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**Book review of Stefaan Top: Op verhaal komen. Moderne sagen en geruchten uit Vlaanderen. Leuven 2008 [Review of: S. Top (2008) Op verhaal komen. Moderne sagen en geruchten uit Vlaanderen]**

Meder, T.

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Police, schools to probe tales of 'pill parties' in Urbandale  
By TOM BARTON

Urbandale police and school officials will investigate rumors of so-called "pharm" parties at which students exchange prescription drugs, sometimes stolen from their parents' medicine cabinets.

Also known as "fish bowl" parties, the gatherings have allegedly featured high-strength painkillers, anti-anxiety medications and stimulants, often washed down with alcohol.

### Book Reviews

Stefaan Top, *Op verhaal komen. Moderne sagen en geruchten uit Vlaanderen*. Leuven, Uitgeverij Davidsfonds NV, 2008. 264 pp.

One day, a carcass was found in the middle of the road. It turned out to be a dead monkey that had fallen out of a van. Investigating this case, the police found out the van came from the zoo of Antwerp and was on its way to a hotdog factory (79).

This contemporary legend was taken down in Flanders in 2006 from a seventeen-year-old boy called Dennis. The narrative, of course, suggests that hotdogs contain meat we do not want to eat. The story started its career over here when it was first published in Dutch in 1978 by Ethel Portnoy (1927-2004) in a book called *Broodje Aap*,<sup>1</sup> which means 'monkey burger' – in Dutch the term *Broodje Aap* has become a *pars pro toto* for all tall tales and urban legends. Portnoy actually imported the story from New York, where she had lived for many years: her version of the story is situated in The Bronx. In 1978 a hotdog was still a typical American snack and hard to come by in the Low Countries. This specific monkey burger story has not been found in oral tradition much, but Stefaan Top was able to publish a specimen.

*Op verhaal komen. Moderne sagen en geruchten uit Vlaanderen* is the sixth and final part in a Flemish series of legends, published by Top. The preceding parts are filled with traditional legends from the five provinces of Flanders,<sup>1</sup> the sixth part contains "modern legends and rumours" from all over Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium).

Stefaan Top is one of the scholars who witnessed the birth of the ISCLR in Sheffield in 1982. From that moment on, he started collecting clippings and encouraging students from the university of Leuven to write down and collect contemporary legends. In 1990 he reports about the progress being made, and in both *FOAFtale News* and *Fabula*,<sup>2</sup> he promises that an anthology of collected 'urban legends' will soon appear. We had to wait until 2008, but

in the meantime Top was able to profit from the fieldwork performed by his students. *Op verhaal komen* contains one collection dating back to 1982, and Top only used one story from it. Three other collections date from the nineties, but no less than fifteen collections were made between 2000 and 2007. This means that most of the Flemish contemporary legends published have been taken down quite recently. No material has been published before.

Apart from some corrections and the addition of titles, Stefaan Top did not rework or rewrite the tales. Unlike popular editions of folktales that present one 'representative' version of the story, Top regularly prints more versions in full, which gives us a proper impression of the variability without the reader getting bored. The experts will recognize a lot of tales we give names like the *Vanishing Hitchhiker*, the *Scuba Diver in the Tree*, the *Razor Blades in the Water Slide*, the *Exploding Toilet*, the *Peanut Butter Surprise Party*, *Aids Harry*, *Aids Mary*, *Superhero Hijinks*, *Indecent Exposure*, the *Kidney Heist*, the *Licked Hand* and so forth. Although most of the material is quite recent, in comparison to Peter Burger's latest book *De Jacht op de Veluwepoema*<sup>2</sup> there are some delicate topics missing, like the attacks of September 11, acts of terrorism, Muslim aggression and Flemish nationalist movements like *Vlaams Blok / Vlaams Belang*. Stories about a wolf running around in *Waasland* that has never been captured are only mentioned in the comments (214-215), but none is published. Another delicate topic was inevitable though: the Flemish stories about the *Angelic Smile*<sup>3</sup> (176-178), in which a youth gang mutilates girls who try to avoid a group rape. Most of the time the stories have an ethnic component, because the victims are supposed to have been white girls, while the boys are said to be North-Africans. This racist element is almost completely lacking in Top's book: only in one of the four versions, it is mentioned that the gang consists of "dark men". There is only one other tale in the book in which a group of violent men is identified as Moroccan (210). Another recently circulating tale is published in two versions: the tale of the mentally challenged boy who steals a penguin from the zoo (166-167). In his comments, Top supposes that this Flemish tale - taken down in 2007 - is not well known abroad (229), but the tale already hit the Dutch media in the summer of 2006<sup>5</sup>, and had been circulating in England and the US at the end of 2005. Almost all the storytellers in Top's book are adolescents, between the ages of fourteen and twenty<sup>2</sup>, whereas their stories are indeed about the proverbial friend of a friend a lot. On the basis of his own book, Top comes to the following division of sources mentioned by the storytellers themselves:

Friends, neighbours, other people: 32%  
Media: 21%  
Family: 20%  
School: 13%  
Clubs: 10%  
'Personal experience': 3%

Top concludes that no less than 79% of the tales are still transmitted orally (p. 234), which falsifies the somewhat pessimistic idea that the natural habitat of the 'urban legend' would be the Internet these days. As far as the

media are concerned, not only the Internet is mentioned, but radio and tv as well. Storytellers specifically remember the popular Flemish television series about 'urban legends' called *Sterke Verhalen* [Tall Tales], by Luk Wyns. At least one tale describes a scene from the American movie *Urban Legend* (1998) – the young storyteller just mentions "film" as her source (199-200). It is surprising to see how few newspapers are mentioned.

Top encountered the usual problems in contemporary legend research. For instance: the story about the truckdriver having sex with a nun who turns out to be a transvestite (52), is that a legend or a joke? It all depends on the intention of the narrator. In this case the storyteller presented the tale when he was asked for an urban legend. Another question is: is it a legend or is it true? The story of the old lady eating crisps and choking on a pug (a collectible toy coin) inside the bag has the features of a contaminated food story (or a silly old lady story), but in this case it really happened in Flanders in the mid-nineties.

Then there are the stories told in the first person. Some of them are memorates for sure, giving awkward interpretations of experienced facts. Other stories look more like cases of proto-ostension:<sup>7</sup> appropriations of existing tales, told as if they happened to the narrators themselves. And then there is the 'Anti-Sage' resembling the shaggy dog story, like the tale of the babysitter who spills some Coca Cola on the floor and repeatedly gets scary phone calls about the stain and the consequences. In the end the doorbell rings and there is... a salesman selling cleaning products (92)! The tale is a ridiculization of the Man Upstairs-versions.

Some stories hardly have a plot, and Top classifies them as rumours. Here is one example, told by seventeen-year-old Thomas: "A crocodile is supposed to wander around in the sewers of Paris; when he was still a child, Louis XIV had flushed it down the toilet" (80).

Finally, I found one story that is a retelling of a literary short story. It is the tale of a man who developed a taste for consuming his own flesh. This cannibal chopped off two of his legs and one of his arms. He visits a friend to ask him to chop off the last limb (95-96). This short story was written in 1973 in the form of the diary of a physician by the Dutch author Belcampo (pseudonym for Herman Pieter Schönfeld Wichers, 1902-1990). I have not found this story in oral tradition before.

If you do not ask for specific legends, often enough you will not get them. This can be a problem in legend research. Top shows that there are many stories to be found on topics like police alcohol testing, wedding pranks, chain mail and contacting ghosts with a ouija board or a glass (34, 64-67, 111-136, 143-145, 205-207). In my view, one of the best decisions Stefaan Top made is to include all kinds of stories about the supernatural (and the extra-terrestrial). In the past, contemporary legends have been defined as "primarily non-supernatural, secular narratives" (31), and in his introduction, Top himself states the following: "In contemporary legends the religious element is completely lacking, in extreme contrast to the folk-legends in which the role of the church was most

relevant" (41, note 81). Surely the influence of Christian doctrine is diminishing rapidly, belief in the supernatural on the other hand is not (which is a form of religious behaviour as well). Flemish fieldworkers inquiring for the supernatural obtained a tremendous number of tales in response, dealing with revenants (105-106, 137-143), summoned souls (111-136) and extra-terrestrials (the modern substitutes for devils, angels, saints or gods; 107-111). Stefaan Top's book proves that the stories are there in abundance, and that if they are lacking in other anthologies, they have just been filtered out by the collectors. That the modern supernatural tales are in fact reworkings of traditional legends cannot be a valid argument anymore, since we know that a lot of secular 'urban legends' have a notable past as well.

The text edition by Top is embedded in a scientific account, consisting of an introduction (22-42), comments (212-243), sources (244-245), survey form (246), bibliography (247-254) and indexes (255-263). I could not help noticing that in the introduction, Top creatively quotes Gillian Bennett on the difference between traditional and contemporary legends: "(traditional) legend implies a long-lived story about the past told by elderly people living in remote rural places, told as true but inherently fictional". Then there are the "contemporary legends, [they] reflect the fears and anxieties of a particular age or are cautionary tales warning of modern dangers" (23). In the first quote Bennett actually deals with the old-fashioned folklorists' view on legends in general, in the second quote Bennett starts with the words "I do not concur with the common view that these stories are also contemporary in the sense that..."<sup>5</sup>

In the comments, the texts are being confronted with each other - unfortunately this confrontation sometimes remains a bit of an enumeration of stories we have already read, while the interpretation may be a bit shallow or too popular at times. For instance, Top states that ghosts re-entered folk narrative, while in fact they never left. While Top considers belief in the supernatural a form of "irrational thinking", I would rather opt for spiritual or magical thinking (223, cf 234). I do admit ghosts have become a hype again in the age of Harry Potter, and that they lost most of their Christian context. However, the idea of a spiritual life after death has in fact not been abandoned by many.

In dealing with stories about students hazing freshmen, Top sees a connection with a loss of moral standards among students (232). Perhaps I am too much of an optimist when I think the situation is rather getting better than worse. At least the stories cannot be taken as proof for either view, only as a narrative image outsiders have created of students and their supposedly gruesome initiation rites. More than cultural facts, contemporary legends reflect cultural feelings.

However, these are details, for we should first and foremost be content with the fact that Stefaan Top - after keeping us waiting for quite a while - managed to publish this rich and valuable Flemish folktale material. We do need to keep in mind that this book firmly roots in the research tradition that above all considers legends to be folk literature, not so much folk behaviour.

I would like to finish with the quotation and interpretation of another interesting tale from the collection:

In our neighbourhood there lives a family, and a few years ago the mother had an abortion. She now claims that she is being haunted by the ghost of a little girl with long blonde hairs. She suspects it is her daughter (139).

The story can be interpreted as another example of belief in the existence of an afterlife and of restless souls returning in order to seek contact with the living. At the same time, the story of the little girl's apparition - either true or imaginative - can be regarded as a manifestation or projection of the mother's bad conscience.

Theo Meder

Meertens Institute, Amsterdam

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ethel Portnoy: Broodje Aap. *De folklore van de post-industriële samenleving*. Amsterdam 1978 (10th impression, 1992, p. 116).

<sup>2</sup> Stefaan Top: *Op verhaal komen - Limburgs sagenboek*. Leuven 2004; idem: *Op verhaal komen - Vlaams-Brabants sagenboek*. Leuven 2005; idem: *Op verhaal komen - West-Vlaams sagenboek*. Leuven 2005; idem: *Op verhaal komen - Oost-Vlaams sagenboek*. Leuven 2006; idem: *Op verhaal komen - Sagen uit de provincie Antwerpen*. Leuven 2007.

<sup>3</sup> S. Top: 'Modern Legends in the Belgian Oral Tradition: A Report', in: *Fabula* 31 (1990), pp. 272-278; idem: in: *FOAFtale News* 17 (1990), pp. 3-6.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Burger: *De Jacht op de Veluwepoema. Sagen en geruchten uit het moderne leven*. Amsterdam 2006.

<sup>5</sup> In the Netherlands the gang was called the "Smiley Gang". The narratives are related to the "Chelsey Smile" tales. See: Peter Burger: 'De sage van de Smileybende. Vertelfolklore, nieuws en morele paniek rond groepsverkrachtingen', in: *CULTUUR. Tijdschrift voor etnologie* 4 (2006), pp. 40-55.

<sup>6</sup> Annemiek Verbeek: 'Broodje aap in 2006: kind steelt pinguïn uit Artis', in: *Het Parool*, 25 July 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Only two stories come from women aged 61 and 76 (pp. 103, 173). The 61-year-old Emilliene told the longest story in the book, about her son being confronted with a mysterious satanic sect in Italy (pp. 98-103).

<sup>8</sup> L. Dégh: *Narratives in society: a Performer-Centered Study of Narration*. Helsinki 1995, pp. 250-253; B. Ellis: *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults. Legends We Live*. Jackson 2001, p. 163; T. Meder: 'Proto-ostension. De primeurs in Hoeven en de mediamieke gaven van een kroongetuige', in: T. Meder: *In graancirkelkringen. Een ethnologisch onderzoek naar verhalen uit de grenswetenschap*. Amsterdam 2006, pp. 281-302.

<sup>9</sup> It looks like proto-ostension can be found on pp. 73-74, 93, 142, but - because of a lack of more contextual data - one can never be sure.

<sup>10</sup> Gillian Bennett: *Bodies. Sex, Violence, Disease, and Death in Contemporary Legend*. Jackson 2005, pp. ix and xlii.

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### Urban Legends: A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors,

edited by Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007. xxi + 343 pages, appendix, indexes, \$85.00 cloth.

Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, editors of the "Perspectives on Contemporary Legend" series and subsequent works that have significantly influenced legend scholarship, present a splendid range of legend texts in this entertaining, well-organized volume. Unlike Jan H. Brunvand's alphabetically arranged *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (2002), this book has nine sections: "City Life," "Horror," "Accidents, Fate, and Chance," "The Body and Disease," "Animals," "Sex and Nudity," "Merchandise," "Murder, Death, and Burial," and "The Supernatural." Each section includes source material that demonstrates the legend's dissemination and adaptability to social conditions.

The editors' introduction explains that legends "have been recently told and are clothed in modern dress" but have, in many cases, a long lineage. The "Blood Libel Legend," for example, originated in the Middle Ages. In contrast to folktales, which are sometimes known as fairy tales, legends do not feature "fabulous beasts, enchanted forests, witches and magicians, ghosts and fairies, set in a fantasy world" (xvi). Featuring unusual content in an everyday setting, legends may inspire belief or partial belief, but it is usually difficult to determine whether they are true or false. Such determinations seem unimportant, as "stories are valuable and exciting regardless of their truth value" (xx).

Bennett and Smith provide a short history of legend studies; while this history could be somewhat longer, it covers the field's milestones effectively. Noting that folklorists have done the most assiduous legend research, the editors list other fields in which scholars have pursued legend studies, including anthropology, business, communications, English language and literature, history, and parapsychology. Wisely, the editors do not emphasize legend theory; the nine sections contain just the right amount of contextual information and interpretation, as well as suggestions for further reading.

Section one, "City Life," presents a number of legends that have circulated widely, both in Europe and in the United States. "Alligators in the Sewers," for example, has amused and frightened Americans and Europeans since the early 1980s. Articles from Paris newspapers show how seriously French citizens took this legend in the 1980s and 1990s; films and literary works have been shaped by its variants (3). Other legends discussed in this section include "The March of the Sewer Rats," "The Mutilated Shopper," "The Grateful Terrorist," "Roaming Gnomes," and "The Severed Fingers."