentioned it before, but you had a podcast that I think has 10 episodes out in it about *Crimelore* and the first couple you specifically talked about this urban legend. So, what are the high points of the plot?

Dr. Kristina Downs: Also, more or less as I remember it, as well as I do remember being told it the first time, which was right around the time I turned 16, my mother told it to me. And what she told me was that this happened to someone that my aunt knew, At the time, my family's living in Virginia, my aunt's living in Dallas. It's about a woman who was driving home from work late one night, kind of tired. Has a long way to drive through a not super populated area. She's on the interstate, and there's a truck behind her that keeps flashing its brights at her. And the first time it does, she thinks, "Oh, he just wants to get around me." So, she moves over to let him pass. And he doesn't pass. He falls back in behind her and keeps flashing his brights at her, and it's making her progressively nervous.

So, she starts taking some turns, like, "Okay, well, I'll get off at this exit and get away from him." But he takes the exit after her. And then when she gets back on the interstate, he follows her back onto the interstate. So, it becomes very clear that he's following her, and she doesn't really know what to do, so she just decides to drive home. She knows that her husband's waiting at home. She knows that her husband has a gun. She's thinking that if she can just get home, hopefully she can get into the house fast enough to get away from this man that's following her.

As she turns into her driveway, she starts blaring on the horn to get her husband's attention. Her husband comes out of the house onto the porch, and she runs out of her car towards him, screaming that some guy's been following her. The truck does pull in behind her, but to her great surprise, the truck driver doesn't follow her. He goes to her car. He goes to her back seat, actually opens the back door, and pulls a man out of her backseat and starts beating on this man to subdue him. And it turns out that this truck driver had seen a man hiding in her backseat with a knife, and that every time he flashed his brights, it's because the man was raising the knife, ready to put it to her throat, and the bright light would make him duck down. And so, he was actually following her in order to protect her, not to attack her.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, I think when you mentioned earlier that that plays with stereotypes, it plays with misplaced fears and everything else, and a really good point, I also remember that the variant of that one that started off the movie, *Urban Legends*, back from a couple of decades ago, which was the guy running the cash register, I think he had some social awkwardness and some other things that would make somebody alone at night afraid of him. But he was the one that was trying to warn it and it didn't go well.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Right. Terrified of this awkward, unsightly man that turned out he was trying to help her.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah. So, from your perspective when it comes to urban legends, contemporary legends, what is the primary focus that you see of those playing within today's society?

Dr. Kristina Downs: I think they change over time, but yet they still do the same thing. It's sometimes frustrating to me the stories that I expect all of my students to know. I'm teaching college freshmen, sophomores. For example, a couple years ago, assigned for the first time a story by an author named Stephen Graham Jones. And it's a take-off of the Legend of the Hook that we all know the Hookman. None of my students had ever heard the legend before.

Perry Carpenter: Really.

Dr. Kristina Downs: And so, they completely missed [laughs] the whole point of the story and I was very frustrated with them. But they have their own legends that they tell. I think one of the main things that legends are used to do is to try to keep people safe. They can sometimes be incredibly misguided in the way that they do it, but there is an intention of even when they're not misguided, the way that they are set up, they can have obviously terrible, unintended consequences sometimes. But one thing I hear a lot from my students are legends related to fentanyl, for example, right now. There's a lot of legends about fentanyl-laced dollar bills being folded up and left on gas station floors or even more sinisterly, on playgrounds for children to pick up. Will tell you that children have died from just touching the bill that had fentanyl on it.

While fentanyl is an incredibly dangerous drug and it is absorbed through skin, it's not absorbed through skin to that degree that it's likely that someone who just handles a piece of money with fentanyl and then is going to die in an overdose. But it's absolutely a good thing to do to warn people about how dangerous fentanyl is.

One of the unintended consequences we're seeing of that is that there's been incidences where people who've been suspected of having taken fentanyl, first responders or just bystanders have refused to help them worried that touching them to administer CPR or something like that will cause them to absorb fentanyl into their own bodies overdose.

Perry Carpenter: Wow, I hadn't heard that. That's pretty chilling.

Dr. Kristina Downs: And it's possible that in and of itself is a legend. I don't know. [laughs] That's what I've heard.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah. I'm not so much upon what today's biggest urban legends are. I hear every now and then some from my kids. One of the most recent ones, it's probably about a year ago was on TikTok, people were talking about a national rape day. That was like August or April something. And of course, there was nothing really to it, but it was just people talking about saying that for 24 hours, it's fair game to violate people, and it resurrects itself. It's kind of like this zombie urban legend that comes back every couple of years specifically for school-age kids, I think.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Kind of like tainted Halloween candy comes back around.

Perry Carpenter: Exactly. It's got the same type of effect to it, I think. So, let's talk a little bit about your talk. So, you gave a talk about memes and misconceptions and conspiracies about animal thefts from the Dallas Zoo. Can you give us some of the high points of that? And then, I want to talk a little bit about some of the components about what makes something a meme? where do things turn into conspiracy? But give folks a little bit of a high outline of your talk and what you were hoping that people would get out of that.

Dr. Kristina Downs: In January of 2023, the Dallas Zoo, which is in Dallas, Texas, had a series of events that happened. Events is probably the best way to summarize them. It started with a clouded leopard being found out of her enclosure. And then, it was discovered that her enclosure had been cut open deliberately, as had another enclosure at the zoo that I

think it was the lappet monkeys or something. I'm probably getting that name of the monkeys wrong. One of the monkey enclosures, both of them had been cut open deliberately. The clouded leopard, her name was Nova, she was found safe and sound on the zoo grounds. She'd actually snuck into another enclosure that was not in use at the time. She climbed into a cabinet and probably gone to sleep.

Perry Carpenter: Nice.

Dr. Kristina Downs: And they found her when she went to emerge from this cabinet, and a squirrel saw her and freaked out, and they heard the squirrel's panicked sounds and realized, "Oh, something's going on," and found her. So, happy ending, the leopard's safe. But we know something has happened at the zoo that these two enclosures were cut.

Then about a week later, an endangered vulture was found deceased in its enclosure with a wound that was described as suspicious. The people that examined it said that they didn't feel like it was a natural death. And then about a week after that, two of the emperor tamarin monkeys were discovered missing from their enclosure.

About two days later, they were recovered at an abandoned house where they found several other animals that were mostly domestic animals, things like cats, birds, fish, as well as some things that have been stolen from employee-only areas at the zoo. Also, at that point, the zoo released an image of a man that they thought was a suspect. That man was quickly found, I think, about a day after that at the Dallas Aquarium, where it's believed that he was looking to find more animals.

Perry Carpenter: Fishnapping.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Turns out it was a 24-year-old man named Davion Irvin. And despite as we could talk about the fact that a lot of theories as all this was going on were these really elaborate things involving animal rights activists or animal traffickers or some kind of thing targeting the zoo, he just liked animals and said he wanted to keep them all as pets. He admitted that if he was let go, he would probably steal more animals. One of the other absurd things that came out was that he was using public transportation for all of these events and in fact, had taken the monkeys home with him on the DART, which is our light rail in the Dallas area. And apparently, no one noticed the man with the two monkeys on the DART train late at night.

Perry Carpenter: That's kind of crazy. Yeah. You'd think that there'd be some great surveillance photos from that.

Dr. Kristina Downs: And if there are, I've never seen them released. They've only released the images of him kind of skulking around the zoo. But as you can imagine, there was a lot of social media response to all of these events, starting off with the leopard, I think. One of the big comical things was that the announcement that the zoo was closed said, it's a code blue, which means a non-dangerous animal out of its enclosure. And then when they released that it was a clouded leopard, people immediately heard "leopard" and thought, "In what world is a leopard a non-dangerous animal?"

Perry Carpenter: Right.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Well, it turns out that a clouded leopard is a completely different species than what we think of and we think of as leopards and a fully grown a female clouded leopard is about 25 pounds. Not that much bigger than an average housecat.

Perry Carpenter: Right.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Well, maybe bigger than an average housecat. It's not that much bigger than my housecats.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, I've got a very rotund housecat that I think approaches that weight.

Dr. Kristina Downs: I have two house cats that I jokingly call the baby mountain lions. They are not rotund. They're just big cats. They're also very young. They just turned two. So, I'm sure they will get rotund, as cats tend to do when they get a little bit less active. But they're probably both about 18 pounds.

Perry Carpenter: Oh, wow.

Dr. Kristina Downs: At a healthy weight.

Perry Carpenter: Athletic.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Yeah.

Perry Carpenter: So, people, their expectations were shattered. But at the same time, they were trying to have a fun time online and talk about these. What came out of that?

Dr. Kristina Downs: So, starting again with the clouded leopard, we saw a lot of cat memes being used. We saw a lot of the things in terms of hints to help the zookeepers catch the cat. "Have you tried shaking a bag of treats? Have you tried opening a can of tuna? Do you need a laser pointer?" Then they had like set out empty boxes. And there's a meme that's been going around for a while of a large leopard, what we think of when we think of as leopards, curled up in a small cardboard box and it's kind of the cat "if I fits, I sits" mentality and thinking this applies to all cats.

There were some jokes between the different types of animals. So, maybe the monkeys let the cat out. So, maybe it was the monkeys who'd gotten out of their enclosure first and cuddled in the cat's enclosure. Then, the cat got blamed for the vulture's death. Although, of course, she had long since been recaptured by that-- Did the cat get out again? And sounds to me like the cat was hungry and a lot of that kind of thing. We also just had some general reactions to the absurdity of the fact that the zoo had lost a leopard. Right?

Perry Carpenter: Right. Yeah. That sounds way bigger than it was because of the size of the leopard and the fact that it somehow just changed enclosures.

Dr. Kristina Downs: And also, that particular event happened to happen on Friday the 13th. Well, if you think you're having a bad Friday the 13th, at least you didn't lose a leopard like the Dallas Zoo did. We had some Texas-specific humor evoked, which was interesting to see. A lot of people think of Texas, they think of guns. "We better hope the zoo finds it first because those Texans are all excited to find out it's leopard season." A lot of referencing maybe other incidences that have happened with animals in zoos. A lot of people are thinking of Harambe. I never saw Harambe specifically mentioned, but I saw a lot of things about "If they shoot this leopard, I'm going to have to come down to Dallas," or if they-- whatever.

Some more light-hearted humor about Texas and the Dallas area in particular, I saw some things about, "Well, she's been missing for about 2 hours. She's probably still in line at Whataburger, but she should be done in about 45 minutes." Whataburger is a fast-food chain that's very ubiquitous in Texas. I think it's headquartered in San Antonio. Texans love their Whataburger. There's an area of the Dallas metroplex called Highland Park, which is very

known for having a lot of money, maybe too much money, kind of being too [unintelligible 00:18:29]. And there was a lot of, "Well, nobody knows where the leopard is, but if it was a cougar, she'd definitely be in Highland Park." "The Dallas Zoo is missing a clouded leopard. And in completely unrelated news, the Fort Worth Zoo has a new clouded leopard just been added to it."

[laughter]

Perry Carpenter: I like that one. Yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: There's some football joke. This was right towards the end of NFL season. So, the leopard went missing on a Friday. I think it was on Sunday that the Cowboys were playing the Buccaneers in Dallas. And there's a lot of people alleging that Jerry Jones had engineered this just to distract from the upcoming loss to Tom Brady.

Perry Carpenter: Ooh.

Dr. Kristina Downs: They did not actually lose. The Cowboys won that, [laughs] which, as it turns out, but nobody knew that on Friday. "She was born in Houston. I should have noted that." "She's just headed back to Houston. She's going to be the new Texans head coach." So, again, I think football humor is very Texas as well.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: It is not for nothing referred to as a religion down here. We also saw some people starting accounts from the leopard's perspective.

There were two main accounts that I found that were alleging to be the clouded leopard tweeting--

Perry Carpenter: I love that.

Dr. Kristina Downs: --her adventures. And one of them was a very cute, wide-eyed little cat exploring things. And she was like, "Did you guys know that there's a whole pond here at the zoo that's stocked with waterfowl? I'll be back after a quick meal." "I just saw something called a restroom, and I thought that would be a good place to take a nap. But it turns out that's not what a restroom is. Humans are disgusting." She tweeted some things about the other animals, and she was overall what you think of cats on the Internet, basically. Just being a little chaotic, but overall sweet.

The other Nova Twitter account was very aggressive. It always tweets in all caps. And then it kept going for a while after she was recaptured and would say things about like, "I'M BEING DETAINED AGAINST MY WILL, SOMEONE CALLED ME A LAWYER." And when the zoo tweeted Nova, the clouded leopard, is happy to be back in her enclosure with her sister, "THESE ARE ALL LIES. I DON'T EVEN HAVE A SISTER." She had a lot of tweets directed at a zookeeper named Wendy who, as best I can tell, is a fictional construct. I hope she is. Otherwise, I feel very bad for Wendy. But there's a lot of, "HEY, WENDY, WHAT DID LEOPARD SAY WHEN YOU LEFT HER CAGE UNLOCKED? NOTHING, BECAUSE I WAS ALREADY HALFWAY TO MEXICO." And for Valentine's Day, she tweeted a poem that's like, "ROSES ARE RED. ROSÉ IS TRENDY. I'M ESCAPING TONIGHT. GO TO HELL, WENDY." [Perry Carpenter laughs]

This kept going, and she responded to the other animal events too. When the monkeys escaped, it was, "THE ESCAPES WILL CONTINUE UNTIL MORALE IMPROVES." And that was really where I started getting interested in what was going on. Of course, that was

where all of these events started, right, was that day I happened to be sitting at my computer and start seeing these things on Twitter and going, "Wait, what's going on at the Dallas Zoo?" And thinking, as folklorists often do, "I don't know what's going on here, but there's something going on here. So, I'm just going to take a lot of screencaps and come back to this later." [laughs] And of course, I had no idea that there would be more incidents. I'm sorry. With the vulture, things were a lot more sedate. There was a lot of outpouring of sympathy.

Obviously, a dead vulture is way less funny than a missing cat, really missing 25-pound cat. Once people realized she wasn't really that dangerous, it felt a lot more comfortable being humorous about her versus-- It's harder to find humor in this. Like I said, there were some jokes about, did the cat get hungry? Did the cat get out again? Those kinds of things. But it was mostly how sad people were about the vulture. Sympathy for the zoo staff, but then also starting to go, "Okay, what's going on here? This is two incidents at the same zoo in about a week's time. There's something going on. Are they being targeted by some antizoo activists. What's going on here?"

And then with the monkeys, it was in between a little bit, I think. There's a lot more humor than there was with the vulture. There was a lot of pop culture references. We saw a lot of references to the film, *12 Monkeys*. I should have said also, I'm backtracking a little bit. But in terms of the realm of pop culture, when the escape of the clouded leopard was first announced, the Jurassic Park official Twitter account just retweeted the Dallas Zoo's tweet about an escaped animal with a big eyes emoji. And then, of course, immediately people picked up on this "Jurassic Park is like, where have I seen this before?"

Perry Carpenter: I love that.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Of course, the juxtaposition of a 25-pound cat with the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, it's quite comical.

Perry Carpenter: That's why we have the internet though.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Exactly.

Perry Carpenter: It is those interactions, and then the fact that people make Twitter accounts from the perspective of those and refuse to let the joke die long after most people would in polite conversation.

[music]

More of our interview with Dr. Kristina Downs after this.

[music]

Perry Carpenter: Welcome back.

Dr. Kristina Downs: If there is a Twitter account for the escaped monkeys, I never found it. I was a little disappointed about that because they were missing for about 36 hours. It's not to say that it's not out there, or it could have been out there and been removed before I went looking for it. It's hard to know. Sometimes, if you're not documenting things in real time with the internet, it can be a little bit frustratingly ephemeral.

Perry Carpenter: Exactly.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Twitter's advanced search functions are not always what we'd hope for them to be. [laughs]

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, somebody should fix that.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Right? Twitter was not designed for scholars to do research on.

Perry Carpenter: No. I bet that there's some fun projects underway about how to mine Twitter archives though. I should check into that, see what's out there.

Dr. Kristina Downs: I think the biggest trend you saw with responses with the monkeys was just, "Okay, what's going on here? Now, at this point, this is three incidences of the same zoo. If we assume that they're all connected, there's got to be something sinister going on here." And that happened both from the humorous approach and the more serious approach. So, we saw, "Someone needs to call Ace Ventura." We saw a lot of that. Or the penguins from *Madagascar* were often evoked like, "I know who's behind it, I solved it." Or the man with the yellow hat from *Curious George* got blamed a few times.

Perry Carpenter: Oh, yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Evocation of that. But what we really saw was, "Okay, what's going on?" And also, "Why can't the zoo fix this?" So, there were a lot of things like, "Do you need us to fundraise for a Ring doorbell for you guys or something?"

[laughter]

Dr. Kristina Downs: And in the midst of this, of course, the zoo is saying, "We have increased security measures. We've added cameras. The Dallas PD is helping us with this." And it seemed to not be doing any good, and people were getting frustrated. And you saw more and more and then these rumors that were then being taken as truth. "Well, I talked to somebody who knows somebody who works at the zoo, and they said this is definitely an inside job." A lot of these obviously were eventually mis-proven when the leopard was missing. Interestingly, of course, because she was caught within less than 12 hours, I think, of going missing. But there was someone that I found on Twitter who was insisting that the night before she had been in Arlington, Texas, and that several people had caught her on their Ring doorbell cameras. Obviously, that didn't happen. I don't know what they caught on their Ring doorbell cameras. We do have [unintelligible 00:25:41] cats and now lions in Texas. So, it could have been-- who knows?

But we saw a lot of discussion-- I keep saying human trafficking, it's animal trafficking. But I think the reason I'm getting mixed up is because it follows so many of the patterns that we see with legends of human trafficking nowadays, which think today, it's not a brand-new thing certainly, these anxieties over human trafficking. There's a folklore named Bill Ellis who's done a really great study showing that in the early 20th century, there were all these panics over human trafficking, which of course at the time was called the white slave trade. That girls were getting abducted from ice cream parlors. Ice cream parlors were these dangerous places for young ladies of good standing to go. And now, it's like the dressing room of Target and these places that again are very benign spaces, but that women are in constant danger of being trafficked. And obviously human trafficking is a very real and very serious problem that it's good that people be more aware of, but what it looks like is not middle-class white women being abducted from a Target dressing room.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, and it's not like a coded language in a Wayfair catalog either. Right?

Dr. Kristina Downs: Right, exactly. Unfortunately, there are much easier ways for human traffickers to find and traffic their victims, as I would imagine, there's much easier ways for animal traffickers to get animals than to break into a zoo.

Perry Carpenter: Exactly.

Dr. Kristina Downs: But it's interesting how similar those things looked in the discourse of like, "This has to be animal trafficking. I hear animal trafficking is this big money maker and that they're everywhere," the same ways that people talk about human trafficking.

Perry Carpenter: Interesting.

Dr. Kristina Downs: And then, of course, it turned out to be this really mundane answer which, as someone who studies the intersections of crime and legend, that's how often things in the crime world work. Often, though people tend to, use another animal metaphor, hear hoofbeats and think zebras rather than horses, it's really usually just horses. It's usually the mundane thing, not the exotic thing. And here it was just a kid who, though I'm in no position to actually give a diagnosis, seems to maybe have been suffering from some mental health issues and just really liked animals. And then of course, people were hesitant to accept that.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, because you assume in that because of just the way our mental framing works, there must be a criminal mastermind and he doesn't look or present like a criminal mastermind. And forget the fact that the leopard was recovered within 12 hours and never was actually stolen. And the vulture, I don't know if they ever solved that or not, but did they? What was the cause of that?

Dr. Kristina Downs: If they have, I have not been able to find-- an official cause given. What they have said, is that they do not believe that Davion Irvin, the man arrested in connection with the monkeys and the leopard, they don't believe he was involved in the vulture stuff.

Perry Carpenter: Enough of a question mark for somebody with the right mindset to still tag that on to the monkey thefts that he was confirmed for and some of the other things that were stolen. But at the same time, there's this disjoint in reality when they look at the condition of the house that they found these monkeys in and the other things and this other thing that would in their minds require a sophisticated criminal mastermind or larger organization. To what extent did the conspiracy grow and what was most interesting or what stood out most to you there?

Dr. Kristina Downs: It's hard to quantify how much it grew in terms of numbers. Of course, I'm just looking at tweets and I looked a little bit at Reddit also and the Dallas subreddit and some discussions there. It certainly came up a lot, of these ideas of there's got to be some conspiracy and that again didn't end necessarily right when he was caught. It was, "Well, who is he really working for?" Or, "I don't believe this, he's a patsy. They're just setting up this poor kid because he's not going to be able to have any defense. It's really something much more shadowy and sinister." There were a lot of accusations against zoo employees also, many of which connected either with the idea of it being animal traffickers.

I'd say PETA got blamed a lot as well. I gathered there had been some event with PETA in Dallas about a week before these events all started. So, it was immediately like, "Okay, well, they were here a week before, so obviously--"

Perry Carpenter: They're trying to break all the animals free. Yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Right again, because that's definitely the most efficient way they could go about this.

Perry Carpenter: And even by their definition, would that be the most ethical thing, to put them in a house with all these other animals?

Dr. Kristina Downs: No, I don't think so.

Perry Carpenter: Right. All of it breaks down whenever you add critical thinking to it. But there's, I think, very little critical thinking and the knee jerk reaction as we start to see these data dots line up and figure out what the straight line looks like with a potentially inaccurate context.

Dr. Kristina Downs: They say humans are predisposed to recognize patterns to the point that we sometimes see patterns where they don't exist. Things about seeing a face in a grilled cheese sandwich or whatever, some of these things.

Perry Carpenter: Those are delicious.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Delicious. But I think sometimes we do that in a narrative sense also. We want to take events that don't make any sense and put them in a narrative pattern that we can make sense of. And so, when you have these preexisting legends about, again going back to the human trafficking thing, there probably are legends about animal trafficking. I'm not as familiar with those, but we can certainly superimpose the legends about animal trafficking into these preexisting stories about human trafficking and then take actual current events and put them into a narrative so we can start to make sense of it.

I think even some of the popular culture references that we saw, these things about *Ace Ventura* or *12 Monkeys* or even *Jurassic Park*, it's trying to take something that doesn't make any sense and find a pattern that we can put it into to make sense out of it.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah. So, how does this story wrap up then? Is there any conclusion or moral of the story? As you think about the research and the state of events as they sit today, what are your thoughts?

Dr. Kristina Downs: In terms of actual wrap-up, the last I looked, Davion Irvin is in custody and being charged with several counts of animal endangerment and animal cruelty, I think, is what he's being charged with. Forget exactly how many charges he's not, as I said, being charged in relation to the vulture's death. I don't think he's come to trial yet. At least, the last time I looked, he hadn't. I don't know if a court date's been set. And of course, the Dallas Zoo says that they have taken precautions. I've read some articles that are saying this is a thing that all zoos should take a look at, and all of them should learn from it.

One thing I didn't mention, sorry, [crosstalk] jumping around, but at the time that all of this was going on, there were also 12 monkeys that were stolen from a zoo in Louisiana, and the culprit was caught in that as well. I don't know as much about what happened there other than immediately when it happened, everyone's assumption was this has to be connected. Texas and Louisiana are right next to each other, and especially if you're not familiar with how big Texas is, because two zoos are not actually anywhere near each other.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: But Texas and Louisiana do share a border. And so, the immediate assumption was this has to all be the same person. And it was not. There was also a bear in St. Louis-- I think St. Louis. There was a bear that escaped its enclosure at a zoo, and it appears it didn't have any help. It just did it all up on its own. But there were also-

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, all mid-south area disappearances or weird events.

Dr. Kristina Downs: As far as what the takeaways are, I think the biggest thing is just to keep in mind that the truth is often the most mundane answer, not the most exotic answer. It's often very simple. It's often way less grandiose. It's not an international network of animal traffickers. It's just a guy that liked animals. You see that a lot. With again dealing with true crime stories, you see this a lot where a case will be unsolved for decades and decades.

Another Texas case, there was a woman named Lori Erica Ruff who, after she was deceased, it turned out that was not her actual name, and they realized that she had changed her name at least twice during her lifetime, but nobody knew what her real birth name was, what her real birth identity was, and why she had gone to such lengths to hide her identity. And there were a lot of really elaborate conspiracy theories that she had been part of a terrorist group, or she'd been part of a cult, or she was related to the LeBaron's who are an LDS offshoot group that's been involved in a lot of violence. And it turns out she was just a teenage runaway that had maybe suffered some abuse as a teenager and just run off. It was really mundane, tragic, but something that happens a lot. And that's, I think, often what happens when there's a lack of information, people will fill it in and often fill it in with something that's much more elaborate than it is.

I think there's also an interesting thing to think about in the way that we in American culture in particular-- not only American culture, but because I'm working in this case mostly with US-based events and can't guarantee where all of the social media posters were, but based on spelling, based on whatever, I feel comfortable that most of them were in the US. The way that we relate to animals, because most of us don't encounter wild animals on a regular basis, at least not anything that's larger than a squirrel or a bird. And the fact that first, this leopard is seen as this really dangerous thing and then immediately, very quickly, people start to realize, "Oh, she's a small leopard. So now, she can come and be my pet kitty."

[laughter]

Dr. Kristina Downs: "Now, I just want to cuddle her." And I'm not judging anybody for that. She's really cute. If you go and look up pictures or video of Nova but doubtless who has featured her on their social media several times since then. She's very charming. I would be tempted to pet her also. I understand that's not a good idea. Interesting how in a lot of the kind of joking conspiracy theories that came out about, well, "The monkeys let the cat out so it could off the vulture." So, we have the monkeys being positioned as these evil geniuses. Emperor tamarin monkeys are very small. This isn't *Planet of the Apes*, we saw a lot of things invoking *Planet of the Apes* as well. But the fact that we see monkeys as intelligent, we see them as team-able or plotting, we see cats as cuddly and cute.

Perry Carpenter: I love the point that you made about the fact that truth is usually the simplest and most direct answer, kind of the Occam's razor piece of this, is very close to what truth usually ends up being in these versus the convoluted things that are, for lack of a better word, the sexier type of explanations that people try to give. I want to see, do you have a couple of minutes for just some rapid-fire questions as we get ready to finish up, just to see if there's commentary or sound bites that come out of those?

Dr. Kristina Downs: Sure.

Perry Carpenter: For people that don't study folklore, I think people know what a meme is when they see it. But from your perspective, what makes something a meme?

Dr. Kristina Downs: I would not say that a meme is something that can be easily replicated with potentially minor changes made to it to make it fit a particular situation. So, something like one of the memes that I saw used in the situation was the one that's been going around

for a while. It says, "If I'm ever killed by a mountain lion, know that my last words were, 'here, kitty, kitty.'" [Perry Carpenter laughs] Someone tweeted that with, the words mountain lion crossed off and leopard put in. So, the set image or the set text but this one thing's been altered to fit that. Versus a joke that's a wholesale joke, whether it's visual or whether it's verbal, if it's created whole cloth from scratch, I don't think I wouldn't classify it as a meme. Though it could become a meme because somebody could grab it and then turn it into that. I think that a meme does not have to be visual, but they very frequently are. There's things that are more texted based or more verbal things like if, "If I fits, I sits." There are certainly images that's been attached to, but the phrase itself also circulates as a meme.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah. So, we also see a dark side of memes. I'm not sure how much you started to study that professionally, but have you come up against meme warfare from the propaganda side or state actor side? Or even just people being mean with their memes and then trying to get off and say, "Well, I'm just meming," or it's just this unserious thing, so therefore it can't cause real damage?

Dr. Kristina Downs: I really haven't gone into that too much in my research. I have seen it because I don't think that you cannot see that and be a person on the internet. But I say this as a person whose research is all on murder, but sometimes it just gets a little too dark for me.

[laughter]

After the break, the conclusion of our interview with Dr. Kristina Downs.

Perry Carpenter: Welcome back. Memes can be really ugly sometimes, right? They're not just these cute things that get this fun phrase out, but they can be used to really hurt somebody's feelings or cause damage or set a context or frame around a situation that's different than reality. What does that say from a folkloric perspective, do you think?

Dr. Kristina Downs: Well, one of the things that's often overlooked is how powerful humor is. That humor, I think by its very nature, we don't take it seriously. [laughs]. Humor is meant to-- We see it as funny. We see it as lighthearted. We see it as trivial. But humor can, at its best, be incredibly subversive and be used to undermine power structures. Again, speaking, in the best-case scenario, can be used to undermine things like patriarchy or undermine racist power structures or whatever.

But at its worst, humor can also be used to be really damaging and really hurtful, because then it becomes a shield that you can hide behind and say, "Well, that's just a joke. Why can't you take a joke?" You can say something awful to somebody and then just say, "Well, it was a joke," and that's supposed to make them just go, "Oh, okay, that's all all right." And if they don't, then you have the now position to say, well, this person has no sense of humor. This person's overly sensitive.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah. The person that can't take the joke is then the bad guy in the situation, because they're ruining everybody's fun time. Do you see-- and you may not based on your previous answer, but do you have any thoughts about memes and how they play into larger conspiracy theories?

Dr. Kristina Downs: They certainly do. [laughs] I don't have anything in particular too. I think we have a concept in folklore studies called kernel narratives. Kernel narrative is a story that can be told without actually having to tell the whole story. It's saying, "Oh, the one about the woman in the car with the guy in her backseat, or the one about the guy with the hook for the hand." I can say that. And if you know the story, you can recognize it from just that. That's a narrative kernel.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, I do that all the time because I'll describe myself as a very princess and the pea type of person. Everything has to be just right for me to start to feel comfortable or to get anything done. So, is that an example of a kernel narrative?

Dr. Kristina Downs: That's a perfect example, yes. That you can just say the princess and the pea, and anyone immediately knows you don't have to go, "I'm like that one girl whose skin was so sensitive. And then, that's how they revealed that--" You don't have to go through the whole story. Just say, "I'm a princess of the pea person," and immediately people go, "Okay, I know exactly what that means." I think that memes can function as narrative kernels. So, you can use certain memes.

This can be an ingroup thing where people- that are one of the big things about conspiracy theories, of course, is that people who adhere to them are very convinced that they know the truth and that nobody else does, or that nobody that doesn't believe their story knows the thing. And so, then you can use these memes as a in group signal that, okay, anyone who already knows this conspiracy theory, whatever will understand when I throw out something like, "Do your own research."

Perry Carpenter: Yep. Like the "where we go one, we go all" type of stuff, or some of the Obama and Hillary memes that we saw during the election cycles, those kind of things. Or anything that has to do with George Soros or all that stuff, seems to become very, very memed. And definitely within the group that sees that narrative thread that conspiracy throughout the world, you just have to name a name like, "Well, the Clintons or the Soros' or the Rockefellers," and then all of a sudden, this entire world of other narrative threads opens within their mind. I can see how that works now. The term "kernel narrative" is new to me, though, so thank you for that. I'm wondering, from a folklore perspective, when somebody talks about like dog whistling, is there a folklore equivalent of that, or does that play into folklore?

Dr. Kristina Downs: It definitely does. I don't know that we have our own term for it. It's certainly something that we've been aware of in folklore studies for quite some time. I always tell people that one of my frustrations with conspiracy theories, because not even just as a scholar, recreationally, I love a good conspiracy theory. I don't adhere to any of them, but I find them fun. And the problem is, with at least 90% of them, when you get down to the bottom, the core of it is something really terrible. Like, you get to the bottom, you're like, "oh, but this is just antisemitism. Oh, this is just patriarchy." And it happens on all sides of the political spectrum and it can be frustrating.

And there's things like you mentioned George Soros. George Soros is one individual, but in certain people's minds has come to stand for everything that's evil about Judaism and this kind of symbol or this Jewish cabal that's secretly running the world. And so, when people evoke him, whether they're even fully conscious of it because I think sometimes, they are and I think sometimes they're not really fully conscious what they're doing when they say something like that. Not to say that they never are because they certainly are some of the time, but that they're absolutely functioning as a dog whistle in this, like, maybe this is calling out immediately alleging things against Jewish people or things like "follow the money," things like that often are used in very antisemitic ways. Assumptions that go back to the Middle Ages [laughs] that the Jews secretly have all of the money and are controlling all of the world's finances.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, I mean, it's amazing how much of the conspiracy world revolves around antisemitism and concepts like blood libel and so on. It's almost sickening to see how often these same things come back but in different forms to reinforce the same horrible, unthinkable ideas.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Right. It's a little frustrating even with something that's so new as memes as internet folklore, we're still going back to these ideas that go back 1500 years.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Come on. Can we come up with-- I mean, and there are, I will say just call out one of the US, the word I want looking for is parallel to antisemitism is nativism or xenophobia or just antimigrant sentiment. Historically in Germany, whenever things were bad, people blamed Jews. In the US, whenever anything's bad, we blame immigrants, as much as we always brag about being a nation of immigrants.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah. We conveniently forget that whenever it comes to trying to address today's economic or social problems, it's easier to create in groups and out groups and hoist all of our woes on this other outside group, which is really, really again, scary. I'm sure from your perspective as a folklorist who's absorbed all of the different times that this has happened, in different ways that it's been expressed and then you see that of the news and people are saying, "Oh, there's a dangerous caravan coming that is going to break their way through our borders and come and slaughter tens of thousands of innocents." And you're like, "Probably not."

Dr. Kristina Downs: Probably have better things to- Here in my part of North Central Texas last week, they caught a serial killer in Dallas who was, I think, nationally overshadowed because it was within a day or two of the arrest of Rex Heuermann in New York in connection with the Gilgo Beach murders. And there's a lot of reasons why it got less attention. There's fewer victims, it's more recent, whatever. But the man who's been arrested happened to be an undocumented immigrant. And so, all of discourse is immediately, "Well, this is what happens when we let them into our country." Say nothing statistically, serial killers are much more likely to be native born US citizens than to be immigrants of any kind.

Perry Carpenter: Yeah, they're much more likely somebody my race and my age that walks around with a lot of, whether we realize it or not, privilege and invisibility.

Dr. Kristina Downs: Exactly.

Perry Carpenter: All right, so then last question on this theme then. Folklore and memes as ways or methods that people use to try to persuade each other. Can you talk about folklore as ways of trying to get ideas across and persuade people into a certain group or belief system?

Dr. Kristina Downs: There are probably people that have done research on this specifically. I have not, but I think there's a lot that could be said about this. I know that there's been a lot of discourse on the ways that we communicate nowadays and the fact that we are much more visual communicators than were even 10 years ago. As I said when I was talking about emojis, I'm not a particularly visually oriented person. If you look at my Twitter account, it's mostly text. My Instagram is maybe some pictures of my cats, but it's very neglected. Not a visually oriented person, but a lot of people nowadays are incredibly visual. Instagram is really popular TikTok, things like that have the visual component, I think, are a lot more how when I talk to my students, that's a lot of how they communicate, that's a lot of how they engage. They're much more likely to be active on Instagram or Snapchat than they are to be active on Twitter because there's that visual component in that way.

And so, I think one thing about memes, particularly the ones that are visual, as I said earlier, I don't believe that all memes have to be visual, but many of them are, there's that visual element of communication. The other thing about them is that they're very short, they're very

[unintelligible [00:48:57], very to the point, and they play into something that people are always critical of. These kids nowadays don't have much of an attention span, but people are-- and I don't think it's just kids, as much as people always want to blame millennials, I think boomers are engaging nowadays in very much the same way, they're less likely to sit down there and read paragraphs-long post on Reddit or Facebook or read an email that's got this paragraphs-long explanation of whatever.

Memes can communicate that in like a sentence and an image and it's bite sized. It's very easy for someone to capture, to absorb and to possibly then be inspired to go look for more. Like, if they do understand it, then you're preaching to the choir. You don't need to persuade them. But if you are trying to persuade somebody, there might be something in there that they're going to go, "Huh, what is that?" And then google it. And if you're lucky and they're googling, find sources that you want them to find.

Perry Carpenter: Thanks so much for listening. And thank you to Dr. Kristina Downs for spending time with us. Check out our show notes to find out more about Kristina. We'll have links to her social media, a few additional interviews, and more. Oh, and be sure to check out her podcast, Crimelore. It's a great show exploring the intersection between our traditional stories and true crime.

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 even an entire season, hit us up. We'd love to hear from you.

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