Creepy Clowns Stalk U.K. Children? Reality and Folklore

Benjamin Radford

Reports surfaced in England shortly before Halloween 2015 of people dressed as clowns stalking and trying to abduct—or at the very least scaring—children. According to the October 16, 2015, *Daily Mirror*:

> Pupils have been warned to "go straight home after school today and not to loiter" as reports continue of schoolchildren being stalked by clowns. Kent Police have issued the caution after a number of "suspicious incidents" in Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells, in Kent. . . . Since then, there have been reports of people wearing clown masks being spotted in a van on St. John's Road in Tunbridge Wells on Tuesday and Wednesday. Schools in the town issued their own advice after a boy was approached by two men in a van on Wednesday morning. Luckily he ran away and told his school what had happened. (see http://tinyurl.com/pzzzavh)

This is not the first time that clowns have been reported terrorizing people. Over the years, a handful of mysterious clowns have appeared in cities around the world with the apparent intent to frighten and unnerve the public. It happened almost exactly a year earlier in the California towns of Bakersfield and Wasco, followed by a series of attacks by clowns in several French cities (see http://tinyurl.com/ovbvjgm). Before that, a weird clown was reported in Northampton, England, and then Staten Island. And in July 2015, a creepy clown was sighted at night in a Chicago cemetery.

When a clown treads on private property, that's potentially a trespassing crime that may result in authorities being called—and the clown identified, his or her motives determined, and possibly arrested. Clowns appearing in public are another matter: there's no law against anyone in a costume walking down the street or visiting a public park. While most of these reports were determined to be hoaxes, pranks, and publicity stunts, the recent reports from Britain are a bit different, being dubbed phantom clowns—"phantom" because they are reported but never caught.

Though some sensational stories of child-abducting clowns were an invention of the news media, a few children reported firsthand abduction attempts.

Writer Loren Coleman coined the term *phantom clowns* and described them in his book *Mysterious America*. One of the first reports of phantom clowns occurred on May 6, 1981, when police in Brookline, Massachusetts, issued an all-points bulletin asking officers to watch for a vehicle containing potential child abductors. The vehicle was distinctive: an older-model van with a broken headlight, no hubcaps, and ladders on the side. It was also full of clowns. Several children reported that clowns had tried to lure them into the dark van with promises of candy; police investigated but found nothing.

Though some sensational stories of child-abducting clowns were an invention of the news media, a few children reported firsthand abduction attempts. One boy told police that he had been confronted by a clown armed with an Uzi machine gun in one hand and a machete in the other. The clown fired off five shots, but the boy counterattacked the surprised clown by throwing his book bag at him. Deciding that an Uzi and a machete were no match for a small bag of schoolbooks, the clown lost his nerve and ran off. Not surprisingly, the boy later admitted that he had made up the whole story, probably for attention.

Though the 1980s and 1990s were the heyday of phantom clown sightings, a few reports have continued in recent years. Throughout the phantom clown panic no hard evidence was ever found that the clowns even existed, and no children were actually harmed or abducted.

The phantom clowns appeared in connection with other rumors and urban legends. As folklorists Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith wrote in *Urban Legends: A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors,* the phantom clown panic was "caused by an urban legend that circulated exclusively among children by word of mouth," fueled in part by parental concern.

Folklorists Sandy Hobbs and David Cornwell examined the origins of the phantom clowns in their chapter in the book *Supernatural Enemies*, asking:

> How did this rumor of evil clowns originate? Many of our informants suggest possible origins of the clown story: parents, police, and the mass media are all cited. One student reports that older children told the stories to frighten younger ones. Others appear to assume that the story derives from an actual incident, even though it may have become exaggerated in the telling.

Whether the recent British sightings are hoaxes, pranks, or a genuine menace, parents and children can take comfort in the fact that the phantom clowns never actually succeeded in abducting any children (or anyone else). For anyone genuinely trying to abduct children, a clown costume is perhaps the worst possible disguise because it attracts attention—especially in light of the warnings and publicity surrounding the sightings. Any clowns seen near schools, parks, or children that are not part of a private party, parade, or circus are certain to draw notice and attention.

For anyone genuinely trying to abduct children, a clown costume is perhaps the worst possible disguise.

Most scary clown sightings are innocuous, such as a person wearing a clown mask in public—perhaps not surprising given that Halloween was only a few weeks away. And of course just because a person is frightened by a person in a clown mask doesn't necessarily mean the clown had any evil intent. But motivations become irrelevant in parents' eyes when it comes to children's safety, and many communities were understandably taking measures to ensure safety.

Benjamin Radford is deputy editor of the Skeptical Inquirer and author of the forthcoming book *Bad Clowns*.

Hungarian Academy of Sciences Proposes Homeopathic Drugs Meet Tests of Efficacy

Gábor Hraskó

Members of the Section of Medical Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) voted unanimously on November 9, 2015, to support an earlier proposal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences about homeopathy. The Swedish statement requested that homeopathic remedies should go through the same efficacy trials that mainstream drugs do.

The Hungarian statement refers to various recent scientific statements, for example, the study of the Australian Government's National Health and Medical Research Council that analyzed 175 publications and concluded that there was no reasonable scientific proof for the efficacy of homeopathy for any health conditions. The HAS also refers to the European Academies Science Advisory Council that is allegedly considering an investigation among the academies of the U.N. countries about this topic. The statement points out that another Hungarian scientific body (Health Science Committee, Egészségügyi Tudományos Tanács) had made a similar statement in 1991 and opposed using and registering those drugs whose efficacy had not been proved and that had not gone through adequate research procedures.

A 2010 statement of the Complementary Medicine Committee of the HAS correctly noted that while there is a legal and public demand in conventional medicine to prove the efficacy and safety of its products and procedures, "nonconventional" or alternative medicine is exempted from these obligations. Based on the recent legislation, complementary medicine is the same as evidence-free medicine, and this might mean a serious risk for the patients.

József Mandl, a biochemist, member of HAS, and president of the Health Science Committee, said:

> The Australian and Swedish statements had raised the interest of the Hungarian scientific community and now members of the Medical Sciences Section of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences voted unanimously to join the Swedish initiative. . . . Science has well defined, rigorous methods and systems. Homeopathy can't be fitted to these. Homeopathic remedies don't meet the criteria of evidence-based medicine. There might be various hypotheses and theories, but everything should be proved. This is what science means and this is what we would like to highlight now.

Gábor Hraskó is chairman of the European Council of Skeptical Organizations, president of the Hungarian Skeptics, and a Committee for Skeptical Inquiry Scientific Consultant.

Halloween Candy Scare Hoaxes

Benjamin Radford

On Halloween weekend 2015, scary news reports and warnings on social media claimed that dangerous candy had been found, raising fears among parents and children. A week after Halloween—after the candy had been eaten and the proverbial fairy dust had settled—the comforting truth about the latest candy scare finally came to light: Police determined that the incidents were hoaxes.

For example, a Philly.com news report stated that an eleven-year-old girl and a twelve-year-old boy "who reported finding needles in their trick-or-treat candy in Kennett Square have admitted they made up the story. . . . The girl hid needles from her mother's sewing kit in Twix bars she was given while trick-or-treating, prosecutors said. She then lied to her parents, who prosecutors said rightly reported the incident to police. The boy heard about the first case, then put a needle inside a Snickers bar that he showed his older sister, who contacted police" (see http://tinyurl.com/ojjd752).

Kids do stupid things, but adults are in on the fear-mongering as well. At least one person was arrested for faking tainted candy in New Jersey; according to the same story, "Gloucester Township police said 37-year-old Robert Ledrew reported that he found needles in four separate pieces of trick-or-treating candy. Prior to calling police, he posted photos of one of the alleged needles on social media. But investigators determined that Ledrew . . . made up the story and put the needles in the candy bars himself, police said. He was charged with making a false report and released on a summons, officials said." Ledrew claimed he had put the needles in the candy to teach his kids a lesson about safety.

News of Ledrew's arrest may have kept some of the tainted candy reports from being solved; pranksters who might otherwise consider coming forward to calm nerves in their household or community may not have done so out of fear they would be arrested, and decided it's better to let the case remain unsolved. The nature of tainted Halloween candy is such that it's a very easy thing to fake and very difficult to investigate.

Kids and others get the idea to pretend to find tainted Halloween candy mostly from popular culture and the news media.

There were no confirmed reports of anyone actually being injured or harmed by contaminated Halloween candy from strangers; there seem to be no news reports of children being taken to the hospital and having to undergo emergency surgery as a result of a foreign object accidentally being eaten. Instead it's always a near-miss, a case of "look what we found before anyone was hurt."

The tainted candy scares this past Halloween—as in previous Halloweens—have been the result of hoaxers and copycats. Why would someone fake such a horrible thing? For fun, attention, sympathy, or any number of other reasons. Kids and others get the idea to pretend to find tainted Halloween candy mostly from popular culture and the news media. This is a process that folklorists call "ostension." Scary themes are especially common in ostension, for example when ghost hunters seek out spirits in a reputedly haunted location, or when girls perform the Bloody Mary ritual to summon a witch from a mirror. Putting a needle in candy gives kids a personal role in real-life legend-making, a sinister form of "let's pretend"—which is of course what costumed trick-or-treating is all about.

Police and the news media are in a difficult position. Until the tainted candy reports are disproven, it seems prudent to warn parents that apparent cases have happened. But the irony is that the more people hear about these (hoaxed) cases through the news and social media, the more likely it is that someone will be inspired to do a copycat hoax for attention or sympathy. It is very easy to fake finding some foreign substance in candy; all you need are needles, thumbtacks, nails, or any other common household object that could be harmful if eaten. It takes mere seconds to put it in a piece of candy and then innocently ask someone nearby, "Hey, what is this?"

The candy scare is part of the ven-

erable "stranger danger" theme common in American culture, fueling fears that evil strangers are hoping to hurt innocent children. Few if any sinister foreign objects are ever found in Halloween candy. This threat is essentially an urban legend; there have been only two confirmed cases of children being killed by poisoned Halloween candy, and in both cases the children were killed not in a random act by strangers but murdered by one of their parents.

While the fact that children and adults have been caught faking tainted candy is troubling, the good news is that the world is not such a scary place.

Sociologists Joel Best and Gerald Horiuchi researched news stories on Halloween sadists and found the threat to be "greatly exaggerated." They discovered the fear of razor blades in apples and poisoned candy was fueled largely by the news media. Best and Horiuchi concluded that most reports of Halloween sadism appear to be imaginary, and that many are hoaxes by kids themselves seeking attention and sympathy. The myth-busting website Snopes.com also updates its section on tainted candy every year. While the fact that children and adults have been caught faking tainted candy is troubling, the good news is that the world is not such a scary place, since strangers are not in fact trying to harm or kill random innocent children.

Henry Gordon Book Collection to CFI

Timothy Binga

The Center for Inquiry Libraries (www.cfilibraries.org) has received a small but significant collection of books on magic and conjuring from Henry Gordon (1920–2009) and his wife, Zita. Gordon was a stage magician, doing conjuring and magic he called "sleight of mind." He was a CSICOP (now CSI) fellow, writer, broadcaster, and president of the Ontario Skeptics.

Gordon began his career as a magician and paranormal skeptic in his hometown of Montreal, where he began writing for various venues, such as *Suburban*, and later a weekly column for the *Toronto Star*. He became known not only for his magic but also for his skepticism and was a pioneer of the skeptical movement in Canada. Up until the founding of CSICOP in 1976, Gordon felt as if he were the only one doing this kind of work.

As he received more and more attention for his magic and skepticism, he appeared on many television and radio shows, beginning on CBC in Toronto, and eventually becoming a guest on such shows as *Oprah* and *Sally Jessy Raphael*. He had done many shows where he was introduced as a psychic and would later reveal himself as a skeptic.

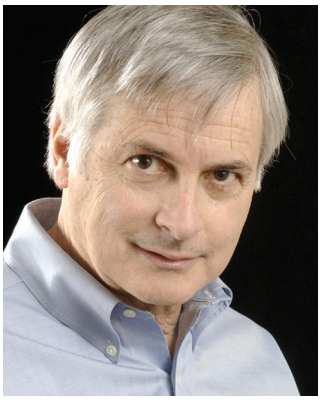
Gordon wrote several books. *Extrasensory Deception* (Prometheus Books, 1987) was taken from his columns in the *Toronto Star*, which ran for three years. *It's Magic* (Prometheus Books, 1989) is a book of easy-to-learn magic tricks for children. *Channeling into the New Age* (Prometheus Books, 1988) is the result of a lot of material Gordon collected about Shirley MacLaine and "her side career of pushing the paranormal with a series of nonsensical books. . . ." He concedes in his chapter in *Skeptical Odysseys* (Prometheus Books, 2001) that "I don't believe Shirley is my biggest fan."

The collection numbers about 100 books; however, it has many of the classics of the small-object/hand-conjuring genre. Included are such notable books as *Expert at the Card Table* by Erdinase, *The Tarbell Course in Magic* (which has volume 6 signed by the author), and books by Milbourne Christopher, Alton Sharpe, Jerry Mentzer, and Harry Lorayne. Some bound magic trick periodicals were also donated; these include *The Bat*, *The Sphinx*, *The Phoenix*, and *Hugard's Magic Monthly*.

"Henry was a strong believer in science and of maintaining an open and curious mind," says his wife, Zita. "He never denied that a person could have paranormal powers. What he did say is that people should be willing to allow scientific investigation of claims under the kind of conditions any other phenomena would be examined. It is my hope that Henry's magic book collection will assist those who seek a logical and deeper understanding of what may initially be mistaken as the paranormal."

Timothy Binga is director of libraries for the Center for Inquiry.

CSI Fellow Seth Shostak Wins Carl Sagan Prize



The 2015 Carl Sagan Prize for Science Popularization has gone to astronomer and Committee for Skeptical Inquiry Fellow Seth Shostak.

The $5,000 prize comes from Wonderfest, a nonprofit organization in the San Francisco Bay area dedicated to science education and popularization. The prize is funded by Google and presented specifically to recognize researchers who "have contributed mightily to the public understanding and appreciation of science."

Shostak is senior astronomer at the SETI Institute in Mountain View, California, host of the SETI Institute's weekly science radio show, and a frequent public speaker. Additional information is at http://wonderfest.org/sagan-prize.

'Sea Monster' Photographed in Greek Islands Never Was Alive

Benjamin Radford

A strange photo of what appears to be an unknown marine animal taken by a Scottish tourist in the Greek islands made headlines around the world in early November 2015.

According to Fox News, "Harvey Robertson was on a boat cruise off the coast of Parga, sailing through sea caves with his family. He was initially just trying to capture the unusual color of the surrounding water with his iPhone camera." Robertson says he didn't see the animal at the time, but "looking back through his camera, Robertson saw that he had captured a grey creature that resembles an elongated manatee. The strange animal appears to pop out of the water in one photo, then disappears under the greenish water in the next" (see http://tinyurl.com/pdbpnox).

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Edzard Ernst Receives 2015 John Maddox Prize

Ernst, left, with his prize.

Edzard Ernst has received the 2015 John Maddox Prize for his research countering claims of alternative medicine. Ernst, emeritus professor at Peninsula Medical School, Exeter, United Kingdom, was recognized for his long commitment to applying scientific methodologies to research in complementary and alternative medicines and to communicating this need.

The prize recognizes the work of individuals who promote sound science and evidence on a matter of public interest, facing difficulty or hostility in doing so.

The citation notes that Ernst continued in his work despite personal attacks and attempts to undermine his research unit and to end his employment. "As a result he has addressed a significant gap in the research base in this field and has brought insights into discussions with the public, policy makers, commentators, practitioners, and other researchers."

"Thanks to everyone who supported me in often difficult times, and made this possible," Ernst said. "For the past twenty years I have tried to find out the truth about alternative treatments. The results were often not what enthusiasts of alt med had hoped for. But my job was to test and not to promote alternative medicine. So I published our findings and, if necessary, I defended them. . . ."

The Maddox Prize is a joint initiative of the journal *Nature*, the Kohn Foundation, and the charity Sense About Science. It is named for the late Sir John Maddox, a longtime editor of *Nature* and a passionate defender of science. Maddox was a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, as is Ernst.

(Continued from p.9)

The viral photo sparked speculation among armchair zoologists and monster lovers about what this bizarre animal might be, ranging from a beaked whale to the "love child of a hippo and crocodile" (best not to dwell on the logistics of that coupling). While the image has some superficially similar features to various animals, it does not in fact look like any known animal.

All the ideas are interesting, but teams of marine biologists packing their bags for a long-term research project in the sunny Greek islands to study the beast may want to hold off on making plane reservations because this chimera was soon identified. Zoologist Darren Naish of the National Oceanography Centre at the University of Southampton and host of the *Tetrapod Zoology* podcast believes that a skin sample biopsy of the "creature" would reveal high concentrations of polyvinyl chloride. In fact, Naish found a near-perfect match for the mysterious monster Robertson photographed: an errant and half-sunken low freeboard fender, used to protect boats from damage.

In an interview published on Discovery News, Naish told me:

> The object never quite made sense as a live animal—what's with that round black marking identified by many as an "eye," and why is there another hole near the tip of what looks like a snout? And where are the flippers or fins? I then remembered seeing extremely similar features in curved boat fenders. These vinyl structures (there are many different types) fit over the gunwales and sides of boats and protect them from dock walls and so on—they often have a shiny look that recalls the skin of animals like dolphins, and this feature obviously made people think that the object looked especially like an animal.

It's not clear whether the photo is a hoax (i.e., Robertson knew what it was when he photographed the object but shared the photo claiming it to be a genuine mystery) or a misidentification (i.e., Robertson genuinely had no idea what it was). The most likely and charitable explanation is that he could have easily guessed what the object was at the time and paid little attention to it until weeks later when he saw the image as he was going through his trip photos. Marine equipment such as thick ropes, fenders, and the like are common and unnoticed in their context but could seem very mysterious out of context.

In other words, had Robertson reviewed the images on his iPhone immediately and noticed it, he could simply have looked over the side of the boat to see what it was; since he didn't, it's a mystery. Others on the same tour boat likely saw exactly the same thing but paid no attention to a half-sunken boat bumper bobbing in the water.

Only later does someone see some apparently strange or mysterious figure and come to think they had been in the presence of a ghost or unusual animal.

This process is common with many ghost photos in which photographs are examined days, weeks, or months after the image was taken. Only later does someone see some apparently strange or mysterious figure and come to think they had been in the presence of a ghost or unusual animal. But by then the opportunity for investigating is long gone.

This Greek hippo-dolphin monster is different, however. Since the photo is almost certainly of a low freeboard fender, it did not disappear and is probably still there for others to photograph for themselves. They are common in ports around the world and not normally of sufficient interest to be worth a photograph.

It is not surprising that people, including many "experts," were fooled by the image; for example, cryptozoologist and author Loren Coleman was quoted in a *Huffington Post* piece as saying, "If the photograph is not a hoax, it could be interesting, cryptozoologically speaking. It might be photographic evidence of a new species or it could be a reconfiguration (a behavioral restructuring of the body form of a mundane known species, like a squid, for example) not usually seen."

Conclusively identifying known marine animals can be difficult under the best of circumstances simply because of the environment. Unlike terrestrial animals that we are used to seeing and identifying from our own eye level and whose feet and legs are visible, animals in water are by definition partly submerged and therefore partly hidden from view, especially when seen from a pier or boat (which gives an unusual view from above and to the side).

In many places where lake monsters have been sighted (for example Scotland's Loch Ness or Canada's Lake Okanagan), the visibility is very poor just below the surface due to suspended sediments. Even in relatively clear water, such as that found in the Greek isles, moving water inevitably causes distortion of the image: colors change, important details are obscured, and so on. Naish notes, "For this fender explanation to work, the object would have to have been heavily distorted by refraction, but this looks plausible based on the photo. Furthermore, features that look like skin folds and so on seem more likely to be scum and reflected light on the water surface."

The object fooled many people because it seems to have an animalian face, complete with a mouth, nostril, eye, and possibly even ears. The fact that the top of the bumper somewhat resembles an elongated face to us is not a coincidence. The human brain is hardwired to recognize faces, and we often see faces and heads in everyday, non-animal objects, including potatoes, rock cliffs, and clouds. We can now add boat fenders to the list, though not a new marine animal to the zoology books.