



Digital Folklore

Unplugged ep4: Chelsey Weber-Smith

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

[Opening music]

Perry Carpenter:

Hi, I'm Perry Carpenter, one of the hosts of the Digital Folklore Podcast. If you've been following us for a while, you know that we're between seasons right now, getting season two all lined out and ready to launch on September 4th. And to be honest, we're getting really excited about it.

But while we're all waiting for that, how about another Digital Folklore Unplugged episode? These Unplugged episodes are all about stripping away the fancy production elements so that we can give you access to raw or only slightly edited interviews with our folklore experts.

On this episode of Digital Folklore Unplugged, my co-host Mason and I had the pleasure of speaking with one of our all-time podcast idols, Chelsey Weber-Smith.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I'm Chelsey Weber-Smith.

Perry Carpenter:

Chelsey is the creator and host of the American Hysteria Podcast, a show that probes the depths of our collective anxieties, our shared stories, our cultural myths and legends, and even those mass panics that occasionally sweep through the nation.

To say that American Hysteria is a podcast is actually doing it a disservice. It is a journey into the heart of American culture, into the intricacies of our shared psyche. Every episode pushes us to question and reconsider the narratives that we have been fed, the myths that we have been told and the truths we think we hold dear.

Okay, let's get unplugged.

[Music fades -- transition to main interview]

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I'm Chelsey Weber-Smith and I host a podcast called American Hysteria, and we look at urban legends, moral panics, and conspiracy theories through a cultural lens and try to trace a through line through our American history.



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Perry Carpenter:

Amazing. So I want to know a little bit about your background. What brings you to this topic and what was the story behind the show?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

A lot of different factors pulled me into a curiosity about what I consider metaphors in American history, because urban legends, conspiracy theories too, all these things are expressing something that is otherwise inexpressible. And my background is actually in poetry. I have a master's degree in poetry. And so in some ways it's a logical jump, even though it doesn't seem like it to start to look at these metaphors in our culture that illuminate something about our shared psychology and journey through history and of course can tell us a lot about what's happening right now as well.

And the other way I come into this is I grew up with a little bit of a conspiracy theorist background from my dad, and then from my own conspiracy theory background more around the 2000s, which was a different scene, but part of the show is me coming out of my own fantastical beliefs and investigating them in a different way.

Perry Carpenter:

Nice. So I don't know that I've dug into those bits of your show. Have you talked about which theories that you adhered to back in the day?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, if you listen to our Illuminati episode or our End of the World episode, I even interview my dad in our End of The World episode and we talk about his 2012 because it was a lot of 2012 stuff, if you remember that.

Perry Carpenter:

Is that the Mayan calendar?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

The Mayan calendar ending, End of The World, Age of Aquarius, new age, new age stuff.

Perry Carpenter:



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Interviewing your dad and talking through, is that pretty cathartic?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, it's a lot of stuff. It's probably not great for this show to go into it, but I think you'll get it when you listen to it. It was a lot of cuts, a lot of trying to put something together there. But yeah, I think it was more interesting maybe than cathartic.

Perry Carpenter:

Okay, okay.

Mason Amadeus:

I'm interested that you came to it with a poetry background and like you said, it is a logical step because poetry is using language to describe bigger ideas and bigger emotions and elements of humanity indirectly. So is that right, and that's like how that is a good lens to look at all the subjects you're talking about now?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, I think so. And I think it's a lot about storytelling because the poetry I like has elements of storytelling in it as well. And it's an ancient practice to describe fables and different things that are the backbones of different cultures.

Perry Carpenter:

So when you're doing episode planning or when you're looking back at your past episodes, what do you think the core ingredients are for these episodes that really stand out in your memory as being great episodes from your past?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I think I always love to uncover a forgotten story in American history or something that is obscure that had a big impact on culture because even though we remember these big cultural touchstones, you can go back and trace any history and find these stories that were enormous at the time and just for whatever reason, didn't stick in our memory, our collective memory. So I love to discover those stories. And then I also love when we can uncover something interesting about human psychology or biology



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that illuminates why that particular maybe moral panic or conspiracy theory or urban legends are coming to fruition in a meaningful way.

Perry Carpenter:

As you're thinking about where you want to go with the show when you're doing your planning, how do you figure out what you're going to talk about? Because it seems like you have seasons that cover some general themes. You do some very, very deep research in pulling everything together. I was super impressed about the story you're able to tell in an episode and all these threads that you pull together, but how would you describe your workflow? How does everything come together? What do you use to accomplish it?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Well, the best part of making the show for me is the research process because it's a treasure hunt and it's fun and you're finding something in one book and it takes you to another book, which takes you to a book written in the 1800s, which takes you to a quote that you're shocked by, that is a huge descriptor of a time period. And we usually go chronologically. We start with what was happening in the earliest parts of colonized America, and sometimes we go before that as well, but generally we'll talk about the Puritans and we'll see what the heck they were up to in terms of the context of whatever we're talking about. And then I just go through time and try to understand each topic through the lens of the major things that are happening in history.

And so in a way, we're telling the same story again and again, just from all these different angles that hopefully paint a more complete picture of our history in general beyond just our topics, just to learn history in a way that's entertaining because history is so fun and it's taught in such a boring way, not always, of course, but in a lot of ways. So I think the research process, it's just a giant load of information and I guess it's like a sculpture. You have a giant stone and you just whittle it away and slowly it reveals itself. It's almost a process I don't fully control. And of course, I have great research assistants. My brother Riley Smith, and then my partner Miranda Zickler are both a huge part of the research and structuring of the show.

Mason Amadeus:

Is it just a lot of chasing rabbit holes and being surprised and finding more rabbit holes in those surprises?



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Chelsey Weber-Smith:

That's a great way to put it. That's exactly what it's like. You just never know what you're going to get, and it's really exciting in that way and it never gets boring. And it's always things that challenge my preconceptions about history and the stories that are told to us from any angle are so simplified that it takes away from the chaos of history, as chaotic as it is right now and all the forces that come together to create these important cultural and historical moments that we just forget and we don't give enough credence to those complications. And I actually really enjoy finding them even when it's challenging to my personal beliefs.

Perry Carpenter:

That is the really weird, interesting thing that has come out to me time and time again listening to your episodes, is that there's always something a little bit shocking that challenges the way that you remember something. One of the ones that I listened to getting ready for this was... And I avoided it early on because I was like, "I don't know why I'd want to listen to that." And then I finally listened to it, was your one on snuff films.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

It's a fun one.

Perry Carpenter:

Because you just see that in a title. You're like, "I don't know that that's something I want to listen to right now." But it was fascinating to realize that there's not really any evidence of them actually existing, and that it was started as an offhanded comment in a book that was then picked up on and amplified. And then the way that we circle in on things and add more evidence ourselves just by talking about fragments of evidence that existed before. The thing that it made me wonder is because in some ways, you can go down, like Mason said, lots of little rabbit holes discovering these new things and being challenged.

Does it give you a sense of empathy? You look at some of the horrible things that have happened over the past few years with people who have gone down rabbit holes the wrong way. Does it give you a sense of understanding or empathy for those kind of people, or do you see it differently somehow?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:



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Oh, no. I am filled with complicated amounts of empathy from this show. I think that the most important thing that I've learned and that I hope to give out into the world is that we should try to punch up as much as we can because the people who are, I would say suffering through an affliction of propagandic belief are people who often are hurting and suffering and looking for meaning in a culture that's this fragmented and stoked by media outrage that makes a bunch of money for people who genuinely don't really care about what we think or do as long as it gives more money in the attention economy.

So I guess I don't see a lot of value in punching it at those people when I see it as a lot of manipulation from powers that be. I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but there are powers that be. And something that we came to during making the Westboro Baptist Church episode, I'm not sure if you listen to that, but you might remember them.

Perry Carpenter:

I listened to part of it, yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

That's the next one I'm going to listen to.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Well, talk about complicated empathy, but we came to this idea, and there's a term that says depiction is not endorsement. So in a movie, that might be considered problematic because something bad happens, it doesn't mean if you depict something in a film that you somehow believe that to be right. And I guess what we think at American Hysteria is that empathy is not endorsement. So I can have empathy for someone without endorsing their beliefs or hopefully doing anything to allow those beliefs to continue to proliferate. But I also, through all of my studying of psychology, know that the only way you get places with someone is through some kind of empathetic interaction.

And I'm not saying I like that, but show me someone who's been yelled into changing their opinion or shamed? That's not true. It happens. But yeah, I guess I've found that the people I'm really angry at are the people that have power, and I don't really want to make any more enemies. That's how I feel.

Mason Amadeus:

What's the expression? Like the banality of evil, the people who it's really just we're making money.



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Chelsey Weber-Smith:

And again, that's another big thing we found is just that exact phrase.

Mason Amadeus:

I am curious though, of how the show from launch to where it is now, how that journey has been as a whole and how you assembled a team, or if you've assembled a team? What's going on behind the curtain of American Hysteria? How has that journey been? In 60 seconds, no pressure.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Ready, set, go. I think I could do it in 60 seconds. A lot of it just happens in a closet. But yeah, we started with a company that eventually we split from, and it became an independent show, and it's been an independent show since then. And we partner with ad agencies, as I mentioned, but it started out with just really just me and then the person who is supervising me working on that together, and a couple of my friends doing voice acting like Will Rogers, who's still our voice actor. And we were working on some other podcast stuff there. So I was learning, we actually worked on a podcast with Jenny Slate called Earth Break. And yeah, we just were a little ragtag production team there then.

So I learned a lot working for a company and doing a variety, marketing, PR, all that. Just whatever they threw at me, I did. But after that, when we became independent... Well, my brother came on and he's a brilliant little... I was going to say a brilliant little guy, but he's in his 20s. He's a brilliant guy who's great at research, and I just knew I wanted to work with him because we've always worked together on artistic creative projects. And then I met my partner partway through making American Hysteria about three years ago, and then she joined the team. And then we've had our same producer, Rod from Clear Commo Studios this whole time, and he's been doing sound for us, and we were just magically placed together by the company all those years ago. And yeah, he's still around, and we're still all together working on this and dragging through here, just trying to make it as an Indie podcast.

Mason Amadeus:

Is this everybody's full-time gig for the most part?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

No. It's my full-time gig, and then they all do other stuff. My partner's a musician, and she's in several bands including a Fleetwood Mac tribute band recently. So that's been really fun. Yeah.



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Perry Carpenter:

Oh, wow.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, cool.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

But yeah, my brother also does other kinds of work too. And then I also do other types of work, but this is the main thing I do.

Mason Amadeus:

Is it your partner playing the music on Suburbs? The song Under the Cowboy Tears tab on your site? Or sorry, Country Boy Tears, the song Suburbs?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Oh, no, that's me.

Mason Amadeus:

Is that you playing too?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah. And then people in my band. Yeah, that's my secret music. I don't do a lot of music stuff in the public eye anymore. But yeah, I used to do a lot of folk punk.

Mason Amadeus:

I thought it sounded really cool.

Perry Carpenter:

That's so cool.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:



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Well, I'm glad. Thank you. I'm glad. I'm learning to sing better. My partner is an amazing, amazing vocalist, so she teaches me to sing better.

Mason Amadeus:

You said your secret music. I cannot resist a tab on the top of a website that says, "Country Boy Tears." You have to know what that is, right?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I know, you got to click it. I know. What am I even saying? I do want to record an album soon, though. I'm going to do it with my brother.

Mason Amadeus:

I'm curious. You have a producer, so you don't have to do the post prod side, you just do the research, the editing, the presentation, and then ship the parts off to Rod?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Basically, yeah. I do what I call the master track. That's probably not the right thing to call it, but it's all the narration, which I edit into its final form. So he doesn't have to go through and cut up my mess-ups and everything. So I send him a final narration track as well as a final track with all of the clips. So then he's mixing it, adding music, but the basic structure comes from me and my brother and Miranda.

Mason Amadeus:

So you are cutting through all of those clips and all of the different sound bites?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yes.

Mason Amadeus:

Okay, because having not worked on a show like that until recently, that's a big chunk of it is logging all those-



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Perry Carpenter:

That is a chore.

Mason Amadeus:

All those bits.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, it's a lot. But I'm a control freak.

Mason Amadeus:

Is there an organization strategy?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

No, it's just pure chaos.

Mason Amadeus:

I think that sounds like mine.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, it's just absolute chaos. What's yours, Perry?

Perry Carpenter:

Mine is absolute chaos. So actually, I use Descript for a lot of it so that I can keyword search through everything and then pull clips.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

That's smart.

Perry Carpenter:

But it is a lot of, "Holy crap, I've got a deadline that I'm trying to manage towards. Let me find clips that match this and then build voiceover around it."



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Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Oh my gosh, the clips.

Mason Amadeus:

I can save this as untitled.wave on my desktop for now. I'll move it later. That's fine.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, right.

Perry Carpenter:

"Wait. Why is there untitled.wave.43? Oh, crap."

Mason Amadeus:

Exactly.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, so there's lots of that. So for you then, from the beginning of when you decide to start creating an episode to the completion, how many hours do you think you invest in that?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I have no idea. I have no idea. Oftentimes we'll be working on two episodes at once. Right?

Perry Carpenter:

Right.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

So I'll be projecting myself ahead a little bit, or Riley and Miranda will be starting to get some idea about whatever's coming next, and then I'll just be buried. I don't have a process. It's just whatever I feel like doing in that moment, and then somehow it comes together. It feels like a divine hand guiding it, because I don't know what is going on most of the time, but somehow I manage.



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Perry Carpenter:

I'm pretty sure we have the same process.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, I was going to say, I can relate to that so much, and I don't want to.

Perry Carpenter:

That is the, "Let me pull everything together and just be like a kid tearing through Christmas presents, and then somehow organization finds it a little bit," and then it's just cutting away until something doesn't sound completely wrong anymore.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Definitely. It's really important to me in this show, and I'm sure it's important to you as well, to tie together all of the threads because there's a lot of threads happening, and that's the poetry thing too. And also, just learning about... It comes back to being in high school and learning the structure of an essay, that is always coming back in my head. It's like, "Okay, now in the conclusion, you need to pull together your three paragraphs and you need to finish your thesis." And so I think my English teachers are always in the back of my head helping me structure things as well.

Mason Amadeus:

"In this episode, I will."

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Pretty much. Yeah.

Perry Carpenter:

As you're working through an episode and you're assembling tape and even starting your initial voiceover, do you write everything out at once or do you find your way through it, record a little bit of voiceover, add some clips, find your way through a little bit more, and then finally do the conclusion based on everything that you've decided to keep?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:



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Each episode's different, and I've recently changed my process of recording. So it's like I record all at once, whereas I used to edit as I recorded. So instead, I just have all this raw audio, then I cut it up and then put it together. But usually I'll record over a couple of days. So as I go along, I'll have a finished script, but I'll know that things are going to change as I'm reading it out loud and as I'm just having new ideas even then, making different connections. I think there's something, when you speak something, it metabolizes in your brain differently.

I'll go through and a lot of things will change, and I'll say, "Oh, I don't want this paragraph anymore." Or, "Oh, you know what? I just remembered something that needs to go in. It's got to go in." And then at the end, the conclusion... Oftentimes the thing that I'll record last is the final line, the final sentence I won't come up with because you got to kill on the last sentence, man. You got to kill on it. So that's the thing I think that tortures me. It's just making sure that that last image, and that's the poetry thing, the last image that you leave people with is going to be what they take away in the end. So that takes the longest because it feels the most important.

Perry Carpenter:

Nice. Well, you can definitely feel the poetry influence now that you mentioned that. I can definitely feel that as I'm thinking through it.

Mason Amadeus:

It gives me hope that your process is so chaotic, and yet your show is so beautifully organized and presented so well that maybe we can pull it off.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

That's so nice of you.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. You would never know that it is virtually the same controlled, fearful chaos that I throw myself into.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Oh, yeah.



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Mason Amadeus:

Well, because some of the other podcasters we've talked to have a regimented, "I do this, then I do this, then I put this in an outline, then I revise the outline." And so...

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Bless their hearts. Yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

I know.

Perry Carpenter:

We said we want to do something Creepypasta and dark themes. So we were hoping to avoid Slenderman, and then the more research we did, every academic was raising Slenderman up as like this example of what digital folklore is capable of. When somebody says Slenderman, what comes to mind and what makes Slenderman an important part of contemporary folklore?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I think you can see how an urban legend is like a community project in a way. And the whispered way that we've told stories about other types of boogeymen, it has this quality where you can almost add your own spin. And I'm sure that we all remember being kids and hearing some kind of urban legend. And I remember there was a supposed child kidnapper in our neighborhood when I was growing up, which is its own story, and there was in fact, not a child kidnapper, but I just remember exaggerating the story and saying, "I saw him and he was doing this." And I just remember making that choice and saying, "I'm going to add to this. It's going to make me cool." I have no idea what the motivation was, but it was a way to add your own spin and be part of the story.

And I think that that's what's happening with Creepypasta, even though it's more overtly untrue. And yet when you're uninformed of that or you're younger, you're in elementary school, you're in middle school, and you haven't passed that liminal threshold into where you're no longer as ready to believe in monsters and other fantastical things. So Slenderman is showing that that's just going to happen online, and there's always going to be personal additions to these legends, and that will blow them up bigger and bigger and give them a lot more substance to them, and then also teach us a lot more about what we're scared of as a culture, even if it's hard to figure out what's being expressed there.



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Mason Amadeus:

That ties really well into something. We spoke with Vivian Asimos about that, who has a doctorate in digital narrative. And one of the things that she had mentioned was that monsters typically represent categorical breakdowns, and those categories that are being broken are usually indicative of things that a culture sees as needing protection or there are anxieties around.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, yeah, totally. And with Slenderman, it's hard to figure out. And something I love to study and talk about is the uncanny valley, the response that we have as humans to things that look human but are not, humanoid things like dolls or clowns or mannequins or things that are... They unnerve us. They trigger strange feelings in us, and everybody knows what I'm talking about, but I'm really interested in that phenomenon. And there's something about Slenderman that does trigger that primordial fear that we have about these inhuman humanoids.

But other than that, I'm not sure. I guess I'm just not sure about what Slenderman represents. He's inviting kids into the woods, right? That's classic stuff right there, but it's not parents telling the story. It's not parents saying, "Oh, don't go in the woods, or Slenderman will get you." It's kids creating their own boogeyman, but they love him too.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, there's like a bring your own fear type of thing with that. Right?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, totally.

Perry Carpenter:

Is his face is blank. It's like a Rorschach test for whatever you already fear. Now, you mentioned the woods, which is one of the things that Slenderman is known for, not everything, because I think that the community around Slenderman has broken them out and put them in other spaces as well. But the woods, when you talk about legend and folklore, even in your show, when you go back and talk about the puritanical roots for lots of things, the woods are very significant in that. Why do woods keep popping up over and over and over?



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Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Well, I think that there's your basic biological reason that the woods are dangerous. You can't see what's around you. We all have animal brains, so when there are places for predators to pop out and get us, we're not going to want to go in there. But I also think if we were looking at it on a sociological level, that for us, especially in our Anglo-Saxon tradition in America, we like to reject the natural world out of fear. And that's why a lot of racial commentaries by powerful white people will be about people of color having these animalistic traits or the idea of the jungle creeping into the suburbs, if you've ever heard that about... Yeah, just it's a metaphor for the chaos, I think, that we want to repress and repress and repress and repress, which includes our societal others.

So I think the woods just is like the Jungian shadow in a way where you don't know what's going to happen in there. You shouldn't go in there. You should stay in the civilized world, which as we know perhaps isn't as civilized as we pretend it is.

Mason Amadeus:

I feel like there's an interesting point/pivot, I guess, to be made there of the woods in folklore and all these stories and being this rejection of the natural world, like you said, and also embodiment of chaos. It's almost as though the internet itself as a whole is the new woods that we're scared of, or at least for a period of time, there was that. But there's irony in that because it's a holy artificial world that exists purely in electricity. And it'll remind me of a quote that Vivian had also said of when Momo came out, Momo wasn't so much the monster as Momo was indicative of the internet as a monster, and the internet being the woods that Slenderman emerged from.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Ooh, I love that. Internet is the new woods. It is, it's chaos. It's a pure and absolute chaos in here. So I think you're absolutely right, and Slenderman is that boogeyman in the woods and parents have a lot to fear on the internet, but it may not be Slenderman and it may not be Momo.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. Because all the moral panics that were spawned around these things, and yet they're definitively not real.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:



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Yeah. They're just completely not real. Yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

I feel like you would have a lot of really good insight on the moral panic aspect that spun out around Slenderman and also Momo.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah. Moral panics I have learned are often symbolic representations of fears that we have, and they also act as a sleight of hand so that we can be distracted by a more interesting problem and not have to address structural issues in society and in family systems and things like that. So something like Momo, you have this creature that is drawing children into this mental health crisis where it's like, "Oh, this monster is convincing our children that they need to commit suicide," when we have a very real issue with suicide in young people.

So it's a great sensational boogeyman to say, "Oh, the problem is that there are these really bizarre individuals out there," whether they be supernatural or just some creepy saw villain that are encouraging children to go down this path when it very well could be parents themselves who are not addressing mental health issues or who may even be causing them, or at least allowing them to go unchecked and be distracted by these fun stories. It's no different than the stories that we got in the 90s.

Mason Amadeus:

It is like these boogeymen that pop up, and then we put all of our attention on that rather than addressing the actual root anxiety they point towards.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, that sleight of hand comment is so interesting because it lets you externalize an issue rather than look into a mirror.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yes, that's absolutely right. Yep.

Mason Amadeus:



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And there's also, and you mentioned this in the snuff films episode, typically a lack of actual substance in most of the things that cause moral panics. Slenderman was a little different. There was actual harm committed there, but with Momo, at least in all of the digging that we could do, there was no definitive harm actually linked to Momo. The appearing in kids videos being edited in didn't seem to be happening, except in that one reference clip until after that news was made, and then people started doing that. Is that a common thread that there's typically not substance behind most of the things that get turned into moral panics, or have you encountered anything like that? I don't have the base of knowledge to speak to that.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah. I think you can take something. The most basic moral panic is stranger danger. I think it's a great way to look at a moral panic because there's always been an issue with child sexual abuse and things that harm children. And yet that harm in the 80s and 90s was presented as a roving stranger in a van offering candy and kidnapping children, which almost never happened. But what there was a lot of are issues of children being harmed in their own homes and communities, which is very hard to address. It's very hard to talk about. It's very hard to have any idea how to solve. And so if we have this sensational villain and sensational issue, we can, again, yeah, like you said, externalize the problem away from us, and then deal with this abstract problem that isn't necessarily completely untrue. Children were kidnapped, Adam Walsh, Johnny Gosch. It was huge news and it was terrifying. It was so scary.

And so there's a lot of good reason for people to be scared of such a terrifying crime. And yet we'll take those stories, those very, very few stories that nonetheless happened, nonetheless matter. And then we'll use that story, that rare story as proof that this is some kind of widespread issue, and then ignore what I consider to be boring issues, boring and difficult, complicated, not simple. Simple is, "Arrest that man in the van." And what's not simple is we have generational trauma. So it's a sleight of hand and it's convenient for a lot of different types of people, for sure.

Mason Amadeus:

Both difficult and does not serve the attention economy to gain that kind of traction and things like that.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

No. Yeah.

Mason Amadeus:



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Perry, both you and I really liked the Woozle effect, had not heard of it until you described it.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Can you give us an overview of that? Because I was immediately drawn in. Well, first I listened to the context episode on pornography, and you hinted at what would be coming in the snuff film, and you basically forecasted that Winnie the Pooh would be involved at some point. So I listened to the end for the Winnie the Pooh reference.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, you like that, right?

Perry Carpenter:

And it paid off really, really well. Can you walk us through some of that?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, I definitely can. I really liked that I could force people to listen because they had to know what was going to-

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, I was waiting with bated breath.

Mason Amadeus:

It was expertly done.

Perry Carpenter:

Wondering what that red shirt deviant was going to do?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I know. He is nasty.

Mason Amadeus:



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It was really, really artfully done, the buildup to that.

Perry Carpenter:

And I don't know how I've never heard that phrase before because again, that's like the stuff that I just eat up all the time.

Mason Amadeus:

Especially in security.

Perry Carpenter:

You gave me a missing part of myself. I feel more complete now after this episode.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I know. I didn't know about it either. And again, yeah, it's like I've been doing this for so long, and there's so many effects like that because anybody can make an effect-

Mason Amadeus:

Right.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

And say it's an effect.

Perry Carpenter:

It's like looking at the cognitive bias chart that has all these spindly things coming out, and there's over 200 of them in there. So it may even be listed on that chart, and I've never looked at it.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

The Woozle effect is something that comes from Winnie the Pooh, and that's the story in which Pooh and Piglet are walking through a snowy forest, and they're looking for this magical creature called a Woozle, and they see footprints in the snow. So they start following those footprints, and soon they start seeing more footprints in the snow, and they're like, "Oh, there's even more Woozles that we're



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looking for." They just keep going and going and trying to catch up with these creatures. Eventually, they have Christopher Robin come in and the omnipresent God that he is lets them know that they have actually been following their own footprints. So they've been going in circles thinking that they're following something real when it's actually fictional, and they're adding their own evidence to it, "As they go."

And so that story is used to explain how one piece of evidence, something that's untrue or misinterpreted or a story that's told incorrectly or misunderstood in some way serves as a piece of foundational evidence. And then our cognitive bias, we want to believe that. So we're going to add our own evidence and build off this. And even in academia and academics going to say something like, "It's widely understood that X, Y, and Z," and we use snuff films as an example. It's widely understood that there's this underground industry producing murder films, but that's all based on a single line written in a book about Charles Manson way back in the early 70s.

So from there, we had different kinds of groups seize on that story, feminists as well as fundamentalist Christians to tell the story that there was this horrible industry going on because it served different purposes. And so it was easy to want to believe that, and then to find ways to spin it to your own audience and build on it often without knowing. It's not like a dishonest process. People believe it genuinely, often, not always, but a lot of people believe it genuinely, and it just takes on a life of its own from there. Like an urban legend.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Well, it turns into footnote pasta, right?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Absolutely.

Perry Carpenter:

Is, "I've seen this one thing. I'm going to reference that." And then an article references the original thing, and then I referenced the article that referenced the original thing and then somebody else... So it becomes the infinite mirror's problem.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah. It's hard.



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Perry Carpenter:

You've pointed two things at each other and you just get this replicate of effect over time. So when you mentioned that in that episode, it was such a great encapsulation of that problem.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

It's so hard because, and I'm sure you guys run into this as well, I don't want to be a part of the Woozle effect. So it takes a lot of not taking things at face value. Even really famous, important works are full of errors and full of things that aren't true. And it's to no fault of the person writing it because... Maybe it is, but they didn't follow up on something because they didn't think they needed to. And so I'm always trying to say you have to follow up on this even if you believe it to be common knowledge. And a lot of times I am shocked by what is not supported by any actual evidence that we believe.

Mason Amadeus:

Even in stuff like in going through the research and notes process for this episode on Slenderman and Momo, I was making sure to dig using the way back machine and finding all the original posts, because even in something arguably not as important as a misinterpreted scientific article or something, but even something like Slenderman, there's inconsistencies in the timeline and moving forward, or people claimed that, "This happened, this happened, this was mentioned here." It is very hard to not be a part of that effect, especially if you're doing any research of any kind on the internet where it's like a Woozle trap.

Perry Carpenter:

And have a deadline.

Mason Amadeus:

And have a deadline.

Perry Carpenter:

If you have a deadline and limited energy, it's easy to go, "Well, that seems right."

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Or, "That fits what I want to say."



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Perry Carpenter:

Oh, that's it.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I got a narrative. We all have one. I'm not going to act like I'm some perfectly impartial person, but-

Perry Carpenter:

"I found the three sources that tie my story together well, make my point for me."

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

Are you familiar with Man Door, Hand Hook Car Door?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

No. No, I'm not familiar with it.

Perry Carpenter:

So it's a trollpasta that first surfaced on 4chan, and so it's somebody making fun of all the different urban legends and Creepypastas.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Like then who was phone? Right? Remember that one?

Mason Amadeus:

No, I don't, but I want to. What is that?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Okay.



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Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, look it up.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, I don't remember it, but I think it's the same kind of thing.

Mason Amadeus:

Then who was phone?

Perry Carpenter:

Right.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

[inaudible 00:40:17].

Mason Amadeus:

Okay, cool. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Look at it. It's very short.

Mason Amadeus:

It's a catchphrase associated with a subtype of Creepypasta stories that are poorly written or unintentionally funny. So that's another form of trollpasta.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, the who was phone? Yeah, it's exactly like that.



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Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Okay, I want to hear this.

Perry Carpenter:

We'll have Mason do a dramatic reading.

Mason Amadeus:

I'll do my best. It really is-

Perry Carpenter:

It's like one minute.

Mason Amadeus:

It's best absorbed through the eyes, but I'll read it verbatim.

Perry Carpenter:

It is. Yeah, there's tons of horrible grammar and spelling.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I want to hear you do it.

Mason Amadeus:

"Man and girl go out to drive under moonlight. They stop at on at a side of road. He turn to his girl and say, 'Baby, I love you very much.' 'What is it, honey?' 'Our car is broken down. I think the engine is broken. I'll walk and get some more fuel.' 'Okay, I'll stay here and look after our stereo. There have been news reports of steres being stolen.' 'Good idea. Keep the doors locked no matter what. I love you sweaty.' So the guy left to get full for the car. After two hours, the girls say, 'Where is my baby? He was supposed to be back by now.' Then the girl hear a scratching sound and a voice say, 'Let me in.' The girl doesn't do it. And then after a while, she goes to sleep. The next morning she wakes up and finds her boyfriend still not there. She gets out to check and man door hand hook car door."



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Perry Carpenter:

Am seen. Yes.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Perfect. It's perfect. It's still pretty much the same story.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. It's the hook, but just taken to this absurd level.

Perry Carpenter:

With all the pasta effects of bad grammar being repeated and everything else.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

The obvious pivot would be that that's obviously a reference to the hook urban legend, which I'm sure you're familiar with.

Mason Amadeus:

What kind of other contemporary legends or urban legends, equally ridiculous or less ridiculous as Man Door Hand Hook Car Door? And then what does it tell us about ourselves?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I'm a big fan of the babysitter and the man upstairs. That's my favorite urban legend, which is the story of a babysitter who's watching kids and keeps getting phone calls from a creepy person who's laughing and saying, "He'll be there in an hour, half hour, 50 minutes." And then it's the, "Have you check the children story," and she finds out, of course, that the call is coming from inside the house when she uses the operator to try to trace it. So my real truest gateway into urban legends was scary stories to tell in the dark. A lot of 90s kids were reading that and unintentionally learning a lot of urban legends because that was a lot of the source material and other kinds of folklore.



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And I think the babysitter and the man upstairs, I can't even say exactly why I like it so much, but I think, I believe that it started to come about during time when women were starting to go to work a lot more, and babysitters were a new thing. And so there was this anxiety of leaving your children behind and almost like the naivety of a babysitter or naivete of a babysitter, or just how scary it is to leave your children in the hands of a babysitter. And then if you take it farther, the irresponsibility of a woman who is not a present mother 24/7.

So that isn't exactly why I like the story. I just think there's something to the call coming from inside the house. I think you can apply that line to so many different parts of what it means to be a person and how we interpret different urban legends or anything. We're always going to interpret them through our own lens, and we're often our own boogeyman in a sense of creating the things we fear and focusing on them and blowing them up and spreading them around.

Mason Amadeus:

There is a really good point there. That line, the call is coming from inside the house, which has been turned into a meme to express that same idea. That's really cool.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, I love that one. And I also love the headlights one, what would you call it? The man in the backseat.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, yeah.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

High Beams. Yeah. Where the car is being followed by a truck that keeps turning the high beams on, and the woman who's driving is freaked out and it's following her. Keeps turning the lights on, she doesn't know what's going on. She gets to her house, runs out of the car saying, "Why are you following me? I'm calling the police." He says, "No, there's a man in your backseat. Every time he rose up with the ax, I turn my lights on so that he thought he'd be seen." There's variations on that obviously. There's the one with the gas station attendant that we see in the movie Urban Legend, that I love so much from the 90s. But yeah, I say those are my two favorites. And then the People Lick Too was the one as a kid that really got me with the dog.



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Mason Amadeus:

Okay. That one I don't know at all.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

You don't know that one?

Mason Amadeus:

No, I don't think so.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

You do. I feel like you do. It's like somebody's nervous. They're in bed, they're scared, they're hearing a noise. It's a dripping, drip, drip, drip. And then in order to get comfort, the girl or boy puts their hand down and lets their dog lick their hand. And this happens throughout the night, keeps hearing the dripping, keeps hearing the dripping. Finally gets up to investigate what it is, and written in blood on the wall beside the murder dog, it says, "People lick too." So the person who was licking the hand was actually-

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, I hate that. I hate everything about that.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Dog serial killer.

Mason Amadeus:

I hate that so much.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah, it's not a nice story.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, God.



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Chelsey Weber-Smith:

And it got me as a kid, man. Whoo, it got everybody, I feel like. Yeah, that was a big one.

Perry Carpenter:

The thing that comes as I've been restudying a lot of these urban legends is that they can, and they are told in such a short, compressed timeframe. You can tell an urban legend in a minute, minute-and-a-half, but I remember when we were kids, it felt like those were 20-minute stories.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Perry Carpenter:

They felt long because it was the first time we heard them. There's a social context that's involved. There's a lot of psychological implication when we're in those environments as well, and they just feel like experiences that we're going through. But now on the other side, looking at the ones that we grew up with, you can really start to understand the psychology of them as well. Especially like what we were talking about before, the caller is coming from inside the house. It is the thing that you are epitomizing putting this babysitter in control of your children, that is the threat. It is that you are absent from the house. You're turning over your responsibility to a third party, and that third party is negligent. It's kind of like the babysitter that puts the baby in the oven and the turkey.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Exactly. Same timeframe that those were really popular, I think.

Perry Carpenter:

And that was probably a societal way of big gender discrimination.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Oh, yeah.

Perry Carpenter:



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The woman needs to be in the house, the mother needs to be in the house so that the children can be adequately cared for. So it's a suppression tactic in a lot of ways.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yeah.

Perry Carpenter:

When you're really thinking about folklore in general or online folklore, or you're thinking about the things that you like to cover for American Hysteria, what are the things that you like to research the most and help people understand?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I like to really try to show the through line throughout history and how most of the stories we tell have been told before in different forms, almost as if they're some kind of archetypal template that we just fill in again and again. And I think it can be really valuable to see the history of a story, if for no other reason than to render it ridiculous. Because there are stories that we tell ourselves that are really simple like, "This is the good person of a story. This is the bad person. This is our hero. This is our villain. This is who was on the right side of history. This is who was on the wrong side." And history never works like that. And our heroes are never completely heroic, and our events are never simple, and they're never pure, right? They're always tainted with individual people who have their own agendas.

And I think telling the stories of people is really a lot of fun, because that's more interesting than telling a flat history of something. If you're going to say, "Okay, we're going to follow this person over 30 years," and their work that they did and all of the ridiculous things that they were also doing and saying and thinking, and then how that can show us, okay, what did American society obsess over in the 20s and the 30s and the 40s and the 50s? And what can that teach us in a broader sense of our evolving fears and fascinations?

And I think I love being able to say, "We've been telling this story this way this entire time," but every generation just puts a new villain in there, or puts a new cultural boogeyman, which is, of course, often people who are lower on the hierarchy of American society. And I think that's really important too, is understanding scapegoating and the ways that we blame people for problems that are maybe not the actual people with power that are controlling more of the propaganda or whatever we're being told through different channels. I always verge into conspiracy theory there.



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Again, there are powers that be, we'll never say there aren't. But yeah, I do think that there's power in rendering our simple narratives, just cracking them and saying, "We can't just rely on this story. We can't just fall back on our history of being heroes or villains," because it's never simple. It's always completely chaotic.

Mason Amadeus:

Incredibly well put.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Thanks.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. So I listened to your urban legend one a couple of times, and you mentioned the book, The Choking Doberman, which was one of his that I didn't have. I've got the Vanishing Hitchhiker and a couple of others of his compilations.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

My hero.

Perry Carpenter:

But I went out and got it, and it just arrived today, and I haven't read it.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

You got the same copy as me. I love it. It's great. You're going to love it.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, the hard back. Yeah. And it smells old because I think it was actually printed in 1983 and sitting on a shelf until then.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:



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I tried to get Jan to talk to me, but his wife... I couldn't, couldn't find. And this was in the very beginning, and I finally found his wife on Facebook and said, "Please." But she just said he doesn't do interviews anymore.

Perry Carpenter:

Oh, too bad.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Got to respect it. I know. I know, but he is a true rockstar, an academic rockstar.

Perry Carpenter:

You reminded me of that when you were talking about how these come up in order to deal with different social pressures. And in the Doberman story, the thing that doesn't get brought up too many times nowadays is that in the original one, the fingers were of a black man, because that was the threat of dealing with racial problems. And so I think that idea of the urban legend being used not only to express fear, but also to bring in some bit of control in some ways, is really poignant.

Mason Amadeus:

Because you have a unique perspective on this, being such an avid researcher and knowing so much about history and also being very online. It seems that no matter what, the stories we tell stay the same in a lot of ways. They just point to different anxieties. Can you think of any differences between the online folklore generation, the online stories, and I guess what you'd call traditional folklore, traditional stories that we would tell sitting around a campfire?

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I think that probably the biggest difference is how quickly it spreads and how many people it spreads to. So back when we had the original way to tell urban legends was you heard it from a friend of a friend. My theory is the ways that urban legends spread is you call your cousin, you're in Missouri, you call your cousin in California, tell them the story, and then it's in California, because it's like, "Oh, why do they pop up everywhere at once? Is it some psychological thing manifesting on?" It's like, yeah. And it's also probably Timmy calling his cousin and telling him this crazy story that apparently happened in that town. And then he says, "Oh, you know what happened in our town? This," and then it spins out.



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And then in the 90s, you had faxlore, which I love so much, which is all of the chain letters that talked about a few flasher headlights at somebody whose headlights are off, they're going to run you off the road as a part of a gang initiation. That was a big one that parents were terrified of during gang panic stuff, spreading that around. But it is limited, right? You're spreading it around as a parent, and then children are picking up that information and spreading it around. But now it's like, it can go... In Momo, I'm sure you talk about this, but Kim Kardashian was a huge... Honestly, I don't know if it would've happened without Kim Kardashian because she in an instant showed millions of people this creepy chicken suicide enchantress. So it's like we-

Perry Carpenter:

I've never heard Momo described that way.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

That's a poetry degree right there baby.

Mason Amadeus:

That was great.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

I don't know. You have a lot more ability to quickly have a false story spread, which of course, then we can expand out to talk about misinformation and disinformation and all of that kind of stuff, which is just like adult urban legends.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah.

Chelsey Weber-Smith:

Yep.

[Ending music kicks-in]



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Perry Carpenter:

Thanks so much for listening, and thank you to Chelsey Weber-Smith for spending time with us. Check out our show notes for more information about Chelsey, the American Hysteria Podcast, and more. If you're not already subscribed to American Hysteria and today's interview piqued your interest, do yourself a favor and go subscribe to or follow American Hysteria right now.

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That's all for now. Thanks for listening.