



Digital Folklore

Season 1, Episode 10

FOLK: Technical Difficulties – Dr. Lynne S. McNeill

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

Intro:

Previously on Digital Folklore...

[upbeat music with transition sounds between each line]

Perry Carpenter:

Is that a raccoon?

Mason Amadeus:

That's Digby. He's a business expense and also my best friend.

Perry Carpenter:

Digby, no, that's not food.

Mason Amadeus:

Well, that tape does have mayonnaise on it.

Perry Carpenter:

Anyway, so where is Digby? Where is the little guy?

Mason Amadeus:

Digby is at the vet.

Dr. Sphynkyll:

Now, this isn't going to hurt per se, but it isn't exactly going to be comfortable. Lie back and talk me through what you experience when I do this.

Digby:

Ah!

[Electronic vortex sound as Digby gets transported into his memories]



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Intro:

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

[Rumbling engine of the Volkswagen as it approaches, parks, and shuts down. Perry gets out and closes the door]

Perry Carpenter:

Man. This thing is freaking cool.

[A distant 'beep beep' sounds as some kind of heavy machinery can be heard backing up. We also hear crashes... and Mason's panicked grumbling]

What? I really hope that's just sound design.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh! Ahhh. Ouch.

Perry Carpenter:

Sometimes, I just think about turning around and going home.

Mason Amadeus:

Ah. Ugh.

Perry Carpenter:

I don't think any other podcaster has to deal with this kind of crap.

Mason Amadeus:

Perry.



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Perry Carpenter:

That's...

Mason Amadeus:

Hey, man.

Perry Carpenter:

Hmm?

Mason Amadeus:

I was just getting ready for you.

Perry Carpenter:

That's got to hurt.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, I was actually thinking about rescheduling.

Mason Amadeus:

What? Why? You're already here, and it's not a short drive.

Perry Carpenter:

This just seems like a bit of a bad time.

Mason Amadeus:

No. No, no, no.



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Perry Carpenter:

For you.

Mason Amadeus:

Ugh, a bit of glass of my teeth. It's actually perfect timing. I basically just finished cleaning up.

Perry Carpenter:

I feel like that means something completely different to you than it does anybody else.

Mason Amadeus:

Restructuring then. Come on.

Perry Carpenter:

You have to have structure before you restructure.

Mason Amadeus:

I wanted to have...

[We hear Mason trying to straighten out the frame of a chair he accidentally hit with the forklift]

Oh, man. I really bent this thing. I wanted to have a clean background for the call.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh. My. God.

Mason Amadeus:

Yes, wicked clean.

Perry Carpenter:



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You literally just bulldozed everything behind your desk.

Mason Amadeus:

Forklift.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

Bulldozers are expensive.

Perry Carpenter:

That's not what matters.

Mason Amadeus:

The cheapest thing I saw was \$53,000 for a bulldozer from 2006.

Perry Carpenter:

I mean, you could have come to-

Mason Amadeus:

[Slapping his new acquisition with pride]

This little guy was a grand, Crown 15BT. Todd had him. He cut me a deal. I mean, I would've preferred a sit-down one instead of a walk behind, but hey.

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This stuff is just going to come crashing down any minute.

Mason Amadeus:



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Nah, doubt it.

Perry Carpenter:

Before, there were mountains of garbage in here.

Mason Amadeus:

I smooshed them pretty hard with the lift.

Perry Carpenter:

Now, they're glaciers.

Mason Amadeus:

They're fine. The ones near the desk have been holding up for hours.

Perry Carpenter:

So I'm not reassured.

Mason Amadeus:

You're ignoring the point, though. Look how good the camera angle is.

Perry Carpenter:

You do realize that just a few weeks ago, your entire place looked like that because it was a... And here's a concept, clean.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh. You mean when you ran over that guy in the van, and I was afraid I was going to get raided?

Perry Carpenter:

I don't even think that guy was real.



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Mason Amadeus:

Wait, what?

Perry Carpenter:

We really don't have time. I'll tell you later.

Mason Amadeus:

Okay. Can you at least just say that the camera angle looks good?

Perry Carpenter:

The camera angle looks good.

Mason Amadeus:

Thank you. I figured getting to talk to Lynne McNeill is a big deal.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, she's a superstar in the folklore space.

Mason Amadeus:

She is. I think it's wild. Every time I'm looking up stuff for the show or we're interviewing people, Lynne McNeill's name comes up.

Perry Carpenter:

She's always got these really fun and clever ways to explain things.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, absolutely.

Perry Carpenter:

Did you get questions prepared for the interview?



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Mason Amadeus:

Yes.

Perry Carpenter:

Okay, that's fine. I pretty much expected you'd forget, at this point, and that was before I saw the forklift.

Mason Amadeus:

Honestly, I think we should just chat. I mean, I feel like no matter what, we'll rabbit hole on something anyways.

Perry Carpenter:

[pages rustling]

I prepared a list of some of the stuff that we want to touch on, but yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, that's a good idea. We know we want to get her definition of folklore.

Perry Carpenter:

And the value of academic folklore programs, the impact and importance of folklore in society, misinformation and disinformation and how different online platforms affect the folklore created on them.

Mason Amadeus:

I also want to make sure that we ask her what's got her excited right now, in the world of folklore.

Perry Carpenter:

Ooh.



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Mason Amadeus:

But that's a lot already. I think we might run out of time.

Perry Carpenter:

We'll see. There's more on the list.

Mason Amadeus:

Well, some of this is stuff we talked about maybe exploring in season two.

Perry Carpenter:

Well, anything we don't use in this episode, we can get back to in season two as well.

Mason Amadeus:

That's fair. I mean, the thing is, I think once we start, we're going to end up somewhere we didn't expect. That pretty much always happens anyway.

Perry Carpenter:

I find comfort in the theater of preparation, even if we end up throwing it all away.

Mason Amadeus:

Theater of preparation, I like that.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, it's like security theater.

Mason Amadeus:

Although theater of preparation sounds like an upper-class euphemism for the bathroom.

Perry Carpenter:

We should start the Zoom call.



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Mason Amadeus:

It's Riverside, not Zoom.

Perry Carpenter:

You pick the weirdest times to be pedantic.

Mason Amadeus:

I'm just being specific. It wouldn't be the first time we sent the wrong kind of invite link. I'm logging in.

Perry Carpenter:

Uh-oh.

Mason Amadeus:

It'll be fine.

[an unencouraging electronic sound]

Oh, my camera won't connect. Hold on.

Perry Carpenter:

Is it plugged in?

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. Yep.

Perry Carpenter:

Try closing all your other apps.

Mason Amadeus:



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Nothing else is running. Well...

Perry Carpenter:

Ah. Hey, Lynne.

Mason Amadeus:

Hey, Lynne. Sorry. Having a camera issue. Oh, no. Hey, Lynne, we can't hear you.

Perry Carpenter:

It's not you. It's us. That little activity icon is wiggling on Lynne's video.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh. Whoops. Okay. Hang on. I have the wrong output selected.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

... I've refreshed again in the hope that that would make a difference. Am I back?

Perry Carpenter:

Yes. Hello, Dr. McNeill. We are super excited to have a chance to talk to you, so much that I just put my fancy podcast voice on.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Oh, good.

Perry Carpenter:

Before we forget, can I get a clean introduction from you for the podcast?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Totally. Yeah.



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Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, just your name, your title, and any other little tidbits you want to include.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Absolutely. I'm Dr. Lynne McNeill. I'm a folklorist at Utah State University, where I teach graduate and undergraduate classes, and I run the folklore program.

Perry Carpenter:

Perfect.

Mason Amadeus:

Just so you know, we're going to be cutting this up, moving pieces around and stuff like that, so it's completely low pressure.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

The magic of editing, that's why we have this capability. I actually just got on a whole long diatribe about this with my students. That when they're thinking of writing their theses in our folklore program, they think they have to be really long, and talking about how length really came from a lack of editing technology. If you'd handwritten 500 pages and you rethought the first 100, you're not going to go back and rewrite them. You're just going to add a new 100 that's a little bit redundant, but kind of says it better. It's like, no, we shrink things up now because we don't have to just repeat ourselves anymore.

Mason Amadeus:

We have the technology. Yeah.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Exactly. We can do it. We can write shorter dissertations, and it's okay. Yeah.

Perry Carpenter:



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We thought we'd start off with maybe talking about some of the things that have you excited about, right now. When you think about having a career as a folklorist and somebody that teaches others, where do you get your passion from right now? What are the things that have you interested?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

In general, the things that keep me, and I imagine any folklorist really engaged is that folklore does not dilly-dally with things that are no longer relevant, which is paradoxical to a lot of people. We think of folklore as being this outmoded, maybe outdated, older way of thinking, but really it is the up to the moment cultural barometer that we have at our fingertips to say what's going on right now. That's frustrating because sometimes you really get into something, and then two days later, you look around, and it's gone already. But I find that ability to keep up is one of the things that keeps me most interested.

I have a student right now working on the AI cryptid, as some people are calling her, Loab, the creature who is emerging through this almost ritualistic method of AI image generation, which I love. It's almost an unintentional, "Oh, you were doing a ceremony, and you didn't know it," and now, here's this lady.

But that idea as a means of symbolically expressing how uncomfortable we all are right now with artificial intelligence, I just feel like is perfect. It's this incredible illustration of the role folklore plays in absolutely entertaining us, challenging us, scaring us, but also in articulating for us what we are stressed about, what we're worried about, what we're afraid of, or what we're really into right now. And it's not the work of practiced artisans to create a poetic turn of phrase. It's everyday people communicating on this symbolic level, and I love it.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, I want to touch on Loab for a second because... And I've not done a deep dive. I've just seen some of the surface-level news reports and some of the original Twitter thread and things like this. And it does look like one of those issues where there's questions around whether this is a phenomenon that actually happens or whether that it was manufactured and propagated by the first person to tweet about it.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yep.



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Perry Carpenter:

Does it matter whether some of these are true when they come out that way? And then, also, I think either way, it gets into those more existential questions that you're talking about, about what are some of the horrors that AI may bring forward?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah. No, definitely. I mean, all of that is, I think, what makes this so compelling. We have this technology that's available to us right now that appears to do things we did not intend it to do, which is distressingly similar to things we might think of as autonomy and free will and a mind of its own, which is we have sci-fi about that. We have literature about that. Now, we potentially have reality about that. And it's hard to not color that reality with those other speculative, fictional things that we've had throughout time, that always tell us what it's going to do is kill us in the end.

But I think what we have here is a situation, as with so many legendary situations, it doesn't matter at all if it's true. And there's multilayered quality to the truth of a legend. It can be true as in literally true. It can be true as in true folklore. Is this true folklore? That's a question that was asked a lot, early on, about Slender Nan.

It's breaking that expectation of age, of ancientness even, as a marker of folklore. We don't need that. Now it's a legend. Now it's folklore. And now it belongs to all of us, which is handy. We know there's a person who originated this. Whatever ideas they had about what this would be, they've set it in motion, but now it's running downhill really fast on its own. And we're going to get a lot of other artistic folkloric, perhaps even filmic versions of this before we're done talking about it.

Perry Carpenter:

Why don't we back up and go general folklore for a second? You do have a very well-known definition for folklore. Imagine that you have a group of all of our listeners in a classroom, and somebody says, "Well, what is folklore anyway? And why am I here?" How would you answer that?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Well, I'd answer it with probably an hour long lecture. Just so you know, step one-

Perry Carpenter:



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We're here for it.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Thank you. It's always going to take more explaining than it would seem to merit as a subject. Nobody thinks folklore, I'm going to need an hour to have that one explained to me. But the way I define folklore is succinctly as informal traditional culture. Three tidy words, whole lot of ideas encapsulated in those three tiny words, so each of them need unpacking a bit.

One of the examples I like the most to distinguish folk culture from institutional culture is things that we learn in an institutional setting, or is in a region that's guided by institutions, but that are totally non-institutional, whether it's a story, or a way of behaving, or a particular term or phrase that we use for something. Maybe it's a way we make a paper airplane. We learn that from the people around us, from everyday people, from our families, our friends, through observation, through non-specific learning. We grow up hearing songs and jump rope rhymes, and therefore we know them. We might learn them at school, but we don't learn them through school. That's that informal quality of it.

The traditional quality of it gets at the idea that we're dealing with repeated patterns so that it's not new content every time. Something becomes traditional when we recognize, "Hey, I've heard that before. I've seen that before. I've heard another version of that. I've done this in another place."

And when we recognize that traditional element that, okay, this is something that more than one person knows. It exists in more than one place. It has what other folklorists have called multiple existence. That tells us that this thing is traditional. It's passed on from person to person. And because it's informal, there's no single correct version. It's when it takes form, the form of a story, the form of a custom, the form of a material object, the form of a belief. And that's where we derive what we would call the genres of folklore.

What the essence of it is is absolutely that boiled down nature of humanity. That's the value of it. That's what it gives us. The tools to study it and articulate it are what academics spend their time with.

Mason Amadeus:

Ah.

Perry Carpenter:

Ah.



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[Rumble and crash of one of Mason’s mounds of electronic debris crashing...]

Mason Amadeus:

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Oh, my god.

Perry Carpenter:

What? Oh, my god.

Mason Amadeus:

Ah. No.

Perry Carpenter:

Good thing Digby is not here. That was his cage.

Mason Amadeus:

The computer is still on.

Perry Carpenter:

I did tell you that this was going to happen.

Mason Amadeus:

We lost internet.

Perry Carpenter:

Did it just get...

Mason Amadeus:

I hope it's just...

Perry Carpenter:



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Look for the cord.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, man.

Perry Carpenter:

What?

Mason Amadeus:

That's super not ideal. It smashed the modem. I mean, it was a pretty trash one anyway. I got it from an ISP that's now out of business. I just never gave it back.

Perry Carpenter:

Well, now it's literal trash, and we just lost the interview.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. This sucks.

Perry Carpenter:

Does your PC have a WiFi card?

Mason Amadeus:

I think so. I haven't used it because wired is so much faster.

Perry Carpenter:

I'll hotspot us. And if we're quick enough, we can probably jump back on the call without losing anything.

Mason Amadeus:

Okay-



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[Transition sound to ad break]

Perry Carpenter:

... Zero, capital W, 72.

Mason Amadeus:

I swear to God, Perry, if your obsession with security ruins this interview, I am going to-

Perry Carpenter:

I don't want to leave my phone open to attackers. It has way too much sensitive data.

Mason Amadeus:

I'm in.

Perry Carpenter:

And my browsing history.

Mason Amadeus:

We're on. I'm refreshing. I'm refreshing the page.

Perry Carpenter:

Great. Let's not over-explain why we dropped out.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. Lynne, hey, we lost you for a second. Sorry.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Oh, crap.

Mason Amadeus:



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I think we just had some internet issues.

Perry Carpenter:

The moment we cut out was a real cliffhanger too.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Hopefully it captured it and is uploading.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. I mean, it's supposed to do that, so I guess we'll find out the hard way. There was a question that came to my mind right before we lost you. I'm not exactly sure how to phrase it, but whenever I'm trying to learn something new, I'm always looking out for ways of viewing the world that are different.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes.

Mason Amadeus:

How can I look at something that's happening like a folklorist would? I don't know if you had a...

Perry Carpenter:

Is there a forensic toolkit for folklorists?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Ooh.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

I love that.



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Mason Amadeus:

Basically.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes. Absolutely. I actually wrote a book chapter called The Folklorist Toolkit. Building off of, ooh, another of my mentors... I have been so lucky as a folklorist. Diane Goldstein wrote about the folklorist toolkit in an article distinguishing the work of an anthropologist from the work of a folklorist. I'll get to that in a minute though.

I often talk with my students that folklorists have this sort of double-vision because we don't stop being a member of the folk, an everyday person, a member of all of our varied and overlapping folk groups, through which we code switch throughout the day. We have a mode of presentation at work that's different than at home, and when we're hanging out with friends, and when we're at a sporting event. We are constantly members of these folk groups all overlapping, all at the same time. And we are that even when we are a folklorist.

And what the folklorist is doing, at its most basic level, is identifying something that seems base and trivial, but that's everywhere, and saying, "What's going on here? Why is this persisting?" I mean the informality of folklore, that key definitional trait of informality, says no institution is keeping this stuff in circulation. There's no AP test making sure that you've heard X, Y, Z urban legends in high school. There's no government licensing that's going to make sure that you know how to successfully put on a traditional holiday dinner. Yet these patterns persist.

So the folklorist comes in and says, "Why?" When a pattern is starting to persist or even starting to rev up, and I'm seeing it everywhere, and there's no institutionalized explanation for it... There's not a big budget production company showing an ad for it every 30 minutes on television. Why is it persisting? That's, I think, learning to spot folklore, learning to see that informal traditional stuff, and then asking yourself, "Why is this sticking around?"

If it didn't mean anything to us, it would disappear. And we've seen that happen. There's a lot of folklore that's disappeared because we didn't need it anymore. It wasn't saying anything of value to us. So when it does stick around, it's our job to then say, "Okay, what's the value? What are we saying with this? That's keeping it a useful tool for us?"

Folklorists pay attention to tradition, transmission, and genre in a way that, I believe, really connects with that expressive mode of everyday people. People choose, even if it's a very unconscious or



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subconscious choice, we choose to communicate in a proverb rather than summing up an opinion with our own speech. We choose to deploy a meme when we want to make a point, rather than just make that point in our own words. We are doing something that means we're choosing a genre in order to transmit an idea in a traditional way when we share folklore. Those three concepts, yes, are useful tools for folklorists, but I think also really start to get at what this is, this vernacular communication that people are doing.

Mason Amadeus:

That makes so much sense. I never thought of genre that way, despite all of the things I've read that never clicked, until just now, as a way of thinking about that. That is really cool.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah. We need to be careful, as folklorists, to not impose our genres on other people. We know, of course, genres are learned through one's cultural upbringing, through one's worldview. And it's very tempting to go out into the world and say, "Oh, is that a song that you sing at night in front of children? That's a lullaby." But no, that's a genre we have. We have to parse out other people's genres. I find this fascinating because, as a folklorist, we do have very specific academic definitions of many genres.

Mason Amadeus:

This just brought to mind a question that I'm super curious about your answer on, but it's a bit of a weird question. To study something academically is, in a way, the pursuit of an absolute truth you can overlay to understand something. Is that directly at odds with the study of folklore, which is studying how we colloquially understand things? Is that an interesting sort of headbutting that comes up a lot? You touched on it in what you just said. I'm just curious if you wanted to expound on that.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah, it can be. It can be a paradox. And what it does for me, though, that helps reduce the impact of that paradox is we distinguish the stuff of folklore and its natural organic processes from the study of it. That's something that we don't do as much with more institutionalized forms of culture, like literature, or art history, or music appreciation, where we study them in the academy because there are correct distinctions between those forms that are institutionalized.



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When things are guided by institutions, it is easier to be definitive and say, "Oh, if you're calling a memoir a novel, you are incorrect." Whereas with a folklorist, if what you're trying to do is be a folklore student, and you call a myth of fairytale, we might say, "You are incorrect," but just everyday people in the world, our goal is not to say you're wrong about what you call these sorts of forms.

This actually is key to the discipline of folklore studies because what we largely are not, and this is not to say that there aren't some instances of it, but we are not interventionist. A lot of sociological work, a lot of the, say, medical humanities, the goals are interventionist. We want to change behavior. We want to fix this public health issue. We want to make different the way something happens in a society. And folklorists largely are like, we want to understand. That's what we want to do. We want to get it. I am not here to say whether Bigfoot is real, or not. I am here to take seriously the people who want to tell me that they think they saw him. And that's great. I believe in that.

This has gotten trickier with the advent of QAnon, with fake news, the purposeful dissemination of, sticky in a folkloric way, misinformation. Suddenly folklorists are like, "Well, maybe we do want to change the way people are doing things." That is a huge, enormous identity crisis in the discipline right now. We have thrived on agnosticism in a lot of ways, as a real point of pride. All of a sudden, we cast that same sort of legendary work in the frame of politics or public health, and we see an area in which it actually does matter to me if someone believes or doesn't believe the information that they're sharing with me. And that is tricky. That is a place at which I hear folklorists now beginning these conversations.

Mason Amadeus:

Do you feel as though there's a tipping point in which the study of folklore now is almost more important than ever because of the advent of the internet? But also something, Perry, you were telling me about before is you had a hard time finding online folklore programs or accessibility into it at the same time.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes. There's my short answer. Yes.



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Mason Amadeus:

Yes.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Absolutely. Understanding what folklore is, understanding how it moves, understanding how it influences people, it's tied to so many other disciplines, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology. It is the understanding of humans, but uniquely it's the understanding of humans on their terms rather than the understanding of humans on like Durkheim's term, or some previous scholar's terms. That I'm coming to understand you through you.

That is a really unique thing and a really important thing and a thing that... Folklorists, I think we are coming quickly to a place where it's like, "Okay, how do we maintain that best practice, but allow for this, 'Okay, perhaps we need an interventionist' bent?" I think what we're going to end up with is a broad application of folklore studies. You can be a folklorist in a variety of contexts, and one of those contexts might eventually be a culturally or a societally-therapeutic context where we can say, "This is how our knowledge can help."

Perry Carpenter:

As I was doing some of my initial research into this and starting to realize how big the world of folklore really is, I did keep butting up against this almost Star Trek Prime Directive type of thing, is that interventionist piece. And then, of course, you get to 2015-16 and beyond, and you start to see that, oh, there are these interesting traces of things that look like legend and things that look like traditional manipulation of belief for some other kind of more nefarious outcome, and you see that struggle.

One of the things that keeps surfacing over and over and over, kind of cross-discipline, is the idea of, in grade school even, injecting some kind of media literacy. Would you, then, also advocate for not only media literacy, but the ways that folklore and belief intersect with that, and the ways that belief may be used to other people, or to create distinct social differences for the purpose of something negative?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes. I think that some sort of media literacy, vernacular culture literacy is something that should go along with this. You brought up the idea that a lot of the times we use these materials to other someone, a group of people, or an individual, or whatever. And this is something that we see happen on



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like the microcosmic diotic scale. Two people do this to each other. Angry people in a relationship will attempt to dehumanize the other person, so as to be more comfortable with harming them or insulting them. And we see it on a societal scale, so this is a human conundrum that we are dealing with. The hardest thing about it is that the people, you, each of us most need to fact-check are ourselves, and the people it is most fun to fact-check are our opponents, in whatever realm we are working in.

So media literacy, learn how to find your sources, learn how to fact-check and stuff like this, those are all wonderful skills for people to learn. It's that people don't deploy them on themselves. And they don't deploy them in the true, I hate to use the word insidious, but insidious way that folklore enters our lives. We think about urban legends as these identifiable friend-of-a-friend narratives that we hear.

And when I talk about them in classes with my students, my students will say, "How could anyone believe that? That's so ridiculous?" And it's like, yeah, it sounds ridiculous written in a textbook about global politics. Of course that sounds ridiculous. That's not how you encounter it as folklore. You encounter it as folklore when you're in high school, and you're at the dinner table with your family, and your dad looks up and goes, "Did you guys hear what happened yesterday?" And that's it.

Then, boom, urban legend. Urban legend comes next. It's not a CNN article, or a Fox News article, or an MSNBC broadcast. It's our friends, our family, our parents. And it's not often bizarre and crazy-sounding stuff because usually it's stuff that fits right in with our worldview. It's something that we don't like, but that we're like, "Yeah. No. I bet that did happen. That is how the world works." And everyone is susceptible to this.

And again, so it's not fact-checking a fake news article. It's fact-checking my parents, my friends, my colleagues, myself, and we don't do that instinctively. That's horrendously uncomfortable. We aren't in that realm of formal research all the time. This really is highlighted by that informal versus institutional culture divide. Fact-checking informal culture is often impossible.

And the genre differences, what distinguishes a joke from a legend? Almost the only thing is whether or not it's being pitched as true because we have many urban legends that, structurally, have punchlines. There's the reveal at the end. And if it were told as, "Did you hear about the guy who..." you'd laugh because it would be a funny social commentary. But when it's pitched as, "No, seriously. My hairdresser's cousin's next door neighbor did this," suddenly it's not funny because now it's biting social commentary.

We react differently based on how, again, the people closest to us, who are not trying to defraud us... There are bad actors in the world. There are money-making, fake news generators. They are less the



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danger than when the story they create becomes so folkloric, has entered that folk transmission process, that we hear it from a family member as something that happened. That's the danger level of disinformation, and that's where it's so convoluted and difficult that those fact-checking skills, even when we've learned them, just don't get deployed.

Perry Carpenter:

Really quick, because this is a good segue in, if somebody were to say to you, "I really like folklore, but what is the value of studying folklore academically? What does that do for the world, for the next generation?" what's your response there?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yeah. I would say folklore opens our eyes to what we really care about, and we being that collective society. We can look to the great thinkers among us for insight, but we can also look to the creative, artistic, cultural expressions of everybody to see what rises to the top.

In many ways, the transmission process of folklore is a survival of the fittest evolutionary process. If an idea, an element, a component, really speaks to a lot of people, it's staying in. It's one of the conservative elements, the traditional elements. If there's details that are specific to that person, specific to this group over here, but not this group, they tend to fall out. By the time any piece of folklore has been rolled through enough transmissive chains, it is pretty reflective of what matters to people. And looking at that is like being given a crystal ball into the worldview of everyday people.

Now, we have to be careful to not generalize. Does that collectively-shaped pattern tell us anything about any one given individual? No, no more than apple pie and baseball is what all Americans do every day. We don't understand any given American through its broadest stereotypes, but folklore is a bit more specific than that. In fact, folklore is weakest at the national level. I mean, how many of us feel that we are personally defined by the story of little George Washington not being able to tell a lie? Not really.

But I guarantee that most of us have a story within our family, perhaps a story of how our family, as immigrants, came here, a story about how our family perhaps made it from the East Coast to the West Coast, a story about how our grandparents started a business, or how our parents found the home that we live in. Those stories that are just as traditional, but just for a smaller folk group, stand to tell us a lot about ourselves.



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So the more specific we can get in that view of what group is this folklore speaking for and to, the more accurate our crystal ball can be, to say, "I need to understand these people. I need to understand the collective worldview of this group so that I know how to move forward."

Folklore is defined in a lot of arenas by its triviality, it's commonality. Everyone knows it. Why would you go to college to learn it? Yeah, well, we don't go to college to learn the folklore. We go to a folklore program to learn how to think about the folklore, how to identify it, how to process it, how to analyze it.

That, I think, is one of our biggest obstacles is that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of what folklore means, when really, it's speaking to this much more abstract symbolic interactionism while also being the discipline that studies fairy tales and urban legends and jump rope rhymes. It's both of those things together. Unfortunately, that sometimes pulls down the standing of the discipline when what it really should be doing is pulling up our understanding of the importance of fairy tales and jump rope rhymes.

Mason Amadeus:

Right, and that fundamental misunderstanding is what broke my brain wide open in the past year of working on this show because I had no idea at all. It's so fascinating.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Oh, good.

[Sound of electronic call failing]

Perry Carpenter:

What?

Mason Amadeus:

No. No.

Perry Carpenter:

Aw.



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Mason Amadeus:

No, no, no, no, no. Why?

Perry Carpenter:

Arg.

Mason Amadeus:

We are just cursed today.

My phone died.

Mason Amadeus:

Android or iPhone?

Perry Carpenter:

iPhone.

Mason Amadeus:

I have a charger.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, sweet.

Mason Amadeus:

Here.

Perry Carpenter:

Mason, this is an iPod charger.

Mason Amadeus:



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They take the same thing, right?

Perry Carpenter:

No, like from 2006.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, Apple and their proprietary stuff, yeah?

Perry Carpenter:

They're a lot narrower now.

Mason Amadeus:

What? Let me see. Ugh.

Perry Carpenter:

Have you never... Wait? You know what? I don't care. Does your phone have a hotspot?

Mason Amadeus:

I think so. I've never used it. Let me-

[Transition sound to ad break]

Perry Carpenter:

And your password is "partycats"?

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah.

Perry Carpenter:

partycats...



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Mason Amadeus:

Yep.

Perry Carpenter:

... all lowercase. Not even a special character?

Mason Amadeus:

I'd like to think that I am the special character. Okay. We're-

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah.

[Electronic 'reconnecting call' sound]

Mason Amadeus:

Hey, Dr. McNeill.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Am I back yet?

Mason Amadeus:

Yes. Yes. Sorry about that. Had a little hiccup.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

It is quite possibly my connection, which has been known to be unstable in the past. I apologize if that's the case.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, no worries. We're back now.



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Perry Carpenter:

So we talked about the criticality for bringing folklore into even greater popularity and the academic side of that. Part of that is because we live in an increasingly digital world, as well. So why don't we talk for a little bit about folk groups on platforms, some of that dynamism that comes in I think we see expressed differently on different platforms. One of the interesting things that we're hoping to look at is how does TikTok differ from Tumblr, and how does Tumblr differ from Facebook versus 4chan or something else, and what groups form there? But then, also, what is viral?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Yes.

Perry Carpenter:

What do you think about those different platforms? And have you done any study about the differences in how they enable or minimize the ability to participate?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

Absolutely. The different platforms that we have available to us 100% develop their own folk cultures, their own sets of expectations, norms, lore, folk speech, customs, all of that stuff. And even it's more granular than the platform level. You can tell the difference, and not just visually, even in just the way people anticipate communicating between something like 4chan and Reddit. But even on Reddit, there are different folk groups for different communities. Different subreddits have their own folkloric nature and traditions, their own vernacular culture. There's almost no limit to the granularity of it.

In order for folklore to arise, there has to be a level of interaction. The defining difference between something that goes viral and something that is a meme, something that goes viral is an individual thing that a lot of people see, that idea of a single entity broadcasting to many. And the thing that is broadcast is the same. That is something going viral.

It becomes mimetic or folkloric when it begins to evolve. When I get it, and instead of just forwarding on what I got, I make my own version of it. And different platforms have different affordances for doing that. TikTok is one of the best because TikTok lets me take the pieces I want. I can take the soundtrack. I can take the original video, and I can do a duet. I can take a comment.



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Comments are one of the places that we so easily forget about. We think of the main content of a piece of social media, like a TikTok, and we forget how much folkloric work is happening in the comments. And then we get responses and we get whole trains of people communicating through this. So different technologies, allowing these different affordances for us to engage and to recreate.

The folkloric process is one of recreation. If I watch a great episode of TV, and I want my friend to watch it, I don't act it out for them. I just say, "Hey, let's get on Hulu and watch it together." And the version they see is identical to the one I saw. Whereas, if I do want my friends to hear a creepy story that I heard, I absolutely recreate it for them. I tell it to them. I redo it, and that is them hearing the real thing.

That really gets at the nature of what we mean when we say there is no authoritative original of a piece of folklore. We might be able to find the first, but that doesn't make it the most authoritative. The most authoritative is the one that is at the other end of that evolutionary process where we have started to see which elements are really the ones that speak to the largest number of people. So a platform that enables that is going to produce a lot of folkloric content because it's handing people their abilities to engage with that dynamic recreation.

Perry Carpenter:

As people are able to more and more quickly modify or move around ideas on those platforms, one of the negative side effects that comes, I think, is the potential weaponization of some of that. Can you talk a little bit about mimetic warfare and the dark side of memes?

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

What's interesting is that when we think of weaponization of this, mimetic warfare and things like this, what we're talking about, again, is not necessarily a new process, but thanks to the affordances of this medium, the internet, it's a process that goes faster and reaches farther than it has before. So we see a real leaning into this opportunity to indulge some of our worst instincts. This is where the nature of the medium really comes into play.

I don't know if you're both familiar or not with a concept called Poe's law. Is this something that's familiar to you, the internet law that is Poe's law?

Perry Carpenter:

I'm going to claim ignorance.



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Mason Amadeus:

It has floated by my understanding, at one point. I cannot remember it now, but those words are familiar.

Dr. Lynne S. McNeill:

The basic idea of Poe's law, on the internet, is that there is no opinion expressed on the internet that is not so extreme in some version of itself that it can't be distinguished from satire. It's basically this idea that anything on the internet is potentially both 100% sincere and completely satirical at the same time because there is no level of ridiculousness that tells us, "Oh, yeah. No, this is absolutely satire." It is always possible that, no, that's someone's true and heartfelt opinion. We have to allow for that true ambivalence in any interaction we find.

What this does, of course, is it complicates the nature of something like trolling. When we have people who are looking to stir up anger, to get people's emotions running high, to be offensive, to be challenging, to be dangerous in the way they approach people, we cannot just say, "Oh, this person is a troll." We want to. We do, sometimes. We dismiss people that way, but we often find that we, then, are driven to these increasingly greater heights to respond in a like manner.

And we get these situations that early internet scholars talked about where the anonymity of the internet causes us to behave badly in ways we wouldn't, face to face with people. I think we've almost hit this unfortunate turn where now it's like, "Oh. Nope, some of us will do that in person." As we spend more and more of our time and more and more of our social engagement in these digital spaces, we normalize these weaponized modes of communication.

I mean, when we think about communicating through memes, and we think about the heightened antagonism of them, this has happened in the past. This has happened with traditional wisdom like Proverbs. People would have debates that pitted things like, "Look before you leap" against "He who hesitates is lost." Here are two opposing forms of traditional wisdom. We have that model, pre-internet, in our society. And now we have this way of memeing ourselves into debates about meaning, debates about value, and we see some of the most extreme opinion that we can have coming out in this way.

I mean, Pepe the Frog is a really excellent example of this. Is Pepe a hate symbol? Yes and no. Was Pepe originally a hate symbol? No. Did he become one? Yes. Did he also exist in ways where he wasn't? Yes. Does a benign use of Pepe as, say, a reaction on Twitch, does that constitute a hate crime? No. How do we know? I don't know, context. Twitch being a very specific platform that has a very specific means of



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using emotes to communicate with people, Pepe the Frog means something different there than in other places, like on 4chan. Different platforms use the same content in different ways, and then mainstream media comes along and tries to say, "This image means this. This image says this."

And that's really hard to say because we are allowed to exist in these siloed communities in a way that we haven't been able to do before. There was an early assumption, that has also borne out, that the internet would help people by helping them find like-minded others. So that if you grew up with a non-mainstream identity in a very small town, and you felt out of place, you would be able to find companionship, empathy, other like-minded people in online spaces. And that was true, and that was so important to so many people living, physically, in small towns where they felt they were not understood or appreciated.

But similarly, it turns out there were people living in diverse metropolitan areas who hated that and used the internet to shrink their world rather than expand it, and find people who are similarly closed-minded as themselves in online spaces, who could then largely limit their social interaction to those more closed-minded people.

That, I think, was something that maybe only a handful of people really anticipated. A lot of the early negative assumptions of the internet were that it would become a tool of institutions. It would be run by tyrants. I don't know how many people really anticipated that it would be the darkest nature of just everyday people, collectively, that might become the tyrant. And that is an...

[Electronic fizzle and thud]

Mason Amadeus:

Are you serious?

Perry Carpenter:

Did your phone die too?

[Sounds of Mason frantically typing]

Mason Amadeus:



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No. No, I'm still at like 30%. It's the whole computer. It's frozen.

Perry Carpenter:

Just give it a second. Maybe it will... *Blue Screen*. Ugh.

Mason Amadeus:

Well, that's a pretty definitive end.

Perry Carpenter:

I will send Lynne an email and explain.

Mason Amadeus:

We did at least cover a lot of ground.

Perry Carpenter:

That's true, and more than enough for an episode.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, if not two.

Perry Carpenter:

But I guess that's our season finale for Season 1, folks.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. Honestly, kind of fitting that we had so many technical hitches.

Perry Carpenter:

I know, a podcast about digital folklore that can't get its digital crap together.

Mason Amadeus:



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Yeah.

Perry Carpenter:

You know what? I think that leaves us back for that opening where we might want to do something more unplugged, every now and then.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, maybe simplify things a little bit.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, just every now and then. Not for everything, but every now and then.

Mason Amadeus:

Well, I guess that's it. I mean, Lynne was great.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. The interview was great, even if it did end a little abruptly.

Mason Amadeus:

I remember ages ago we were talking about doing a listener survey between seasons. Is that something you're still into?

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, I think so. I think we can get that together after you edit episode 10, and then maybe drop it and a trailer for Season 2, so like a week or so after.

Mason Amadeus:

Sure, that sounds good.

Perry Carpenter:



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Cool, and I can start putting together a list of questions because I know you won't.

Mason Amadeus:

I just wish there was something more like, I don't know, *narratively* satisfying to end the season.

Perry Carpenter:

That makes sense.

[Mason's cell phone begins ringing and vibrating]

Mason Amadeus:

One second.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, you should really have that do not disturb on when we're doing interviews.

Mason Amadeus:

It is.

Perry Carpenter:

Really?

Mason Amadeus:

I just, I have some people come through it, though.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh.

Mason Amadeus:



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I need to take this. It'll be real quick.

Perry Carpenter:

Sure.

[Mason takes the call]

Mason Amadeus:

Hello?

Dr. Sphynkyll:

Yes, hello. This is Dr. Sphynkyll. Just calling to let you know that Digby is ready for pickup this afternoon.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, excellent. Digby is done at the vet.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh. It's been like a month.

Dr. Sphynkyll:

Yeah, so if you could just swing on by later today and pick him up, that would be great.

Mason Amadeus:

Absolutely.

Dr. Sphynkyll:

Oh. Also, Digby wanted me to pass along a message.

Mason Amadeus:



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Okay. Okay, sure.

Dr. Sphynkyl:

He says it's Digby with a Y. So...

Mason Amadeus:

Oh. I guess I'll have to re-embroider the polo.

Dr. Sphynkyl:

Yeah, sure, whatever. We close at 5:00.

Perry Carpenter:

So Digby is coming back?

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah.

Perry Carpenter:

I didn't want to harp on it, but you never told me why he had to go in the first place. What's up?

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, right, right. Well, let's just say, you'll see.

[Theme music kicks-in as Digby reads the final credits]

Digby:

Thanks for listening to Digital Folklore. If you like the show, join the Discord. It's a fun way to connect with the other listeners as well as the two idiots who host this thing.



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A special thanks to Dr. Lynne McNeill for lending her insight and expertise this episode. Dr. McNeill is the author of *Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies*. She also teaches graduate and undergraduate classes at Utah State University, and she's the head of the Folklore program there. You can find links and more info in the show notes of this episode.

A thank you as well to our voice actors in this episode. Dr. Sphynkyl was played by Tucker Bettez from the podcast PodCube. I'm Digby, and I'm played by Brooke Jennett from the podcast Thirteen. You can find links to our other work in the show notes too.

If you love this podcast, consider supporting it on Patreon at patreon.com/digitalfolklore. If enough people do that, maybe I could afford to eat more than just plastic.

Digital Folklore is a production of 8th Layer Media and is distributed by Realm. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you in Season 2.

Oh, and keep an eye on your feed. Perry and Mason have some extra content in the works.

[Theme music ends]

...Was that good? I'm not really used to the whole talking thing yet.

Mason Amadeus:

You did great. Doing great, Digby.