



Digital Folklore

Think of the Children (Halloween Sadism & Internet Challenges)
Joel Best & Dr. Elizabeth (Libby) Tucker

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

[Intro]

Welcome. You've got ...*Digital Folklore*.

Announcer:

Previously on Digital Folklore.

Perry Carpenter:

You have full internet access in your head now?

Digby:

Yeah, I think so.

Mason Amadeus:

Digby, do not download an old version of LimeWire into your brain.

Digby:

There's no real Goncharov, right?

Mason Amadeus:

The Meme Enthusiast Mega Expo.

Perry Carpenter:

If we buy everything here, will you come do the presentation with us?

Dr., Kristina Downs:

We have a deal.



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Digby:

It's just one download. If it seems sketchy, I'll just stop!

[Theme Music begins]

Perry Carpenter:

I am Perry Carpenter.

Mason Amadeus:

And I'm Mason Amadeus.

Perry Carpenter:

And this is Digital Folklore.

[Contemplative music]

Perry Carpenter:

Okay, bear with me. All of this is important.

I know you remember how this story started with me driving the van off of a cliff, and I do promise we're going to get there. I need you to see things progress the same way that I did. We've all been in these situations where we know that somebody is acting completely out of character. They did something rash or nonsensical or seemingly irrational, but often you don't have the same set of information that they have or the same interpretation of that information.

In the mid-1950s, a guy by the name of Leon Festinger originated the theory of cognitive dissonance. He did a lot of early work in studying social psychology, specifically the formation of folk groups based on physical proximity. He also personally infiltrated a doomsday cult, but I'm getting sidetracked there. In describing cognitive dissonance, Festinger proposed that human beings have a need for internal logical consistency.



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Effects must have causes. Everything happens for a reason. If this, then that. If A, then B. And when that breaks down, it causes us stress. If something doesn't make logical sense, we will find any reason that we can to make it make sense. Whether that means searching for whatever you can find that will confirm whatever you want to believe, or by adding more steps, inventing reasons and justifications to build a bridge of logic that will make it all consistent again.

We see this in conspiracy theories and misinformation, but also in smaller ways in our day-to-day lives. If you've ever left a dish in the sink because you didn't want to wash it and then thought or maybe even said out loud, "That's okay. That one just needs to soak for a little bit." Even that is a tiny example of cognitive dissonance. It's uncomfortable when our actions don't align with our beliefs or when our beliefs don't align with reality. But you can't undo your actions, and reality is notoriously hard to change. It's much easier to find or invent a reason that it all makes sense. We crave logical consistency. That is not the same thing as craving the truth. So in order for you to really understand why I made the choice to drive our van off the cliff, I need you to see all of the individual links in my chain of logic. If anything, this is a story of trying to discern between deception and delusion with varying degrees of success.

Our expedition to Meme Expo had gone surprisingly well, especially given how little sleep we had had. The ride back was uneventful with the only exception being that Mason and I watched the entirety of the movie Shazam starring Sinbad. If I'm totally honest, it was pretty mid. Granted, I was mostly listening to it, not watching. You know, safety first, kids. But still, we returned to our respective houses and each took the remainder of the weekend to rest and recuperate. Monday rolls around and I get a call from an exhausted-sounding Mason. He told me that something was wrong with Digby, that he had been trying to deal with it all on his own, but was at the end of his rope. I asked him to elaborate and he just said, "It's too much to explain over the phone."

Mason Amadeus:

He's been acting weird ever since I got back. I'm at a loss for what to do, but I figured maybe you would have an idea or know someone who could help.

Perry Carpenter:



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I was a bit confused as to why Mason thought I would have any idea how to help with a raccoon-specific problem, but I grabbed my laptop, hopped into the van, and made my way over to the studio. Opening the door, I was greeted by a strangely tense, yet extremely cartoonish scene. Digby and Mason sat silently at opposite ends of a table. Strewn across it were countless printed-out screenshots of various social media sites and memes and photos of people that I both recognized and didn't. And behind both of them was this set of freestanding whiteboards. I had purchased them for Digital Folklore, but they were now plastered with illegible scribbles and tied together in this intricate web of red marker lines and ribbons.

Digby looked as though he had been run through a washing machine. He was wide-eyed, looked like he hadn't slept in weeks. He was hairy. His furry little hands were riffling through pages on the table over and over and over again. Mason, on the other hand, looked like he was on the verge of actually putting Digby into the washing machine. His thousand-yard glare was only broken by the exaggerated twitching of his lower eyelids. I just wanted to leave, but before I could, Mason piped up he didn't even look at me. He just said-

Mason Amadeus:

Digby has a new hobby.

Digby:

It's not a hobby. I might be on the verge of blowing the whistle on the biggest threat society has seen in the last century. It starts with the-

Perry Carpenter:

I couldn't follow most of it. Well, any of it really, but I did understand now why Mason thought I might be able to help. Digby had fallen deep, and I mean very deep, into a conspiracy rabbit hole so convoluted that it felt like somebody had trained ChatGPT on Truth Social mixed with r/Conspiracy and 4chan and 8kun, and maybe just a little bit of transcendental poetry for the fun of it. I tried to gently steer, Digby's rambling into a direction that might clue me in into where all this started, but all I was able to glean was that the "pipeline" begins with Halloween candy that's been laced with pharmaceuticals,



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and apparently this year is the year of activation. And I'm pretty sure that at some point, he even mentioned mind-reading clowns. I kept prodding him for details about each of these weird and wild claims, and he was happy to give those details. But anytime I challenged him, I was met with the phrase-

Digby:

Do your own research.

Perry Carpenter:

What Digby wasn't aware of, is that I happened to know the world's foremost expert on Halloween candy panics, literally. His name is Joel Best, and he's been specifically studying Halloween candy panics since the 1980s, and actually his research goes all the way back to the 1950s.

So, Mason and I gave him a call.

[Transition to Interview]

Joel Best:

I'm Joel Best, I'm a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware, and I study social problems.

Perry Carpenter:

If you were to, I mean, given the weird research that you do and the cross domain subjects between criminal justice and folklore and everything else, if you can give an idea of how long you've been doing this and what made this an interesting thing to study, and then we can get into that broad question.

Joel Best:

Yeah. Okay. When I was in graduate school, when I started out and I entered graduate school in 1967, I thought that I was going to study deviant behavior. And one of the things that I did was I started reading a lot of autobiographies of thieves and drug addicts and people like that. And one of the things that



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struck me about these books, these accounts, was that these people all had reasons. They didn't necessarily have what you'd think of as good reasons, but they could explain to you why they were stealing and they could explain to you why they were using drugs and so on and so forth. And this is right around the time that there was a lot of news really picking up about people giving contaminated treats to trick or treaters. And I thought, I cannot imagine the reason that anybody would do this.

What's the point of doing this? And I started saying to friends, I don't think this is real. And my friends were just outraged. Of course it's real. Everybody knows it's real. How can you say that? So I shut up and I started teaching and I would say this to my students and they were, same thing, of course it's real, it's got to be real. So I thought there must be a way to study this and you cannot prove a negative of course. But what I could do was I could look at press coverage. And in those days, the New York Times had this great big thick annual volume, which was an index, and it was very thorough. You could find one- and two-sentence stories index in this annual volume. So I just got out 25 years of the annual index, and I went back and at that point it was back to 1958, and I looked up there Halloween, what was in the New York Times, and there weren't any stories.

Then somebody said, "Well, that's the New York Times, not a very good sample." The reason New York Times was low-hanging fruit because it had this book, it was in the library, you'd just go and do it. And I thought, "Okay, this could be a real pain in the neck." But I got microfilm copies of November 1st, 2nd, and 3rd for every year going back to 1958 for the LA Times and the Chicago Tribune, and I just paged through every issue the papers on the theory that if you had a contaminated treat on Halloween, it would make the newspaper within three days.

And the point was that when I was all done, I couldn't find any evidence that any child had been killed or seriously hurt by a contaminated treat picked up in the course of trick-or-treating. Now, there is the case of Ronald O'Brien, okay? And this case received, I think front-page coverage in all three of the newspapers. And just to explain why these three newspapers, these were the three largest metropolitan areas at that time. So I figured that I had a national window on news coverage. O'Brien was this guy who decided that he could poison his son, and he could do this because if he put poison in their Halloween candy, the police were swamped with all these cases of children being poisoned. And so they would never suspect him, it would be a perfect crime. Now, he never copped to this, but he took out a life insurance policy on his son.



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He purchased some poison, he put the poison in a big Pixy stick, he got a great big Pixy stick and put the poison in there and gave it to his son when they started to go trick or treating.

They went around to the other houses, and then they came back home and he did something like say to his son, "Okay, you can have one piece of candy tonight. What do you want?" I bet it's going to be that Pixy stick. And the kid ate the Pixy stick, was poisoned, died, he called the police, horrified. The police came out, they alerted all the people in Houston that there was a maniac loose, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. They took this seriously. In a sense, this worked. And then after a couple of days, the police realized that there weren't any other kids that had poisoned Pixy Stix. O'Brien had just taken out this life insurance policy, et cetera. And he was arrested, tried, convicted, and it being Texas, eventually executed. Now, he pled not guilty to all of this. I don't count that, and I don't count that because when people are worrying about is it safe for me to take my kid trick or treating, they're not asking the question, am I going to poison my own kid?

So I don't count that. And I found over the years, four other cases of deaths that were attributed to poisoned Halloween candy, and in each case they were retracted. I can't find any evidence this has happened. Now does that mean it's never happened? No. You can't prove that something's never happened, but it does mean that it sure isn't happening a lot because if it were happening, this would be a big news story and it's not there.

Perry Carpenter:

Well, it's just an expansion of stranger danger, right? Because Halloween is one of the only times of the year where you throw stranger danger to the side and say go take candy from strangers all day long. But at the same time, maybe that stranger wants to kill you.

Joel Best:

Well, and I like to tell people that this is the greatest thing in the world to worry about, okay? Because if you're worried about this, if your parent is worried about this, you can solve this problem. You don't let your kids go trick or treating, you go with them when they trick or treat, only go to the houses of people that you know, you inspect all the treats, you take them trick or treating at the church, you go trick or treating at the mall. There's all kinds of things. And then November 1st, you wake up, the family's



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gathered around the breakfast table and you count noses and everybody's still there, and you say, "Oh, we don't have to worry about that for the 364 days." Now, this is a story. There's somebody in your neighborhood who's so crazy, they will poison little children at random, but they're so tightly wrapped, they only do it one night a year.

Perry Carpenter:

That's a really good point.

Mason Amadeus:

We don't look at the absurdity of that. I have a question, but it's wrapped up in two things and it contains a tiny dash of conjecture. And so I really want to get your thoughts. I have essentially grown up my entire life in the era of the 24-hour news cycle. So a lot of times all of these small stories are on the news at some point. The news is desperate for things to cover. So it's really easy to track things that are spreading now because they're making appearances and everything. The news half the time is what people are saying on Twitter when it's 2:00 PM on a Tuesday. I'm curious how you saw the story spreading before, because I imagine it's such a simple concept that it could have been invented in a bunch of people's heads all over the place at the same time because it's easy to come up with. Did you see it being spread centrally or-

Joel Best:

No, it isn't like that. I have data. It's not incredibly terrific data, but it's data going back to 1958. I think there was one year when reports hit double digits, and this would've been like 10 or 11 incidents. You can look this up. I have a website or a thing in my university's archives called Halloween Sadism: The Evidence. And you can look at the table, and most years there's two, three, something like that, cases that I've counted.

Now, what is a case? A case is when you are told here's a town where there's a contaminated treat, and this is the nature of the contamination. There was a razor blade in an apple in Little Rock, Arkansas. That's a case. And there just aren't very many of them. There have been two efforts to follow up, systematically, on all the cases reported in some area. And it turns out both of these things concluded,



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and they figured that both of them used was 95% of the cases are hoaxes, and probably it's a higher percentage than that. But you tell kids this is the easiest thing in the world to do. The whole point of Halloween is it's got a whole tradition of trickery and prankery. So you can take a pin, stick it in a candy bar, run in, show your parents, look what I found in my candy bar, and you receive their concerned attention. If you're incredibly lucky, you can get a sympathetic hearing from the police or a newspaper reporter or something like that. It's easy to do.

I don't know. A few years ago, there were a couple kids in Kenneth Square, which is a Pennsylvania town that's just over the border from where I live in Delaware. And they posted on Facebook, they got a candy bar and they stuck a nail through it. And it was not like a small nail. It wasn't a railroad spike, but it was heading in that direction. And they posted this on Facebook and said, "Look what we found." And there was a certain amount of flurry in the neighborhood, and you realize that you can do this.

In 1982, the candy industry surveyed reports of poisoned candy, and they had got the same 95% of the fraudulent thing. And they have an example in there, and there's a kid who comes and runs in to his parents and says, "Look, I think there's ant poison on this candy bar." And he's taken a bite out of one end of the candy bar and they analyze it and there is ant poison sprayed on the other end of the candy bar. He did not the courage of his own convictions. So it's so easy to perpetrate this and there's really nothing there. And when the police do take it seriously, they look around and first thing you do is warn other people, check your kids' treats and nobody reports anything. And then they go back and they interviewed these kids in Kenneth Square and they said, "Really?" And they said, "Well, we were joking."

And it isn't that there's a big thing, there isn't. You can't blame the media for this. The media does not stir this up. There are no reports. I mean, they're incredibly localized and they're always these things. Somebody found glass in a cookie or something like that. It's just not a big news story. If the media does something, what they do is they publish a list of Halloween safety tips and they're the National Safety Council, the American Council for Safety, or whatever it is, will publish a list and they'll say, "Here are the tips for a safe Halloween. Don't let your kid wear an all black costume. Make sure they can see through their mask. Don't let them carry an open flame. Oh, and check your kids' treats." That's the panic spreading that's going on.

Mason Amadeus:



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You would be the only person perhaps in the world who would know this. Have you found any empirical information about where the idea started, or how the idea was spreading in the beginning?

Joel Best:

No. Sylvia Greiner, who's a folklorist, who's even older than I am, told me that when she was a little girl, she heard stories about people heating pennies on a skillet and then pouring the red-hot pennies into the outstretched hands of trick or treaters.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, wow.

Joel Best:

And I did find there was a story in the New York Times in the early 1950s, this is outside my sample. I looked up pennies and Halloween, and I did find a report of something like this, and I don't even remember if it was people are worried about this or if it actually happened, but trick or treating is not as old as you think it is. This is not something that goes back centuries. Halloween has this very complicated history where it's people really bobbed for apples, they held parties. There are different ways of celebrating Halloween. There was a story that a young woman took a candle into a otherwise darkened room and looked in a mirror, she would see the face of the man she was going to marry.

There is some trick or treating, but typically the Halloween celebrations in a lot of places are testosterone poisoning. They're adolescent boys who go out, and they tip over outhouses and the do mischief, soap windows, do mischief of that sort. And after the Second World War, there is some trick or treating. But after the Second World War, there are a lot of communities that try to organize Halloween as an anti-delinquency measure. And the idea is, we're going to have this night, people are going to go out in costumes. You can go from door to door, people can give the kids treats, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

And Halloween becomes, instead of the kind of adolescent, kind of middle school-age trouble making that it used to be, it becomes increasingly the province of younger kids who are dressed up by their parents and taken around and celebrated. One thing I should say is Halloween is dangerous. There is



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research on this and emergency room admissions for children, I think this is right, are greater on Halloween or Halloween is the second most dangerous holiday, something like that. So there actually are a fair number of cases, but this is a night when you send tens of millions of kids out into the dark and they get hit by cars, they trip over their costumes, they can't see out of their masks, they get hurt, they are not getting poisoned.

Mason Amadeus:

So there isn't a point source that kicked off a wider spread idea of this Halloween candy. It was just from all of the circumstances, many people all over independently started worrying about this thing.

Joel Best:

Yeah, I think Perry's right. I think that you go out and see a lot of strangers, so you're having more contact with strangers. I mean, that's why we have this terrible crime wave in the mall. You've got all these child abductions in the mall and people hiding beneath cars and grabbing ankles, and all this stuff happens at the mall. And why does it happen at the malls? Because the Grimm Brothers, people used to go into the forest. You go into the forest and you'd meet a talking wolf or you'd meet three bears or whatever it was. And in the good old days, going into the forest, forest was on the edge of town, and it was kind of dangerous to go into the forest. You didn't know what was going to happen there. Today, if we go into the forest, we're on the nature trail, and it isn't something that we do, but we go to the mall, and the mall is the place where everybody's there. So there are all these people, many of whom don't look like you, who are wandering around, and we treat that as the dangerous place. So I think Halloween was a way of, it's a moment when we enter the larger public and we have all of these things already about food and contaminated food and so on. And so it's not a big jump to get focused on Halloween.

Mason Amadeus:

That's interesting. And I think that the Halloween candy panic interests me, and I know that a lot of contemporary legends are like this, but the collaborative expansion and world building of the idea of how all this happens without any coordination or even communication between people, like the fact



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that this arose in so many places. And I feel like nowadays our communication methods are so unified that there's more collaboration in terms of how we evolve it.

Perry Carpenter:

But it does expand, right? Because Joel, you were talking at the [inaudible 00:25:08] meeting about the panic around the rainbow fentanyl and how that worked its way into the Halloween legend.

Joel Best:

I don't know that it expands so much as you have years. And the way that I'm measuring this now is not so much in my newspaper articles about Halloween sadism, but in interviews that I get, this is a seasonal job. Every October I wind up talking to people, and sometimes they'll have something very specific. Typically, what they're just saying is, tell me about Halloween sadism, and I give the same interview that I always have. But you'll have very specific things, and typically it involves something that happens in September. So last year in August, at the end of August, the Drug Enforcement Administration issues a press release. And you can go look this up online. It's the most routine press release in the world. I mean, just think about how many press releases come out from federal agencies every day, and this is one.

And it says, it's got a picture of a bunch of colored pills, and it says, "We're looking at rainbow fentanyl. And rainbow fentanyl is fentanyl pills that are colored." For starters, these pills in the picture are not fentanyl. That much fentanyl would kill. So what they are is opioid cocktails where somebody's added a little fentanyl seasoning to them. They may still be very dangerous, but they're not pure fentanyl. And they say in this press release, this may be an attempt to make fentanyl more appealing to young users. So that's fine. Nobody pays any attention to this press release.

And then three weeks later, Ronna McDaniel, who's the chairwoman for the Republican National Committee, is being interviewed on Fox News. And she is, this is my opinion, desperately looking for something to talk about that isn't abortion because it's a midterm election year, and the principal women's issue is abortion. And she says, "Mothers across America have to be worried that there's going to be rainbow fentanyl in their children's Halloween basket." And that took off. That just blew up.



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Rolling Stone had a critique of that the same day, and I wrote a piece for The Conversation, and I got 40 interviews last year.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh wow.

Joel Best:

Yeah, that's a lot. I mean, in a pretty good year. I get 10. So this was just a big, big year, the biggest ever. And I was saying, this is not going to happen. A, fentanyl is extremely dangerous. Nobody's going to give it to a small kid because a small kid will die. And that would cause a lot of problems for your drug dealing business because people would be motivated to seek you out. And besides that, what is the business plan? Are you going to get the milk money from these kids? I mean, where is the sense here? But it became a big deal. Now, of course, November 1st rolls around and total number of reported incidents of fentanyl and Halloween treats is zero.

And there is a case in Canada where somebody, and this is in Moose House, Canada. It's a remote place in the center of Alberta, and they announced that they'd found something very suspicious, and they were presuming it was fentanyl. It got set off to the Mounties. The Mounties analyzed it and said, "No, there's no illicit substance in this." But nothing came of this. You had exactly as much rainbow fentanyl in Halloween treats as you do every year. So this can happen, I am eagerly waiting this year to see if I get any rainbow fentanyl inquiries because I have a feeling this will just vanish and it'll have no more lasting effect than 1982 or 2001.

Perry Carpenter:

So I heard, I've not independently verified this, but I have heard that one of the things that reinforced that concern was some drug seizures where they had been able to show candy packaging with this. But of course, if you're going to hide your stuff, it makes sense.

Joel Best:



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There were two things last year. There was a case where somebody had some drugs in a Lego box, and there was somebody who had got drugs in Skittles packages. And these were shown on TV, and this was evidence that the rainbow fentanyl thing was a real threat. But of course, we've heard for years about stories about dolls being stuffed with heroin and taken on airplanes and stuff like that. And the whole point is to not ship your stuff in a box that says fentanyl on the outside.

Perry Carpenter:

Exactly.

Mason Amadeus:

And I wonder, I can imagine someone who's pretty deep into believing this and reluctant to change to be like, "Yeah, well, what if that Skittles package somehow accidentally ended up in someone's candy?" As opposed to deliberately.

Joel Best:

They would die.

Mason Amadeus:

They would die, and we would hear about it, and that hasn't happened.

Perry Carpenter:

Well, and the other thing is that the supply chain, you're looking at two completely different supply chains and logistics streams. So very, very unlikely unless some drug dealer dropped his bag of Skittles on the street and then somebody picked a rainbow fentanyl factory-

Mason Amadeus:

Right outside the Skittles factory next to the dumbest newest employee, ever.



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Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Well, I'm wondering, Joel, if there's a last thought to parents or children or the world at large that you like to leave around this topic?

Joel Best:

Yeah. Well, actually there is, my favorite line here is that a contemporary legend is harder to kill than a vampire. I've been doing it for whatever it is, 30-something years, going on 40. And I fully expect to be doing it until I can't do it anymore. It's not going to go away.

[End of interview – transition back to Perry's voiceover]

Perry Carpenter:

Even as we hung up our call with Joel, I knew that that wouldn't be enough to convince Digby that this whole conspiracy thing was wrong. But if I'm being honest, I was even more curious to see, in real time, how Digby would change and adapt his narrative in light of all this new information. He barely even blinked. It was almost impressive how immediately he crafted what seemed like this whole new set of watertight justifications and narratives for it. Everything from-

Digby:

That just makes it the perfect cover.

Perry Carpenter:

To-

Digby:

Of course there aren't any mass reports of that happening. They haven't activated the pharmaceuticals yet.



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Perry Carpenter:

Now, at this point, I knew there wasn't truly any hope of Mason and I talking this raccoon back to sanity. But selfishly, I felt like this whole debacle might make great fodder for an episode in the podcast. So of course, I had to ask Digby, "I really, really want to understand this. How does the activation process work?"

Digby:

It's actually fascinating.

Okay, so the way that they activate it is they start [inaudible 00:32:41]-

Perry Carpenter:

I have to admit, I didn't see this part coming. To summarize it all, this shadowy group, which Digby had not yet discovered the name for, has been lacing Halloween candy with psychoactive compounds for the better part of a decade. These compounds, however, lie dormant in your system, undetectable, except by a very specific process that I won't get into, but sounded a lot like Reiki. Then, in the wee hours of the morning, right after Halloween 2023, the shadowy cabal plans to activate the chemicals by starting a viral trend on TikTok. A challenge that involves a specific set of movements and coded phrases, which will awaken everyone who has ingested this tainted candy just like sleeper agents. And yeah, I'm pretty sure that's borrowing from Marvel's Winter Soldier or the Manchurian Candidate, or half a dozen other hypnosis-related tropes that have been used over the past 50 years. But the end goal, naturally, is to create a standing army out of all the brainwashed kids and take over the world. Digby even argued that there had been limited tests that we've seen, including things like the NyQuil Chicken Challenge and the Blackout Challenge.

Digby:

I mean, how else can you explain those?

Perry Carpenter:



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And again, now we're in a situation where I don't think Digby expected that I might know just the right person to ask about these things.

[Transition to Interview]

Libby Tucker:

I'm Elizabeth Tucker, called Libby for short. My title is Distinguished Service Professor of English at Binghamton University. I've been here since 1977, so I've had a long teaching career. It's been a great joy to work with very intelligent and lively students of Binghamton University, and I go to American Folklore Society meetings most years, and also the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. I've been active in both of them, and they've been important parts of my career as a folklorist. I started working on Digital Folklore in 2002 and was amazed that it was so easy to access right from my little study right from my computer, and I've never stopped.

Perry Carpenter:

So with the long career that you've had, and especially at a single university, I think that you've had a lot of chances to see the field of folklore emerge and mature in different ways or morph in different ways. I would love to get your perspective on when you saw this, I guess, sub-discipline of studying folklore from a digital perspective emerge, what thoughts did you have? There has been some debate around that, about are things like Reddit threads folklore, the emergence of Creepypastas, all that. What was going through your head as you started to analyze those from a more academic and disciplined perspective?

Libby Tucker:

That's a great question. I should mention that even before I started doing research that became published articles in the early '00s, I got to know Digital Folklore back when it was, remember when it was still emerging on the pieces of paper with the little crinkled edges and students were playing D&D and other games online and having a wonderful time with it. And back around that time when it was just emerging on our campus, I had a student who offered to be a research assistant for me, and he said he



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was going to find a space online where he could put together some information, and he called it Fiendish, which I thought was a kind of interesting name to give it. It turned out that he was exploring some things that were a little bit uncomfortable, though he was a very nice, hardworking student.

So that was my introduction at that very early time to some of the possibilities of things that people could do. Everybody was so excited. People were talking about the spirituality of the internet, which was certainly important. But then, when I started researching articles on children's folklore and then aspects of supernatural folklore online, including levitation, light as a feather, stiff as a board games, I found that it was just amazing that you could contact people all over the world as long as you had enough language to communicate with each other, and sometimes even through body language if you couldn't understand each other's languages.

This just was such a marvelously exciting way for people to communicate, and it offered new possibilities for research. In children's and adolescents folklore, particularly people like me had been having problems because rules to protect children, which are of course important and good, but they had been making it more difficult to work with young informants. But when you find a performance online that a young adolescent has chosen to post, then you can get a little bit of a window into their world with their agreement, and you can learn a great deal about young people's expressive culture. So in my early research, I got a good sense of the boundless possibilities of this field. And then gradually, as young folklorists such as Trevor Blank and Andrew Peck came into the field and started doing their own work, the scholarship became more precise and more theory-based, and moved in many interesting directions.

Perry Carpenter:

Given the weird research that you may have to do every now and then to fulfill your job, or even just a personal rabbit trail, what within your search history would be really tricky to try to explain to somebody?

Libby Tucker:

Oh, yes. Well, probably lots of them in different ways. I'm the only folklorist on our campus, so the work I do is so different from my colleagues, although we do have more people in our English department



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working on cultural studies now, so they're working on censorship or Title IX responses and things like that. But I guess I would say the part of my research that might be the hardest to explain might be my research on teenager's choking games on YouTube, because that was an uncomfortable subject.

It was uncomfortable for me sometimes looking at it. And I ordered through Interlibrary Loan a number of books that had to do with this kind of play. And I remember getting one through Interlibrary Loan that looked like it might be an issue of Hustler with all these pictures of... Oh my gosh, I'd better read that quickly and send it back. But I think it is very important to understand why it is that people need to flirt with danger in their games sometimes. It's an important part of growing up, and many of us have done this in different ways, but when it comes to choking games, it's a very contentious and troubling subject.

Perry Carpenter:

Describe what those are real quick for somebody that's not run across them.

Libby Tucker:

Oh sure. They're sometimes called fainting games as well, and they can happen in different ways with either just a brief hand around the neck or sometimes even a rope, which is really dangerous.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, wow. Yeah.

Libby Tucker:

And sometimes, Iona and Peter Opie wrote about this in their Games of Street and Playground published in the late 1960s about kids at boarding school just briefly strangling each other with towels from a roller towel machine, and then making each other pass out for a moment and then just get out and ha ha, run along. And all of this is fine if it's just a momentary flirtation with danger, but it's tragic if things go wrong, and sometimes things have go wrong. And so I tried in my research to understand what kids, mainly young teenagers, were doing, how they were expressing this on YouTube and how dangerous it could be for young people to see videos of this kind that offered them a chance to learn



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how to do it themselves. When you're young, you feel invulnerable. I felt invulnerable too. But when you have a video that's explaining exactly how to play this kind of game, then that's dangerous.

Perry Carpenter:

A lot of the body of your research revolves around folklore that emerges from college campuses because you have a great pool of study in front of you and obviously are passionate about the folklore that students create and pass on. One of your books really dives into the ghost lore from college campuses. I'd love for you to give a little bit of a background on what made that a book that you wanted to write, and maybe what are a couple of the favorite stories that came out of that?

Libby Tucker:

Oh, sure. I'd love to thank you for asking about that. That's my book, *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* published in 2007. So it's already an old book. Time goes by quickly. I started working on that research because I was hearing so many stories while I was working as a collegiate professor in one of our residence halls, students were talking about seeing faces materializing in mirrors. For example, there was a young woman who was seeing the face of a young man when she looked into the mirror above the dresser in her room.

And I could see that this was very real and important to the young people who shared the stories. And so I wanted to learn more about it. And I traveled around the country going to different folklore archives, including Berkeley and Utah State University, and collected some material from Asia as well. There's a lot of wonderful folklore from the supernatural in Asia. So I have many favorite stories in *Haunted Halls*, but the one I might mention is the story of the ghost of Brian, who appears to two female roommates in an old dorm building, and he contacts them by putting letters in reverse on their computer screen saying empleh, E-M-P-L-E-H, which if you look at it backwards, is help me.

Perry Carpenter:

Help me.

Libby Tucker:



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That's a motif you find in other legends, too.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah.

Libby Tucker:

But Brian tells the students, there were female students in the room, though Brian had lived in that room years before when he was a student, that he had accidentally died because one night he was studying for a thermodynamics test, and he also was having their science books open at a certain time, three o'clock every morning. He would make their textbooks open to something about thermodynamics, showing them that he was there. He was still studying even though he was dead.

And so he told them that he was nervous about doing all the studying for that test. And so he went down the hall and found somebody who offered him a handful of caffeine pills and he swallowed them all. And then he went berserk, ran out of the dorm, ran into the back woods, and fell into a drainage ditch there and drowned. But he wanted the girls to tell his family that it was an accidental death, that he hadn't meant to do it, and that he was so sorry it happened. He would never have taken the caffeine pills if he'd known how dangerous they were, and he hoped that no students would do what he had done.

So I like that story, both because it has vivid details, but also because it's very typical of campus ghost stories. It includes a warning, think before you do something rash, that may have tragic consequences. It may seem at the moment that taking a handful of pills to ace a test is going to be good, but it may lead you in a direction that will be dangerous and even fatal. So that's what many of the best ghost stories too, they teach you, don't become a ghost. Enjoy the stories. They're exciting and mysterious, but don't do anything yourself that will make you end up like them.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, wow. So what do you think about the college experience creates these kind of stories within that unique context? Because I do think about people who are starting to experience the world and more freedom in different ways. They can have more freedom to take a handful of caffeine pills if they wanted



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to, maybe because they're less monitored. What do you see coming up as some of the things that people are exploring in these legends?

Libby Tucker:

I think that on college campuses, one of the reasons why people come together so much is that most of them are from the same age group, though there's some of non-traditional age, which is great, and they have time to talk with each other. They're away from home. It's a little like going to summer camp, but in a much more massive and life-changing way. So I remember when I was in college how thrilling it was to have time to talk with friends in the evening and even all night if you wanted to, just to stay up talking about your classes and your hopes for the future and what worried you and just all of those things. And so you bond and then you share stories that you've heard. And some of them may sound outrageous or sensational, but with legends, there's always that kernel of truth. There's something that has happened or that is very likely to happen that makes the story have at least the potential for belief.

Perry Carpenter:

If I remember correctly, you also collected a number of stories about COVID-related legends on college campuses. Can you talk about that for a little bit?

Libby Tucker:

Sure, I'd love to. That's actually the research project that I'm working on now. I worked on that during my sabbatical last spring. When the COVID pandemic started, it was so hard for all of us and involved such a rearrangement of our lifestyles except for some of my friends who mainly lived on their computers and said they were just fine, was the way they'd always been, and what was this big fuss? And I am online quite a bit in my work anyway, so to some extent it wasn't so bad. But one of my first thoughts along with the anxiety and worry about what was going to happen to all of us was the folklore of this experience is going to be absolutely fascinating.

And so many of my folklore colleagues and I started right away trying to gather whatever information, observations we could about how people were handling this very unusual crisis. Of course, there hadn't been a global pandemic since 1918, so none of us alive knew really what was going to happen. There



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were some videos from some folklore projects that involved interviews with very elderly people about how they had handled having the 1918 flu.

But I wanted to know how this pandemic was going to affect folklore of the supernatural, because I'd always found that students I'd known on our college campus and others tended to love ghost stories and tended to express in those stories many of the major issues of their lives, both things that worried them and things that made them joyful, things they hoped for. So I was eager to find how this might influence the stories that were told. I did find a version of the vanishing hitchhiker that developed very early in the pandemic on our own campus, students talking to each other during the Safe Ride program, it's one of the great programs on our campus that helps students get where they need to go at night. They don't need to walk worry about being out alone, though our campus is very safe. And so some students were sharing with each other's stories about a girl who had gone home for the weekend during the time that going home for the weekend was highly discouraged.

And she had come back with COVID and she had started spreading it, but she had become like a ghost. Nobody knew if she was still alive, or where she was living, or what. And the fear was that she was infecting a lot of other people on campus and nobody knew what they should do. So I thought that that was a very interesting story, and I wrote an article about that that was published in the journal Contemporary Legend. But there are also other kinds of ghost stories that started servicing after a while, including bathroom ghost stories, stories about strange sounds, a cracked mirror, other things that happened in bathrooms. Bathrooms have always been sites where ghostly figures seem to express the kind of anxiety that comes when you're at a liminal space between the public and the private. And so I wasn't too surprised that bathrooms were the setting for stories of this kind.

Perry Carpenter:

I would love your perspective because you and Lynne McNeill did the case book on legend tripping, how you've seen legend tripping evolve in the digital age as well?

Libby Tucker:

Oh, yes. That is a very important thing to think about. There's been huge evolution of legend tripping in the digital age. And I think just to get back to the pandemic for a moment, I think that the pandemic



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exacerbated that because there weren't the kinds of physical chances for legend tripping that people were usually taking. And I did find in my classes where we talk about folklore of the supernatural, that the pandemic had had a depressive effect upon physical adventuring. People didn't feel safe going into unfamiliar spaces like abandoned hospitals or deserted houses. Some of those aren't safe to go to anyway. And I always tell my students, they must be very careful above all.

But yes, many of us enjoy spending a lot of time online. Many of us do that as part of our jobs. And so I think it's natural that we want to explore the possibilities for legend tripping in that way. There's a plethora of videos on YouTube that people make to help make it possible to visit a haunted place without actually going there. And there has been some theorizing about that. People have thought about whether a virtual legend trip really constitutes a full legend trip. I think it does. We just need to understand how it works and what it means to people.

Perry Carpenter:

Do you also see things like some of the newer technologies around cell phones enabling different kinds of legend tripping, and I'm thinking back on the Pokemon Go, the augmented reality things that people are able to do, or maybe even in some of the newer ghost hunting people saying that they have EMF readers on their phones and things like that. Do you see this blending of the digital and physical space?

Libby Tucker:

Oh, absolutely. The digital and physical space has come together perfectly in a cell phone and on my own cell phone, which I have with me constantly like a little dog.

Perry Carpenter:

Me too.

Libby Tucker:

Good. Good. There is a ghost hunting app. They're really cheap. They cost maybe 99 cents or many of them are free. You can use it to check out a place. Maybe a red or blue dot will appear if a spirit is supposed to be present or you on some of them, you can get a spirit box type effect without using an



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actual spirit box. Spirit boxes being devices that bring in random radio sounds, kind of a word salad that comes together. You can construct a ghost story from bits of the words or sentences that have come in through your phone app or maybe through a spirit box. And there's just so much that you can do and the chances for that keep expanding.

But it's interesting to me to see that some of the old devices are still appealing to young people. Last week, one of my students said that she had gotten some dowsing rods from her mom who was interested in the supernatural, and she asked if she could bring them to class. And I said, sure. So she held them out. There were these metal rods, and she said she knew people used to use them to find water, but they were supposed to be able to detect ghosts. And I told her that our Binghamton Student Paranormal Club had used them to look for ghosts before, and she held them out in the class and said, "Is there a ghost here?" And one of them went down a little bit, so maybe there was. But you can ask it yes and no questions like a Ouija board. So if it's saying yes, it will go across like that. If it says no, the two rods will spread very far from each other. She asked it some questions and the answers seemed appropriate. My class was absolutely spellbound.

Perry Carpenter:

Wow.

Libby Tucker:

This was something physical going on, and they could see the results. They didn't need to pull out their phones. And so I was glad to see that young people are still finding that kind of device to be appealing. It's not just online. It also is something you can pick up and do physically on your own.

Perry Carpenter:

You know what? There's something to that, right? I think people are increasingly enamored with the analog age. There's something romantic about a VCR tape, and there's something romantic about dowsing rods or pendulums or things like that that are more than just looking at a screen. And I think that's really great to hear. I wonder, from your perspective as a folklorist and a teacher, do you have to



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pull yourself back from entering a more kind of a logical debunker mode every now and then? Because of some of the science that you know may conflict with the experience that people are having?

Libby Tucker:

That's an interesting thing to think about, yes. I always tell my students that all of us stand somewhere on the spectrum between absolute belief and complete skepticism. And it's natural and perfectly fine for all of us to be in a slightly different spot. I take the supernatural very seriously, and I think it's very important. But on the other hand, I'm a little skeptical myself sometimes, but I am not really interested in debunking what anybody is doing or saying, well, that legend or that rumor doesn't seem to be true. Sometimes it's really difficult to even know whether something is true. I'm more interested in the kernel of truth or the meaning, the resonance that a legend has for people. It may be an emotional meeting, it may be something related to our place in society, but all of it is important and matters a lot.

[Transition out of Interview – back to Perry's voiceover]

Perry Carpenter:

We really tried our best. We took everything we learned to Digby. We even played back pieces of the interview for him. But as fast as we could provide real explanations, he was even faster at moving the goalposts.

Trying to reason with him felt like arguing with someone who had a script memorized for every single point that you might make. And when you have direct access to the internet in your brain, it's unbelievably easy to feed your own confirmation bias. I don't think any amount of debate or reasoning would be able to bring those walls down from the outside. At least nothing Mason or I could say. Either he'd find his own way out soon, or we'd need to get some professional assistance.

Now, I'm no expert at deprogramming conspiratorial thinking, but I do happen to know a guy.

[Ending Credits]



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Thanks for listening to Digital Folklore and a special thanks to our guests, Joel Best, and Libby Tucker. You can find links to their work in the show notes. Thank you also to Matthew Bliss of Blissery.FM for stepping in with editing help for this episode. And thank you to Brooke Jennett for providing the voice of Digby.

If you're not in our Discord server yet, go ahead and join. It's free, there's a link in the show notes to take you there. And if one of the reasons you haven't joined yet is because you have no idea what Discord is, it's like a cool online private chat room where you can hang out with other fans of the show, as well as Mason and myself. It's totally free, and there's a great community there discussing folklore, sharing pictures of their pets, and generally having a good time. You'll fit right in.

Digital Folklore is a production of 8th Layer Media and can only exist with your support, so please tell a friend about the show.

Thank you again for listening, and we'll see you soon.

[Post Credits Scene]

Mason Amadeus:

Perry, for the love of God, if the person that you have in mind is Todd-

Perry Carpenter:

What? No.

Mason Amadeus:

I don't believe you.

Perry Carpenter:

No, it really wasn't. But now that you mention it, he might not be the worst choice.

Mason Amadeus:



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No, I'm pretty sure he is the worst choice.