

**Introduction to Part Two: Contemporary legend:  
conspiracy, belief and politics**

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## Part two

### Contemporary legend: conspiracy, belief and politics

Diane A. Rodgers

Considering the continuing current levels of exposed institutional corruption, cover-ups and political scandals across the globe into the 2020s, it is arguable the legacy of *The X-Files* and the themes with which the series dealt remain as relevant as ever. Paranoia, conspiracy theories and misappropriation of folklore, under the aegis of contemporary legend, invade everyday life with the potential to directly affect social, cultural and popular belief. Such legends can be understood as stories that spread primarily through informal channels, particularly via word of mouth or contemporary forms of media. Contemporary legend narratives tend to be about subjects that really exist, or are ‘believed to have existed; even when it recounts a supernatural or highly unusual event, this is claimed to have occurred in real life’ (Simpson and Roud 2003: 212). Thus, the plausible political context in which *The X-Files* situates even its most fantastical narratives, conspiracy theories and supernatural events is supported by the pilot episode’s opening claim that “The following story is inspired by actual documented accounts”. In an era where influential billionaires publicly muse upon alien life and conspiracy theories help sway electoral outcomes and fuel the polarization of public health debates, it is vital to reflect upon how *The X-Files* presents its legendary stories with its own strongly conspiratorial suggestion that these stories *could be* real: stories that ‘they’ simply don’t want ‘us’ to know.

David Clarke’s chapter opens this section with an exploration of contemporary UFO legends that inspired *The X-Files*, charting a history of the modern phenomenon of

Unidentified Flying Objects from events in 1947 (such as the 'Roswell incident') to the present day. Clarke examines how the portrayal of phenomena like alien abduction experiences (and recurring associated motifs like the notion of 'missing time') in entertainment media affected popular belief and how this, in turn, was reflected within *The X-Files*. The chapter looks at the role played by *The X-Files* in reinvigorating a fringe belief system and how this fed into mainstream perceptions about UFO conspiracies and cover-ups which, Clarke argues, have become as much a part of the American cultural myth and imagination as the assassination of President Kennedy.

Racheal Harris moves the notion of belief into the realm of alternative spiritualities and new religious movements in terms of their portrayal in the series. Harris explores how echoes of the mass suicides which occurred in Jonestown in 1978 and the 1993 Branch Davidian siege at Waco, Texas are evident in episodes of *The X-Files*. Harris examines the representation of 'cults' and alternative religions such as Haitian Vodou across the series and interrogates changing attitudes to spiritual beliefs which deviate from a Christian 'norm' across recent decades.

Picking up on notions of myth and legend (such as those introduced earlier by Clarke), Gregory Frame situates *The X-Files* within a lineage of 1970s conspiracy thrillers (such as *All the President's Men*, 1976) and the USA's 'traumatic decade'. Citing the parenthetical milestones of the 1963 Kennedy assassination and the US's defeat in the war in Vietnam in 1975, Frame's chapter examines how these are incorporated into the wider 'myth-arc' in *The X-Files*. This chapter discusses how events like these, and others like the Watergate scandal, remain thematically relevant both throughout the series and to today's society in relation to continuing government secrecy, corruption and denial.

Bethan Jones looks back at *The X-Files* from the perspective of the modern ascendancy of fake news and conspiracy theories like QAnon. Her chapter questions the

notion of the search for ‘The Truth’ in the series as linked to the 1980s and ’90s eras of Reagan and Bush and how this was reinterpreted for seasons ten and eleven, under the shadow of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America. Jones draws upon original research recording fan response to the political relevance and verisimilitude of the revived series, exploring the ways in which the later seasons reflect increasingly right-wing global trends in the 2010s and onward.

The authors of these chapters, therefore, create a picture of not only the stories, myths and legends communicated by *The X-Files*, but also the part the series played itself in perpetuating notions about subjects from alien life to government corruption. It is fascinating in this section to reflect upon which of these notions have become pervasive in popular culture and to what extent *The X-Files* (and the ideas shared within its own legendary cycle) may have affected cultural and popular beliefs and perhaps even a number of conspiracy theories widely shared today.

## **References**

Simpson, J. and S. Roud (2003), *A Dictionary of English Folklore*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.