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American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An Encyclopedia of American Folklore

Christopher R. Fee
Gettysburg College

Jeffrey Webb
Huntington University

Danielle R. Dattolo
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

Roles

Editors:
Christopher R. Fee, Gettysburg College
Jeffrey Webb, Huntington University

Assistant Editors:
Fatimah B. Samuels, Babson College
Emily A. Francisco '14, Gettysburg College
Bronwen Fetters
Jaime Hillelegonds
Andrew Wickersham

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American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An Encyclopedia of American Folklore

Description
Folklore has been a part of American culture for as long as humans have inhabited North America, and increasingly formed an intrinsic part of American culture as diverse peoples from Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania arrived. In modern times, folklore and tall tales experienced a rejuvenation with the emergence of urban legends and the growing popularity of science fiction and conspiracy theories, with mass media such as comic books, television, and films contributing to the retelling of old myths. This multi-volume encyclopedia will teach readers the central myths and legends that have formed American culture since its earliest years of settlement. Its entries provide a fascinating glimpse into the collective American imagination over the past 400 years through the stories that have shaped it. [From the Publisher]

Keywords
Folklore, Tall Tales, Mythology, African American Folklore, Asian American Folklore

Disciplines
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Comments
An introduction to the encyclopedia and Dr. Fee's sections on "The Zodiac" and "Zombie Legends" are available by clicking the download link above.

Authors
Christopher R. Fee, Jeffrey Webb, Danielle R. Dattolo, Emily A. Francisco, Bronwen Fetters, Jaime Hillegonds, and Andrew Wickersham

This book is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/books/96
American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An Encyclopedia of American Folklore provides a comprehensive introduction to folklore in the United States. It offers a guide to the stories people tell and have told for centuries within the diverse array of cultures native to the region, as well as those cultures appearing in the United States since its founding as a nation. Many of these stories are retold here, along with useful historical context and accounts of how the stories have been adapted and reshaped over time. Readers will encounter people, places, and storybook characters they’ve heard about since childhood, like Paul Bunyan and Brer Rabbit, but they’ll also discover many things that are new and unfamiliar. This three-volume encyclopedia is not meant to be the final word on its numerous topics, but rather to provide beginning and advanced students, as well as interested general readers, with the entry points and pathways they need to pursue further exploration and discovery.

Storytelling is a basic human impulse and every culture compiles traditions of storytelling across many generations. In recognition of this fact, the encyclopedia embraces not only Native American mythology and folklore, but also the many traditions that were carried to North America by immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania. As such, the collection includes a sampling of Asian American myths and legends right alongside the myths of the Lakota and Cherokee, and stories passed along within African American families and communities. By the same token, the encyclopedia addresses topics that are more contemporary in nature, like popular conspiracy theories, urban legends, and even superheroes. When set alongside one another, these seemingly diverse strands of popular storytelling in the United States reveal a number of common threads. As they teach us particular things about their unique cultures of origin, they also address universal human fears, struggles, values, and aspirations.

The encyclopedia has a number of key features, including an introduction to the subject of myth and folklore, more than 490 individual entries, more than 90 primary sources, a chronology, a bibliography, and a detailed subject index. The entries also offer “See also” cross-references to related entries and primary documents, as well as bibliographies of relevant print and nonprint information resources. The entries range from individual characters and stories to broad themes like Women in Folklore and general topics like Creation Stories of the Native Americans. It is the collaborative work of more than 150 contributors, most of whom are university-based researchers who have completed postgraduate degrees in their fields of specialization. They are literature scholars, research librarians, historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and
professional writers. Their work draws from academic studies of myth and folklore and their own personal investigations and experiences. What readers will find inside these volumes are American myths, legends, and folktales—stories of heroic deeds and terrible tragedies, as well as tales of strange monsters, dangerous criminals, haunted forests, and alien encounters. In other words, the mysterious things in the world and beyond that sometimes frighten us, but also spark our curiosity and awaken our imagination.
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American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An Encyclopedia of American Folklore collects together a variety of myths, legends, and tall tales, but these are terms that require a little explanation. Myth is an English word derived from the Greek mythos, which refers to a "story." In common American usage, myth most often refers to ancient stories about the origin of the universe and all the living things on earth, which are viewed in modern times as literature or fairy tales. For most readers in the modern world, these ancient stories have lost their sacred and religious quality. Myth is also often used as a shorthand term for patent falseness, as in the common term "urban myth," or as in the title of the popular show Mythbusters. In both of these senses, as commonly understood by many Americans, myth implies something imaginary or untrue that someone in the distant past formerly believed, but which is no longer "believable." It is no surprise, then, that many Americans take offense if their personal beliefs or the lore transmitted through their religious systems are referred to as myth or mythology.

This is extremely unfortunate. Much frustration and conflict comes from a misunderstanding of the technical meaning and proper usage of the term myth. To avoid these aggravations, readers can arrive at a better understanding of myth, starting with a recognition that myths are not falsehoods, but stories or narratives that people tell to explain the absurd or inexplicable, or to make meaning out of events and realities that are otherwise chaotic. Myths are therefore properly understood as ways in which cultures interpret the great mysteries of the cosmos and of life itself, and then impart these traditions to ensuing generations. Thus, rather than thinking of myth as a falsehood, it is better to consider the narrative as a way of wrestling with the mystery of Creation. Myths are sincere—even truthful—expressions of wonder and awe at the majesty of the universe, and although the details of these stories vary from place to place and people to people, the subtext of such stories is always a search for a way to discover and to describe fundamental truths.

Legend, on the other hand, is a story from the knowable past that is told as true, a narrative with some appearance of verisimilitude to life as we perceive it in the everyday world. These stories are generally based on events or figures that are historical or that are at least generally believed to have been so. In addition, legend, as commonly used by Americans, refers to the narrative embroidery that makes history more attractive and engaging. Thus the legends of Johnny Appleseed or Geronimo or Elvis or Billy the Kid are the trappings with which these historical characters have been invested by the generations of storytellers who followed them and who used their histories as grist.
for their narrative mills. Legends are often didactic in nature—meaning they are meant to teach—and they impart cultural concepts in addition to any grains of historical accuracy. Therefore, legends also strive for a form of truth, a kind of “cultural truth,” as it were, through which a people transmits aspects of its group memory and its core values. Legend is, therefore, more focused and specific to a given culture than myth, the latter of which deals with a particular tradition’s attempt to wrestle with universal concerns.

Folklore, like legend, is specific to the particular community that produces it, and therefore is also to be distinguished from myth. Unlike legend, folklore makes no pretense of historical accuracy or real-life veracity, and may in fact sometimes take the appearance of fairy tale with fantasy elements designed to entertain. Folklore includes what its students refer to as “items,” manifestations of folk belief, practice, and ritual that may include stories, dances, magic spells and charms, ceremonies, and the like. Unlike legend, which may well have roots in written accounts, folklore, at its most basic, is oral and performative, passed from one generation to the next through active participation in the storytelling, singing, dancing, rituals, and so on of a given community. Researchers take a comparative approach to the study of folklore, so it is possible to examine an item from the folklore of one community, for example, through the lens of similar items from traditions from around the world and across the centuries.

Although certainly not limited to America, the tall tale found fertile soil in what is now the United States, perhaps most notably in reference to the Western Frontier, which lent itself to hyperbole. As a result of the seemingly limitless horizon, the vast forests, the powerful rivers, and the other incredible natural features of the landscape of a largely unsettled America, a narrative genre that took exaggeration as its fundamental principle was utterly reborn in American storytelling. The tall tale is, first and foremost, an engaging and entertaining story about characters of utterly outsized proportions, a story of the “biggest,” the “baddest,” and the “best.” Classically told with a straight face and a “just-the-facts” manner, the wildly exaggerated content of the tall tale is often related with ostentatious language in sharp contrast to its dry delivery. Considering the American cultural emphasis on greatness, it perhaps should come as no surprise that the genre of the tall tale has long struck a resonant chord in the American psyche.

American folklore is probably a misleading term, since the United States is a nation composed of many cultures and many folklore traditions. This collection acknowledges and celebrates this diversity. Indeed, America is all the more interesting and vibrant precisely because it is populated by such a welter of peoples, stories, and beliefs from around the world. In fact, America is and has long been both a venue and a vehicle through which many different peoples and traditions come into contact, sometimes into conflict, and occasionally into confluence. Each American takes pride in his or her particular heritage, of course, and the folklore of our culture is a lens through which we may see ourselves. This vision is constantly changing, however, and each tradition is in a constant state of revitalization through contact and cross-pollination with other traditions. The corpus of American myth, legend, and folklore is no more static than the times, places, and peoples that gave each birth, and thus provide endlessly fruitful, fascinating, and enjoyable objects of study.
It will be easy to point out ways in which this collection is not inclusive enough. While this is undoubtedly a fair criticism in some respects, the reality is that all collections are constrained by limits of space and time, and we are confident that we have made a forthright and largely successful attempt to balance the pressures of inclusion and diversity with those of tradition and the generalist needs of nonspecialist and student readers. Some may object to the examination of a particular tradition or a given culture by scholars using an academic lens. While we have attempted to be sensitive to such concerns, we strongly feel the responsibility of erring on the side of sensitive inclusion rather than excluding materials that are important and substantial additions to the standard canon of American folklore.

Ancient cultures traditionally told stories under the stars and around the flickering flames of the campfire. Some cultures still do so to this day, even in the United States of the twenty-first century. Many continue such traditions in backyards, on family trips, and at camp. There is no denying, however, that in the past half century or so the flickering light around which we gather as clans trends more and more toward the electronic screen, and in recent years these have become increasingly individual and hand-held rather than communal. Nevertheless, the storytelling potential of constantly evolving social media has much to recommend it as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural information, and any outright rejection of technology and other new avenues of communication for the transmission of American “folklore” is premature and, in the end, unwise.

Many American myths, legends, and tall tales are incomprehensible apart from the geographical and spatial contexts within which they occur. In the case of Paul Bunyan, for example, loggers wove tales about a giant with superhuman strength within an environment that required physical toughness to survive. His legendary feats were located in settings that matched the dimensions of his size and strength, particularly the vast stretches of virgin forest in the upper Middle West. In effect, storytellers established a relationship between the scale of the human figure in the story and the scale of the geographical setting where his legendary exploits occurred. They populated the American West with its limitless horizons, towering mountains, and expansive canyons with the sort of legendary heroes one might expect to find on such a grand stage. Put plainly, geography matters in the composition of myth, legend, and folklore.

In a few cases, the place itself is mythic, and long, fruitless search for its location generates and expands its legend. References to places like Atlantis, the Fountain of Youth, or Cities of Gold in ancient texts inspired fortune-seekers to break away from the known world and venture into the trackless wild. The dream of acquiring fame or riches by finding the location became inflated by the degree of spatial separation between the geographical point of departure on one hand, and the mythic destination on the other, a place entirely within the realm of speculation and conjecture. In these cases, the mythic place itself possesses a kind of agency, or the ability to shape and perhaps even determine the arc of the story or the dispositions of people who populate the narratives.

The geographical and spatial element in myths and legends goes beyond what might be considered the setting for a novel or the location for a screenplay. The places where folktales and legends occur are haunted by the ghosts of dead people and
contain rarely seen monsters whose existence defies scientific explanation. In these locales, spiritual or magical forces enable animals to speak or change their form, and allow beings to move between physical and spiritual worlds. Mythic spaces and places disrupt the established patterns of cause and effect and operate under a different set of physical laws in which the impossible becomes possible.

In American mythology and legend, particular landscapes might also be conceived of as sites of concealment and grand conspiracy. The remoteness of Area 51 in Nevada and Roswell, New Mexico, made it possible for some storytellers to allege that aliens had landed or made contact with local residents, but sinister government officials suppressed news of these events for a wide variety of reasons. In the long history of democracy in America, citizens have always demanded openness and transparency in the affairs of government. The inaccessibility of these places—which may as well be as distant as the planets from which these aliens derived—stoked fantasies about an undemocratic conspiracy deep inside some obscure government agency or bureaucracy, forming an alternate reality that stirred the popular imagination.

America itself has always been a land of mythic proportions in the collective imaginations of its myriad peoples. For indigenous nations, it was often the Mother Earth who birthed the People as well as their beautiful and bountiful home, while for many immigrants—past and present—the mythos of America has evoked images of a kind of El Dorado, an imaginative landscape flowing with milk and honey, the stuff of legend that draws people across time and space and innumerable hazards to leave all they know and to start anew. Thus, America is not simply the locus of a discernible set of myths, legends, and folktales. It is itself both the genesis of many tales and concepts, and an active motive narrative force on its own terms.
The Zodiac

Astrology traditionally relies upon very close observation of the heavens and involves drawing conclusions about the impact of cosmological phenomena upon human lives. In Western thought and practice, since the advent of the scientific method, the ancient practice of astrology generally has been derided by contemporary astronomers and astrophysicists. In Chinese tradition, however, the division between the scientific method of astronomy and the folkloric practice of astrology has not been quite so sharply drawn.

The Chinese calendar is dual in nature, based upon both the lunar and the solar cycles: two systems that run independently but align every nineteen years. The Chinese solar year is divided into twenty-four periods, and the lunar New Year begins with the second full moon after the winter solstice. The lunar calendar is employed for keeping track of significant events, both individually and culturally. Each year is associated with one of twelve animals (rat, ox, tiger, rabbit/hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep/goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig) and one of five elements (earth, fire, metal, water, and wood), a combination that produces a sixty-year cycle first determined 2,637 years before the Common Era by Huang-ti, an imperial official.

Chinese astrology draws upon these combinations in conjunction with the locations of the significant celestial bodies at the precise time of one's birth to develop an elaborate astrological profile of a given individual. This is a complex process that requires a good deal of astronomical data as well as an exhaustive knowledge of folkloric astrological beliefs and procedures, and practitioners believe that such a profile offers prophetic glimpses into the future of the person in question. The Chinese almanac, meanwhile, offers a broader interpretation of the times and days of a given year that are likely to be either propitious or ill-suited for a given enterprise. The Chinese zodiac itself draws far more general outlines of supposed character traits and potentially suitable mates believed to be indicated by a person's year of birth. Western astrology broadly construed, on the other hand, makes similar claims based upon the astrological sign of a given period within any year, although other considerations also come into play.

The Chinese cycle of years runs from Rat to Pig and is sometimes represented in the form of a circle that is read in a clockwise direction. Such a zodiac wheel may be interpreted as a schematic with the signs most likely to produce compatible mates divided most evenly from one another. These are thought likely to make good romantic or business partners while opposite signs are considered likely to provide poor matches in such endeavors. That said, this is the most simplistic reading of the Chinese zodiac and does not take into account many other factors, including the inner animal associated with the birth month of an individual, the time and day of birth, and a host of other possible influences. That elements of Chinese astrology remain important to many Americans—and not only to those of Chinese ancestry—is evidenced by the wide popularity of Chinese New Year celebrations, especially in regard to the zoological icon associated with a given year.

Each animal sign in the Chinese zodiac offers complementary positive and negative attributes. Those born in the Year of the Rat, for example, are thought to be nimble-minded, clever, full of charm, and highly charismatic; on the other hand, they can be self-centered,
The twelve zodiac signs and lucky words are engraved on this antique Chinese copper coin. The zodiac grew from roots in ancient astrology, a system of belief that ties an individual's fate to configurations of planets and starts at birth. References to one's zodiac sign provide a way to explain personality traits and tendencies. (Guangsong Chen/Alamy Stock Photo)

manipulative, and quick to anger. An Ox, by way of contrast, is dependable, indefatigable, and a good leader with an open hand and an open heart, but born with a stubborn streak and prone to offer followers a choice between "my way and the highway." Tigers, meanwhile, are courageous, passionate, confident and very loyal. Tigers may be emotionally volatile, however, and they also may allow their passions to cause them to be careless. Those born in the Year of the Rabbit (or Hare) are thoughtful about the feelings of others and make good diplomats; their inclination to see another person's point of view can lead them into gullibility, however, and thus Rabbits can at times seem naive, not to mention sentimental.

Dragons are known for their wisdom, energy, and great attitude, and they are widely esteemed and generally liked although their confidence in their own correctness and point of view can make them seem dictatorial, judgmental, and pushy. Those born in a Snake year are generally regarded as wise, and they can be charming and very romantic. Snakes look out for their own interests, however, and can tend to think highly of themselves. Combining attributes of the stolid draught animal and the unbroken feral mustang, those born in the Year of the Horse are both hard workers and wild at heart. Their very independence, however, causes Horses to be somewhat self-centered and sometimes intractable to other points of view.

Sheep (or Goats) make great artists and have pacific and personable personalities. Sheep can be good friends, but they can also be waveriing, unsure of themselves, and more willing to criticize than to offer
leadership. Those born in the Year of the Monkey are generally thought to be smart, sassy, witty, likeable, and funny, but Monkeys are also prone to be self-centered risk-takers. Roosters are industrious, orderly, and well structured; problems bounce off their backs, and they have the capacity to see a task through to completion. Roosters can have a tendency to preen, however, because they tend to think highly of themselves, and they also have a propensity to dream.

Those born during the Year of the Dog are associated with the classic attributes of loyalty, fidelity, justice, and sincerity with which many cultures imbue this animal; such individuals can be good leaders, and money is not the key to happiness for them. This sign, however, also incorporates a certain cynicism and predisposition to a negative point of view as well as a possible tendency to stand in judgment of others. Those associated with the Pig of the Chinese zodiac are both worthy of trust and selfish as well as both patient and prone to bouts of temper. Pigs can be good students and make great friends, but they may expect that all share their virtues and thus may be deceived. While they can be protective of others, Pigs are often very interested in their own pleasures and can be greedy and acquisitive.

A widespread popular interest in the Chinese zodiac—at least in terms of the iconic animal figures associated with it, and in particular the mystical powers and forces they represent—may be inferred, for example, from the fact that a popular TV series took the symbols of that system as a major plot device over the course of a number of years. Jackie Chan Adventures, an animated children’s series from the early 2000s, featured an avatar of the eponymous international martial arts, film, and comedy star as an archaeologist working with his family and a law-enforcement agency against the Dark Hand, a cabal of villains bent on gathering and controlling twelve powerful talismans associated with the Chinese zodiac to release a potent evil force into the world.

The notion that snippets of Chinese lore and astrology—however minimal and out of context—might be woven into an otherwise entirely mainstream entertainment vehicle argues that Chinese folklore in general and the Chinese zodiac in particular are perceived as objects of broad popular appeal, at least on the most basic level. Moreover, a 2012 film starring Jackie Chan as the unfortunately named character Asian Hawk develops some of the same sorts of themes, packaging them in the context of a high-energy, live-action Hollywood movie. Asian Hawk leads a team of adventurers to recover twelve bronze figurines of the animal icons of the Chinese zodiac that were looted by Westerners centuries ago and that are imbued with supernatural powers. The very fact that this high-profile film starring one of the stars in the firmaments of both the Hollywood and Hong Kong entertainment industries was entitled Chinese Zodiac attests to both the widespread fascination with and the broad popular appeal of at least the simplest and most commonly recognized characteristics of this ancient and complex system of astrological divination.

C. Fee

See also Chinese American Mythological and Legendary Deities; Good Luck Charms; Superstitions

Further Reading

Zombie Legends

Zombie is a word with powerful and abiding spiritual, social, and pop-cultural significance and connotations in contemporary America. The concept and term first entered the American consciousness in the South, having migrated from Haiti. The zombie is, in fact, a figure borrowed from the Voodoo traditions of Haiti, and ultimately has its roots in West African folklore; indeed, the term itself has clear West African antecedents in such Kikongo words as nzambi, “god” or “a spirit of a dead person,” and zumbi, “fetish.”
In the context of the folkloric understandings of Haitian Voodoo from which the common American understanding of the term *zombie* is derived, such a revenant is, in simplest terms, a soulless body that is enslaved by the sorcerer that removed its soul and/or reanimated it. Such a corpse is a mere automaton that responds to the commands of the magician that holds it in sway. Such witches are said to be able to use dark powers either to animate the dead or to steal identity and autonomy from those of the living unlucky enough to fall into their clutches. In the latter case, a Voodoo practitioner of black arts—known as a *bokor*—is said to have used a kind of magical powder—or *coup poudre*—to cast his victim into a death-like state, during which the apparently lifeless body would be buried. Soon after the funeral rites were over, however, and when the last of the mourners had departed, the *bokor* would arrive at the graveyard to dig up his thrall, who would ever after serve the sorcerer without question.

Such a notion of a living person trapped in a zombified state owes much of its contemporary currency to Wade Davis, who claimed in his 1985 book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* to have discovered the actual scientific basis for *coup poudre*, and thus the source of the zombie legend. According to Davis, the seemingly magical properties of this substance are in actuality the result of ingredients including dried puffer fish and other potent sources of the neurotoxin tetrodotoxin, or TTX. Davis postulated that zombies are thus individuals with ravaged neurological systems who arise from death-like comas induced by the toxins with which they were afflicted to find themselves buried alive or recently exhumed. The characteristic subarticulate groans, shamboling walks, and paralyzed facial expressions of zombies are therefore, according to this theory, the result of severe brain damage, anoxia, and trauma, rather than that of supernatural black magic. Wes Craven directed Bill Pullman in the 1988 film version of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*; Wade Davis was overtly credited for the inspiration of Richard Maxwell’s screenplay.

Zombies in various manifestations had been a Hollywood staple for more than fifty years before Craven’s adaptation of Davis’s book. *White Zombie* (1932), starring Bela Lugosi and drawing upon a traditional link between witchcraft and zombies, is often considered the first real zombie movie. The modern genre of the apocalyptic zombie film, however, complete with archetypal reanimated corpses with a desperate yearning to gorge on living human flesh—most often specifically brains—seems to have been born (or reanimated) in the imagination of George A. Romero, who produced the iconic *Night of the Living Dead* on a shoestring budget in 1968. This cult classic was followed by with a number of sequels, including *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), the latter of which was loosely reprised in a 2008 version of the same name. The Romero zombie-verse was lampooned to a punk beat in 1985’s *Return of the Living Dead*, which spawned its own series of sequels. The

Zombies thrive in other areas of American culture, as well. There are a great number of zombie-themed video games, for example, and the Internet abounds with “Top Zombie Game” lists, each with its own seemingly rabid—if perhaps not literally flesh-eating—fan-boys. In addition, *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music* contains no fewer than nine entries under the term Zombie. Moreover, besides its abiding currency in pop-culture videos, books, music, and games, the word zombie has crawled from its resting place in the charnel house of the popular imagination to roam American culture at large, signifying a dizzying array of concepts metaphorically linked to reanimated corpses. Zombie refers, for example, to a computer that has been infected by a virus and is partially or fully under the control of an unauthorized user, who generally utilizes the slave machine to generate spam emails. A group of enslaved machines working together is generally called a botnet, although fans of *Star Trek’s* Captain Picard might prefer to call it a Borg. In banking terms, a company kept alive by its creditors is likewise known as a zombie.

*Zombie* is also the name of a cocktail popularized in the 1930s at the Hollywood eatery known as Don the Beachcomber. A mix of juices and a number of rums, the drink is thought to evoke the origins of its name in both its tropical taste and its death-like after-effects. In a similar manner, zombie long has been used popularly as an expression both for drugs and the addicts thereof, and in various slang usages may refer to slow-witted or seemingly impaired individuals, including—historically and humorously—habitual radio listeners or television viewers. The association of this term with drug addiction may be particularly lasting and evocative, however, as such usage may point to a traditional and fundamental terror of the walking dead, who originally represented those who had been ensnared and enslaved through the employment of black arts and the evil employment of soul-deadening magical powders. Thus, while the term zombie comes from a specific time and place and meant something quite different originally than it does in common American parlance today, the word continues to speak to universal human terrors and concerns; stories of such revenants thus have much to teach us both about American culture and about universal human fears and nightmares.

*See also* Buried Alive; Death Waltz; El Muerto; Headless Horseman; Second Death; Voodoo

**Further Reading**