Tears for Fears: the curse of the crying boy

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TEARS FOR FEARS: THE CURSE OF THE CRYING BOY

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Introduction

'…at the boundary of the legend is *news.* Were folklorists to suspend their disbelief, legendry would immediately resolve itself into the category of news' (Oring 1990, p. 165)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *curse* as 'an utterance consigning, or supposed or intended to consign, (a person or thing) to spiritual or temporal evil' (OED online 2022). Evidence of traditional beliefs in the efficacy of curses is found in the folklore of many cultures and is often attached to material objects as varied as vases, chairs, dolls, jewels, Egyptian mummy cases, stones and statues. The author of a recent compendium lists innocuous objects that have acquired an uncanny reputation in four types of circumstances. They 'can become cursed because someone with a powerful or mystical knowledge' hexes them; they were present 'at a scene of great tragedy' and therefore absorbed and retained their evil influence; they were inherently evil from that start or 'it could all just be in our heads' (Ocker 2020 p.12).

One type of curse is attached to examples of folk art, particularly paintings or prints where the identity of either the artist or the subject remains ambiguous or uncanny (Anderson 2014). The folklore motif of the magic or uncanny painting also occurs in popular literature where such portraits have been 'stock feature of fantastic fiction since its earliest days' (Mighall 2000: xviii). An early scene in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Ortranto* (1764), regarded as the first Gothic novel, has the giant figure of Count Alfonso step down

from the frame of his own portrait. In Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890) the painting does its owner's ageing for him from the seclusion of his attic and its evil influence originates in a demonic pact. In the 20th century several influential writers in the genre of supernatural horror fiction, including M.R. James, H.P. Lovecraft, Roald Dahl and Stephen King published stories with plots centred upon eerie paintings that periodically change, act as a portal to other worlds or as conduits for demonic forces.

Paintings and prints depicting young children are a common focus for supernatural folklore and personal experience narratives **[1]**. A mid-20th century folk art genre known as big eyed waifs or 'big-eyed art' was popular in the aftermath of WW2. The subject matter is sad-looking children of both sexes with huge, preternatural eyes often disgorging tears. The subjects also included dogs, cats and other animals. The genre was popularised by the work of the San Franciso-based artist Margaret Keane whose life-story became the subject of a film, *Big Eyes* (Tim Burton, 2014). Keane said she was inspired by homeless orphans she saw on the streets whilst studying art in post-war Paris (Ronson 2014). Her paintings sold well across North America and Europe. Her style inspired others including an obscure Italian artist, Bruno Amadio (d. 1981) who produced a series of portraits of crying boys and girls, painted in his studio in Venice. Amadio signed his work using pseudonyms including Giovanni Bragolin (aka 'G. Bragolin' and 'Bragolin') and Franchot Seville (Polidoro, 2012).

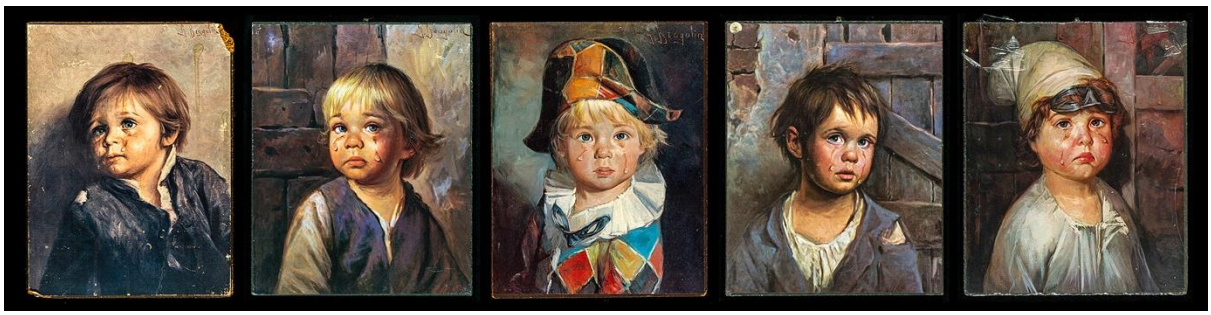

Figure 1: Selection of 'Crying Boy' portraits credited to 'G Bragolin' from the collection of Andrew Robinson (unframed, 240x300mm, varnished paper print on chipboard). Image © A Robinson 2025.

Prints of the crying boy portraits were among the first examples of mass-produced popular art, marketed via catalogues such as Freemans from the 1960s onwards. This accounts for their popularity among the working class and aspiring middle classes. In 1985 a tabloid newspaper claimed that 250,000 such prints had been sold in the UK (Boyes 1989, p.120). According to contemporary news reports, the ‘big eyed’ art style was particularly popular with women (see also Boyes 1989, p. 127-28). Wayne Hemingway recalls his grandmother having a ‘crying boy’ on the wall of her Lancashire home during his childhood. He believes their appeal came from owners ‘feeling sorry for urchin children’ (Sawyer, 2009). Others suggested that owners regarded them as exotic or mysterious and an antidote of opposition to the drabness of post-WW2 austerity in the UK. Journalist Miranda Sawyer suggests that owners were motivated by a desire to rescue ‘these poor mites, who were often from foreign climes, or past times, dressed in Spanish flamenco outfits or Dickensian rags’ (Sawyer 2009).

Origin of The Crying Boy legend

The first reference to ‘The Curse of the Crying Boy' occurred in September 1985 in the Rotherham edition of a regional evening newspaper *The Star*, published in Sheffield, that served South Yorkshire and parts of north Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. It appeared as a page seven lead on Monday 2 September 1985 (Murphy 1985). Written by journalist John Murphy, it described how a redundant miner, Ronald Hall and his wife May, blamed a print of a crying boy, signed G. Bragolin, for a fire that severely damaged their terraced council house in the coal-mining village of Swallownest.

The story, nine paragraphs in length, was framed by two images: on the right the ‘crying boy’ print (attributed to Bragolin) and on the left a photograph of the couple’s 25-year-old son David with his arm swathed in bandages. The introductory paragraph read: ‘The distraught Hall family from Swallownest believe the curse of the “Crying Boy” print has struck at their home’. The story went on to describe how the fire began when David, a fitter at

Kiveton Park colliery, was trying to cook potato chips and it spread rapidly. Although the downstairs rooms of the house were badly damaged, the framed print in the lounge had inexplicably survived and appeared untouched by the flames.

Family hit by a 'curse'

THE distraught Hall family from Swallownest believe the curse of the "Crying Boy" print has struck at their home.

By John Murphy

Their home in Pagenall Drive, Swallownest, was wrecked by fire, and they are kicking themselves for not following the advice of a fireman relative, who told them to get rid of a framed print of a little boy crying.

Ronald Hall's brother, Peter, works at Erskine Road fire station and he told the family that every house fire he's been called to there's been the same sad print.

"When he told us we just laughed," said 53-year-old May Hall. "It's not going back in the house, it's going in the bin. It's a lovely print, but it's got to go.

"I'm not superstitious, but this makes you wonder," added May. The print was not damaged in the blaze, and May said this was the case with other prints that had been in fires.

Ronald Hall, a 59-year-old redundant miner, said: "I want to burn it to make sure it doesn't come back. If I find out who painted it, then I'll sue him."

The house suffered extensive smoke and heat damage after chip pan fat started to blaze. The kitchen was completely gutted.

The Hall's 25-year-old son David was trying to cook chips when the fire started. The Kiveton Park colliery fitter said: "It was very frightening, and I.m upset about the whole thing."

David burnt his hands when he tried to put out the fire with a damp towel, but he has not been detained in hospital. The Hall's are now having to stay with relatives.

"Crying Boy" print.

Figure 2: *Family Hit By A 'Curse'* by John Murphy published on page seven of the Rotherham edition of the Sheffield Star on 2nd September 1985. Clipping from the author's collection.

The account also said the Halls 'are kicking themselves' for not following advice given to them by a fire fighter relative who had advised them to remove the framed print. It emerged that Ron's brother Peter Hall, who worked at Rotherham fire station, had warned the family 'that every house fire he's been called to there's been the same sad print' (Murphy 1985).

Before the arrival of the internet, stories published by regional newspapers were frequently 'tasted' by regional news agencies and a network of freelance journalists who earned a living by re-writing them and selling their versions to the national newspapers. The most popular and influential, in terms of circulation figures in the UK at the time, was the tabloid *The Sun* that had a daily circulation of approximately 4.1 million copies in 1985 (Franklin 2008, p.8). The tabloid version of the story appeared on page 13 of its 4 September edition headlined: '*Blazing Curse of the Crying Boy*!' with a subheading 'Picture

is a Fire Jinx'. The story, written by Martyn Sharpe, *The Sun's* South Yorkshire correspondent quoted May Hall, who said: 'There's no way the picture will come through our door again. Peter [Ron Hall's fire fighter brother] told us he wouldn't have the picture in his house, and neither would his friends at the fire station' (Sharpe 1985). Accompanying the story was a photograph of the Bragolin print, with a caption that read: '*Tears for fears…the portrait that firemen claim is cursed*.' The story added that an estimated 50,000 'crying boy' prints, signed 'G. Bragolin', had been sold in branches of British department stores, particularly in the working-class areas of northern England (Clarke 2008; Clarke 2011).

In my earlier investigation of the origins of the rumour I noted that, in the context of regional newspaper practices in the UK, 'a report of a house fire would merit no more than a couple of paragraphs in a local or regional newspaper. What transformed this story into a page lead in Britain's leading tabloid was the intervention of Ron Hall's brother Peter, a fire fighter based in Rotherham' (Clarke 2008). The former editor of *The Sun*, Kelvin MacKenzie, has confirmed that it was the testimony of the Yorkshire fire fighters, 'not a regular member of the public', that enhanced the news values of the story (Punt 2010). News values are the professional codes used in the selection, construction and presentation of news stories (Harcup and O'Neill 2001). Fire fighters are regarded as credible sources of reliable facts as part of what journalists categorise as hard news, defined as stories about the day's events that 'focus on a particular event and are factual in content' (de Vos 1996, p. 33). The Crying Boy story included both factual information and elements of novelty and sensation that placed it in a liminal position between hard news and human interest, often described as 'soft news'. In these circumstances, journalistic news values such as novelty and sensation can and do take precedence over the requirement for accuracy (Harcup and O'Neill 2001). Since the advent of social media 'shareability' has added another important news value to this type of story (Harcup and O'Neill, 2016).

Journalists Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie directly credit editor MacKenzie as the key story-teller in the creation of the Crying Boy legend. For much of the 1980s when

MacKenzie was editor, *The Sun* was engaged in a circulation war for readers with its Fleet Street rival, the *Daily Mirror*. During this period the tabloid published a series of quirky and bizarre stories that had tenuous factual accuracy but strong entertainment news values. Some of these, most notably the 1986 story headlined ‘Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster’, have earned a permanent place in pop culture as contemporary legends (Mayhew 2019). The crying boy arrived at a time when MacKenzie was on the look-out for what journalists call ‘a great splash’ (Chippindale and Horrie 1990, p. 188). For tabloid journalists, ‘a splash’ was a story that would provide a newspaper with an exclusive overlooked by its rivals, in this case the *Daily Mirror*. MacKenzie’s role was to recognise the inherent news values of the crying boy curse story from a mass of run-of-the-mill copy from the regional news agencies. He told his sceptical news editors: ‘This one’s got legs,' his phrase for a story that would ‘run and run’ (Chippindale and Horrie 1990, p. 188-89).

John Murphy, author of the story published by *The Star*, provides a different version of its origins (personal communication 2017). News of the Swallownest fire was acquired as part of his early morning telephone calls made to the emergency services as part of his daily news-gathering duties. Murphy’s aim was to collect news-worthy incidents that had occurred over the weekend that followed the August bank holiday. What was known as ‘calls duty’ remains part of the occupational rituals followed by journalists at that time.

‘I regarded the report of a chip-pan fire as nothing more than a NIB [news in brief] but I went out to the scene as it was a quiet news day. I remember talking to one of the fire fighters who was holding the print of the crying boy. He said something like “it’s very strange” the number of fires he had attended where the only thing to emerge unscathed was the same print of a crying boy that had been salvaged from the house in Swallownest’. Murphy confirmed it was he, the journalist, not the fire fighter who was responsible for the phrase ‘curse of the crying boy’: ‘He said it was really odd, it must be some kind of curse, and after that I had got my angle on what was otherwise a pretty run-of-the-mill story. *In*

effect I think I created the idea that there was a curse [my emphasis]' (personal communication 2017)

Murphy's story and the follow-up published by *The Sun* appeared during what is known as the 'silly season' that follows the UK Bank Holiday. In 1985 this occurred on Monday 26 August. The summer month of August is viewed, in the occupational folklore of journalists, as a time when there is 'very little serious news'. Senior editorial staff and politicians are on leave from Parliament and the machinery of central and local government is suspended. During such quiet periods, the print media has traditionally turned 'to the reporting of more trivial matters' such as sightings of Sea Serpents and, more recently, UFOs (Franklin 2005, p.245).

'*Crying Boy Curse Jinxed Us Too'* – how a rumour became a legend

The Sun's version of Murphy's story generated a series of newspaper follow-ups during September and October 1985 when media interest in the topic reached its peak. To examine the coverage and its context, I conducted content analysis of a sample of national and regional newspaper at the British Library's newspaper collection **[2]**. The search located 38 stories that referred to the Crying Boy print published between 2 September 1985 and 1 April 1986.

On 5 September 1985 *The Sun* reported that scores of 'horrified readers claiming to be victims of the "Curse of the Crying Boy" had flooded [the paper] with calls…they all feared they were jinxed by having the print of a tot with tears pouring down his face in their homes' (Willsher 1985). The results of the content analysis highlighted the tabloid's attempts to link the print with bad luck in the period immediately before Halloween, a festival often associated with evil and the supernatural. Words and phrases used in Willsher's page lead included 'curse', 'jinx', 'feared', 'horrified' and were laden with sinister foreboding (Clarke 2008). Folklorists have noticed how the popularity of Halloween increased in the UK since around 1980 when the North American custom of 'Trick of Treat' was incorporated into

existing visiting customs as a result of depictions in TV, comics and cinema. The media first began showing a sustained interest in Halloween at this time and frequently published warnings from Christian groups ‘arguing that celebrating supernatural evil forces is morally evil’ (Simpson and Roud 2000, p. 164).

Among the new personal experiences that emerged from locations outside of Rotherham was that by Dora Mann, from Mitcham, Surrey, who claimed her house was gutted just six months after she bought a print of the painting. 'All my paintings were destroyed – except the one of the crying boy’ (Willsher 1985). Sandra Craske, of Kilburn, North Yorkshire, said that she, her sister-in-law, and a friend had all suffered disastrous fires since they acquired copies. *The Sun* also published the account of a family from Nottingham who blamed a copy of a Bragolin print for a house blaze that left them homeless. Brian Parks, whose wife and three children required treatment in hospital for smoke inhalation, said he had destroyed his copy after returning from hospital to find it hanging undamaged on the charred interior wall (Hooper 1985a; Clarke 2008).

As the rumoured link between house fires and ownership of the print spread, new details emerged that encouraged the idea of supernatural danger. One reader reported an attempt to destroy two of the prints by fire – only to find, to her horror, they *would not burn*. Her claim was tested by security guard Paul Collier who disposed of one of his two prints onto a bonfire. Despite being left in the flames for an hour, it was not even scorched. 'It was frightening – the fire wouldn’t even touch it,' he told *The Sun*. 'I really believe it is jinxed. We feel doubly at risk with two of these in the house [and] we are determined to get rid of them’ (Oldfield 1985; Clarke 2008).

Journalists at the Rotherham branch office of the *Sheffield Star* followed up the national coverage via interviews with the fire fighters that investigated the causes of fires in the South Yorkshire region. ‘The real mystery, from their perspective, was *how* the picture had survived fires that were in themselves perfectly explicable. In most cases straightforward explanations of carelessly discarded cigarettes, overheated chip-pans and

faulty electric heaters had been uncovered during the subsequent investigation' (Clarke 2008; Clarke 2011).

One of the fire fighters interviewed by journalists John Murphy and Ray Parkin was Alan Wilkinson who claimed that he had recorded fifty 'crying boy' fires dating back to 1973. Despite this large number he did not accept there was any evidence of a 'supernatural' cause (Boyes 1989, p.119). Wilkinson, who had 33 years experience, said he wasn't superstitious and had satisfied himself that most had been caused by human carelessness. Despite his pragmatism, he could not explain how they had survived the inferno that generated heat sufficient to strip plaster from walls. His wife had her own theory: 'I always say it's the tears that put the fire out' (Boyes 1989, p. 127). *The Sun* appeared uninterested in finding a rational explanation. It ignored Wilkinson's qualified comments and claimed, 'fire chiefs have admitted they have no logical explanation for a number of recent incidents' (Oldfield 1985).

The photographs used to illustrate the newspaper coverage make it apparent the prints were not all reproductions of the same painting, nor were all the prints by the same artist. Art historian Gail-Nina Anderson has noted the 'atypical aspect of this piece of artlore is its attachment to a reproduction rather than a one-off work of art' as the 'curse' appears to be attached to the visual motif as opposed to the original painting. This 'represents a democratization of the belief that an artwork can act as a channel for undefined energies, and also pares away the notion that the process of creation might account for its powers' (Anderson 2014, p. 149).

The print that survived the fire in Rotherham that initially triggered the scare was signed by the artist, Bragolin. *The Sun* claimed the original was 'by an Italian artist.' Attempts to trace him floundered as art historians said he did not appear to have 'a coherent biography' (Clarke 2008). My content analysis of the newspaper coverage revealed the extent to which other versions of the 'crying boy' print genre featured in the fires. Another example, pictured in October 1985, is from of a series of studies, *Childhood*, painted by a

Scottish artist, Anna Zinkeisen, who died in 1976. My research found the crying boy genre of vernacular art existed in at least five different variations. At least two of these had companion studies of ‘crying girls’ and some people owned copies of both. Others in the series included pictures of girls and boys holding flowers, most of them sad in tone and reflecting the influence of the ‘big eyed’ style pioneered by Margaret Keane. In defiance of the scare headlines, some owners had developed such an emotional bond with the print they refused to dispose of them. 'I’ve never cared for the picture myself because of its sadness,' the partner of one proud owner was quoted as saying. He then went on to pose two questions that many anxious *Sun* readers wanted answered: 'Why would you want a picture of a child crying? Why *was* the child crying?’ (Boyes 1989, p. 120). My research from 2008 to present has revealed the single common denominator was that all ‘crying boys’ were ‘examples of cheap, mass-produced art that was sold in great numbers by English department stores during the 60s and 70s. The geographical cluster simply reflected their popularity among working class communities in part of northern England’ (Clarke 2008; Clarke 2011).

Journalists are trained to refer to experts when reporting on breaking stories but in this case art dealers and scientists were reluctant to comment. Paul Smith’s examination of the relationship between contemporary legends and newspapers identified six basic approaches: reporting, exposing, retracting, educating, entertaining and advertising (Smith 1992, p. 45). Whilst *The Sun’s* was central in reporting the Crying Boy legend as ‘factual news’ its rival tabloid, *The Daily Mirror*, was instrumental in attempts to expose the story as untrue and, in the process, educate its readers. A letter that asked for advice about ‘the picture of a little boy with a teardrop on his cheek’ that was loved by its female owner offered an opportunity to employ two of these basic tabloid functions. ‘Everyone seems to think that wherever the picture is hung there is a fire, so I should get rid of it?’, she asked. In response *The Mirror’s* Old Codgers, a semi-regular question and answer forum published by the

tabloid, dismissed the link between the prints and tragedies as a pure coincidence, ‘one of those silly irrational rumours which spring up from time to time’ (Old Codgers 1986).

The tabloids also approached Folklore Society member and Rotherham resident Georgina Boyes for a comment. She later reported the interview was not used because she refused to provide a supernatural explanation for the crying boy fires. The journalist 'went off in search of "a witch" or "somebody into the occult" who might make a better headline' (Boyes 1989, p. 125). In her place Roy Vickery, secretary of the Folklore Society, was quoted to the effect that the original artist might have mistreated the child model in some way, adding: 'All these fires could be child’s curse, his way of getting revenge' (Kay 1985). In 2022 Vickery said he could not recall talking to the journalist ‘and don’t think I had anything of use or interest to say’ (personal communication 2022).

Figure 3: Print, detail and label of Crying Boy portrait entitled ‘Childhood’ by British artist Anna Zinkeisen published by ‘Prints For Pleasure’ from the collection of Andrew Robinson (framed, 460x610mm, textured paper print on cardboard). Image © A Robinson 2025.

A print of the Zinkeisen crying boy became the centre of another 'mysterious fire' reported by *The Sun* that left another family of four homeless. This destroyed a council house in East Herringthorpe, Rotherham, a town that was portrayed in the results of my content analysis as the geographical focus of the mystery. *The Sun* quoted unnamed ‘fire experts’ as reassuring owners of the print but added ‘these incidents are becoming more frequent. It is strange and we have no logical explanation for it’ (Saxty 1985). The anxiety generated by

this story subsequently led South Yorkshire Fire Service to issue a statement that aimed to debunk the connection between the fires and the prints. It said that the most recent blaze was started by an electric fire left too close to a bed. Chief Divisional Officer Mick Riley was quoted saying a large number of Crying Boy prints had been sold and 'any connection with the fires is purely coincidental…fires are not started by pictures or coincidence, but by careless acts and omissions'. Riley then revealed the service's own explanation: 'The reason why this picture has not always been destroyed in the fire is because it is printed on high density hardboard, which is very difficult to ignite' (*Rotherham Star* 1985, Clarke 2008, Clarke 2011).

Riley's statement was published by the *The Star*, but ignored by *The Sun*. On 24 October the tabloid announced, alongside its coverage of the latest Rotherham Crying Boy fire: 'Enough is enough, folks…If you are worried about a crying boy picture hanging in YOUR home, send it to us immediately. We will destroy it for you – and that should see the back of any curse' (Saxty 1985). Following up the editor's offer, the tabloid was subsequently inundated with telephone calls from worried readers who wanted to know if they should get rid of their prints. '"Sure," MacKenzie replied. "Send them in – we'll do the job for you." Bouverie Street was swamped…the Crying Boys were soon stacked twelve feet high in the newsroom, spilling out of cupboards, and entirely filling a little-used interview room.' (Chippindale & Horrie 1990, p. 189). This account notes that up to that point MacKenzie's staff could not work out how much credence the editor attached to the story. When the paper's assistant editor took down a picture of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and replaced it with a crying boy, the question was answered: 'MacKenzie, bustling into the newsroom at his normal half-run, stopped dead in his tracks and went white. "Take that down," he snapped. "I don't like it. It's bad luck"' (Chippindale & Horris 1990, p. 189-90).

Rotherham fire station officer Alan Wilkinson reacted in a similar fashion when his colleagues presented him with a framed crying boy on his retirement from the brigade. He denied being superstitious, but nevertheless immediately returned the painting (Rotherham

Star 1986, Clarke 2008). Similarly, Chief Officer Mick Riley, who was responsible for the statement debunking the curse would not accept a copy of the print as a gift, saying his wife ‘wouldn’t like it, it wouldn’t fit in’ (Boyes 1989, p. 121). Wilkinson admitted that he had been presented with another crying boy print by worried woman who turned up at his home one night. He took it to work and 'as a joke' and mounted it on the office wall of the fire station. Within days he was ordered by his superiors to take it down: 'The same day an oven in the upstairs kitchen overheated and the firemen’s dinners were burned' (*Rotherham Star* 1986, personal communication, Ray Parkin 2008).

After six weeks of publishing crying boy stories, editorial staff at *The Sun* were faced with a dilemma. How could they safely dispose of 2,500 copies of the print stored at their offices in central London? According to Chippindale and Horrie, MacKenzie’s initial plan to burn them on the roof of the paper’s Bouverie Street office but this was vetoed by both the London and Thames Valley fire brigades. Both refused to co-operate and denounced the whole campaign 'as a cheap publicity stunt’ (Clarke 2008, Clarke 2011). On 30 October reporter Paul Hooper left the paper's Bouverie Street HQ with two van loads of prints for burning on a bonfire constructed on land near Reading in Berkshire. *The Sun* published the story on Halloween, under the headline: 'Sun nails curse of the weeping boy for good.' The accompanying photograph depicted a scantily-clad 'red hot Page Three beauty Sandra Jane Moore' feeding the bonfire as a group of bemused fire fighters watched from a distance (Hooper 1985b, Clarke 2008, Clarke 2011).

How the legend acquired a narrative

The Halloween destruction of *The Sun’s* collection of Crying Boy prints symbolically exorcised the ‘Curse of the Crying Boy’. My 2017 analysis of the newspaper coverage of the story found that from November 1985 the number of newspapers stories began to steadily decrease. As tabloid interest waned the newspaper-generated rumour began to morph into a contemporary legend, initially via oral transmission. New versions appeared, including one

that suggested those who were kind to the print were rewarded with good luck (Maclean 1986). Another was the idea that placing a picture of the ‘crying girl’ next to that of the crying boy would bring good luck or avert bad luck. What the story lacked in 1985-86 was a satisfying narrative that satisfactorily explained how the crying boy came to be a source of fire. In her paper on the phenomenon, read at the ISCLR conference in 1986, Georgina Boyes noted that rumour legends ‘articulate, and to a great extent, validate cultural fears’ and as such ‘the absence of any narrative to “explain” the phenomenon of the Crying Boy “jinx” is significant’ (Boyes 1989, p. 128). She described the story as ‘a proto-legend’ using the definition coined by folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand. He defined proto-legends as ‘undeveloped stories and rumours’ that make up ‘a floating anthology of possible urban legends in the making’. These fragmentary rumours or stories both interact with and borrow from established legends and occasionally ‘one of these…surfaces in the media but does not become widely known in the oral tradition except as a conversation reference in a news report’ (Brunvand 1981: p. 175).

My research demonstrates how the intervention of *The Sun* in September 1985 allowed the initial rumour, that was confined to readers of regional newspapers in South Yorkshire, to spread to other parts of the UK. The content analysis of news coverage identified Crying Boy stories published in regional newspapers covering Norfolk, Gloucestershire, Merseyside and Cornwall, between September 1985 and March 1986. Internet sources claim that during the last decade of the 20th century crying boy fires began to be reported for the first time from other parts of the world (DragonQueen’sLair 2022). This pattern of dissemination helps to explain how the basic cursed painting motif has altered and evolved as new versions have been published online by professional story-tellers and paranormal investigators. For example: '…A medium claims the spirit of the boy is trapped in the painting and it starts fires in an attempt to burn the painting and free itself. Others claim the painting is haunted or attracts poltergeist activity. Stories of the artist’s and subject’s misfortune had attached themselves to the painting’ (DragonQueen’sLair 2022).

In 2000 author Tom Slemen revived the story in book form as part of his series titled *Haunted Liverpool*. Slemen's writings are presented as non-fiction but are largely un-referenced. His stories are presented in an entertaining, narrative style that appeals to a mass readership. His book summarised a number of Crying Boy stories from Merseyside and claimed 'the head of the Yorkshire Fire Brigade told the national newspapers that copies of the weird portrait were frequently found intact in the shells of houses which had been mysteriously burnt to the ground' (Slemen 2000a: p.13). He adds that when asked by journalists if he thought the picture was cursed 'the Fire Chief refused to comment'.

In a more detailed internet version of 'The Crying Boy Jinx' that appeared in 2000 Slemen claims the origin of the curse had been traced to an artist who had painted the original, 'an old Spanish portrait artist named Franchot Seville, who lives in Madrid'. The subject of the paintings was a street urchin he had found wandering around Madrid in 1969. This child never spoke and had a very sorrowful look in his eyes. Seville painted the boy, and a Catholic priest identified him as Don Bonillo, a child who had run away after seeing his parents die in a blaze. 'The priest told the artist to have nothing to do with the runaway, because wherever he settled, fires of unknown origin would mysteriously break out; the villagers called him "Diablo" because of this' (Slemen 2000b). The painter ignored the priest's advice and adopted the boy. His portraits sold well but one day his studio was destroyed by fire and the artist was ruined. He accused the little boy of arson and Bonillo ran off in tears, and was never seen again. Slemen's account claims that from this time onwards 'reports of the unlucky Crying Boy paintings causing blazes' emerged from across Europe. Seville was also regarded as a jinx, and no one commissioned him to paint, or would even look at his paintings. In 1976, a car exploded into a fireball on the outskirts of Barcelona after crashing into a wall. The victim was charred beyond recognition, but part of the victim's driving licence in the glove compartment was only partly burned. The name on the licence was one 19-year-old Don Bonillo.' (Slemen 2000b, Clarke 2008, Clarke 2011)

The source of Slemen's story is unknown but the only factual content that can be corroborated is the name of the artist, Franchot Seville. That name has been identified, along with Giovanni Bragolin, as a pseudonym employed by the *Italian* artist Bruno Amadio who created many of the crying boy studies in his Venetian studio (Polidoro 2012). The online dissemination of the Don Bonillo story completes the metamorphosis of the ‘curse of the crying boy’ from tabloid-generated rumour to contemporary legend. The lack of any factual basis for the narrative has done nothing to erode its popularity. It has been repeated as factual both as part of television investigations of the Crying Boy mystery (*Scream Team*, 2002) and via online supernatural discussion boards, newsgroups and blogs (Clarke 2009, Clarke 2011).

Conclusion

The Curse of the Crying Boy was created by a newspaper journalist in 1985, two years after the birth of the world wide web. Within two decades the legend had become an internet phenomenon. A Google search results in approximately 10,800,000 results and postings under variants of the #CryingBoyCurse hashtag occur frequently on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. A Crying Boy page published on the author’s blog *Folklore and Journalism* has received approximately 80,000 unique views since it was uploaded in 2011. Of the 54 comments left by readers a number include personal experience narratives (Clarke 2011). These reveal a division of opinion between those who love their copy and associate it with good luck and those who believe the image is evil or associated with bad luck **[3, 4].**

Internet discussion boards across the world continue to debate the source of the 'curse' that animates the portraits. Examples frequently turn up for sale on Ebay and other online auction sites, one of which cites research by ‘Dr David Clarke’ to validate its authenticity. A Dutch ‘Crying Boy Fan Club’ website briefly appeared, then disappeared in 2006. A Google search in 2008 led the author to Brazilian website, since deleted, that

claimed Giovanni Bragolin had appeared on a popular TV channel where he admitted making 'an evil pact with the Devil' to sell his paintings. The poster's advice was: 'PLEASE if you have one of these paintings, throw it away right now' (Clarke 2009, p. 38).

The role of the mass media in modern legend transmission is recognised by folklorists, along with the key role played by journalists as story tellers (Smith, 1982; Oring 1990). Degh and Vaszonyi argued that it was more accurate to describe the mass media as being the greater part of folklore (1973, p. 37). Tabloid news sources both publish contemporary legends and have taken on the role of the travelling storyteller to become 'virtual anthologies of age-old themes reincarnated in contemporary terms' (de Vos 1996, p. 39). One of the cultural functions of the storytelling journalist is to explore the inexplicable and the magical: 'the point of such stories is to illustrate that whatever our knowledge, it is ultimately not enough to explain the mysteries of the natural environment' (Barkin 1984, p. 29).

In 2010 journalist Steve Punt interviewed ex-*Sun* editor Kelvin MacKenzie for an episode of his BBC Radio 4 series *Punt P.I.* on the part he played in the creation and dissemination of the Crying Boy legend. During the interview MacKenzie admitted he was 'a superstitious man'. He also confirmed the anecdote reported in *Stick it up your Punter!*, where he removed a copy of the print from the wall of *The Sun* newsroom because it was 'bad luck' was factual (Chippindale and Horrie 1990, p. 189-90). When asked if there was any truth in the idea of a curse, he responded: 'Who knows…there comes a point when you research a story too deeply – as you keep on asking more and more questions about it - the story actually disappears and before you know where you are we are all sitting there, it's ten to five, we haven't got a front page lead and the story's just collapsed. So some stories are too good to check' (Punt 2010b).

Endnotes

1) In the autumn of 2023, during the editing of this paper, UK media reported how a 'suspected haunted painting' of an unidentified young girl in a red dress had twice been returned to a charity shop in Hastings, East Sussex, by customers who claimed it was 'cursed' (*Daily Star*, 23 August 2023). It was later reported the print was acquired by the owners of The London Bridge Experience, that describes itself as London's 'prime horror attraction', in an online auction for £1,600. At the time of writing the print was on display in the attraction and, immediately before Halloween, had generated reported haunting narratives and a reputation for causing 'bad luck' among members of staff (*Metro*, 17 October 2023).

2) In July 2017 the author conducted a purposeful manual search of microfilm records of five national and six regional newspapers at The British Library newsroom, covering the period 2 September 1985-1 April 1986. None of these titles were available for online keyword searching for the dates of interest. Of the stories located, 21 appeared in national newspapers (primarily *The Sun*) and 17 in regional newspapers (primarily the *Sheffield Star*). Approximately 50% of the coverage was in the form of page leads. The remaining articles were commentary, features or mentions in 'news-in-brief' sections of the newspapers. The search did not include articles in magazines or broadcast media coverage.

3) A contemporary example was provided by folklorist Roy Vickery who recalls seeing a crying boy print at a jumble sale in Streatham, London during the mid-1980s. 'At the end of the day, a scrap and metal merchant based in Mitcham (settled travellers) would come and take away anything that remained unsold and pay about £5 for it. After one sale there was a crying boy print left, and they refused to take it because they considered it to be unlucky' (personal communication 2022).

4) Post by laust (March 8, 2018) https://drdavidclarke.co.uk/urban-legendary/the-curse-of-the-crying-boy/: 'My grandmother had a painting like that above my bed when I was sleeping there as a kid. I never felt safe there and always wanted to sleep next to her when I was there. I always felt said when I was looking at the painting and I didn't really like it.

About 5 years ago I was home alone while my family was on holiday. One evening I was watching a movie when I noticed that something was smelling like burning plastic. I did walk around the house and found nothing wrong…When I did look upstairs to the first floor I could see smoke. I ran up there and entered my room. When I opened the door there was flames everywhere. I was in panic and ran after a bucket to get water and fight the fire. I remember it was hot and hard to breathe and see where to go…I realised that if I ended passing out inside the house it would be the end so I took the animals and left the burning house. A big part of the house was destroyed. When we started cleaning…I remember finding the painting from my grandmother's house complete intact but didn't think much of it. Then yesterday I was watching a YouTube video with cursed objects and saw a painting like the same painting my grandmother had and found information about the cursed painting. I still have nightmares about 5 years after the fire…I did never believe in the supernatural or curses but after yesterday I have been thinking a lot about it. If the curse exist would it keep following me?'

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