Stranger than Fiction: Urban Myths

Phil Healey and Rick Glanvill

About the authors
Phil Healey was born in Manchester and Rick Glanvill was born in London. They met in 1982 in Newcastle, where Rick was working as a disc jockey and Phil was studying graphic design at the Polytechnic. They shared an interest in the strange stories that people often told each other in pubs and bars and decided to start writing the stories down. They invented the phrase urban myth to describe these strange stories, and they started sending them to The Guardian newspaper for publication. The Guardian liked the stories so much that the editors decided to publish them in a weekly column.

Healey and Glanvill published their first collection of urban myths in book form in 1991. The book was very successful and led to three more collections being published over the next few years. The authors have now collected more than 1,200 urban myths from all around the world. They use the Internet as a means of collecting new stories and opinions from their readers, and they receive hundreds of letters detailing new urban myths from around the world.

In addition to writing their column in The Guardian newspaper, Healey lectures at Middlesex University in London and Glanvill writes newspaper articles about football and music.

Summary
Stranger than Fiction: Urban Myths contains twenty-three short stories outlining strange or interesting happenings that were collected by the authors, Phil Healey and Rick Glanvill, during the 1980s. The authors didn’t invent the stories — instead, they wrote down interesting tales that they had been told by other people. The stories are grouped into four themes: the nature of the human condition, accidents, crime and death. The tales are very varied — some are funny, some are frightening and some are sad.

The stories mainly take place in the present day, and the characters featured in them aren’t famous or heroic — they are just ordinary people. Although the characters have names and the stories take place in specific locations, alternative names and locations could easily be introduced without affecting the impact of the stories. In fact, some of the stories may seem strangely familiar to readers — this is because many of the tales are based on spoken anecdotes detailing strange experiences that readers may have heard about at some point in their lives.

Background and themes
Unknown origins: Urban myths represent one of the mysteries of modern-day urban living. They are stories that are told as true tales, but their origins are always unknown. In other words, neither the person telling the story nor the person hearing about it know for certain if the events described in the tale actually happened. Before the phrase urban myth was established by Healey and Glanvill, these strange stories were known as ‘FOAFS’ (friend-of-a-friend stories), because they had never actually happened to the person telling them — they had always happened to a ‘friend of a friend’.

The human experience: To a large extent, urban myths deal with aspects of the human experience that are difficult to explain — those twists of fate that undoubtedly happen to everybody without conforming to modern society’s view of the world as a rational and logical place. The stories frequently concern the less attractive elements of human nature, for example, the desire for revenge, the abuse of trust, the fear of embarrassment and the delight taken in other people’s ineptitude and misfortune, which people recognise but are reluctant to admit to. It can be argued that the themes of urban myths are real even though the details are most likely made up. It is this ‘realness’ that gives urban myths their longevity.

People’s secret feelings: Healey and Glanvill have a theory to explain why urban myths exist and why they are so popular. They believe that they give people a safe way to express their politically unacceptable prejudices against other people, such as social climbers, bosses, criminals, etc. In the same way that fairytales enable people to explore their deepest fears and desires, urban myths allow them to confront some of their secret feelings about other people and the world that they live in. By helping to pass
Stranger than Fiction: Urban Myths

along urban myths, people can share thoughts, opinions and feelings that would otherwise remain unexpressed. Urban myths give them a chance to examine some of life’s taboos.

Preparing for danger: Many psychologists argue that this kind of story-telling fulfils a useful function in society. They maintain that telling urban myths allows people to think about dangerous situations, helping them mentally to prepare for – and thereby defend against – a reality that might confront them one day. For example, the story The Hair on Her Hands deals with a commonly held fear that strangers may not be what they appear to be, and it enables people to consider how they would cope if they found themselves in the same situation. It gives them a chance to prepare for the worst – before the worst actually happens. Other stories in Stranger than Fiction: Urban Myths serve as useful warnings guarding against the dangers of modern life, such as being too trustful of strangers and driving at night when you are very tired.

Looking on the bright side of life: Of course, urban myths don’t just focus on the darker side of the human experience. Many of them convey tales of practical jokes or amusing coincidences. Instead of making readers shiver with fear, they give them a reason to laugh at the absurdity of life. They are highly detailed jokes that are passed on from person to person to person – reminders that life isn’t always serious.

Mass appeal: The enormous success of Stranger than Fiction: Urban Myths and the authors’ other collections of strange stories demonstrates the fact that people find urban myths to be extremely fascinating. The reasons for this mass appeal aren’t really important. In the end, the important thing is that the individual reader can decide if the urban myths appeal to him or her – and whether or not he or she will pass the stories along to someone else.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1

Before reading

1 Pair work: Put students into pairs and ask them to look at the cover of Stranger than Fiction: Urban Myths. Get them to write down the people, animals and things that they can see on the cover of the book. When they have finished, some of the pairs should read out their list to the rest of the class. Then write the following combinations of letters on the board – they are anagrams of the people, animals and things that can be seen on the cover of the book. Finally, ask students to spell the words correctly.

a woc
b olpcienam
c kebi
d rac
e nabk
f rbdgei
g mnaow
h tmocylorc

2 Pair work: Put students into pairs and have them look up the word myth in a dictionary. Then get them to think of as many examples of myths as they can. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and describe the myths to the rest of the class.

3 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 1 is called That’s Life. What do you think this? Why do you think this? What do you think the chapter will be about? Why do you think this?

After reading

4 Discuss: Who is the young man who comes out of Mrs Harvey’s house in the story ’The Wrong Lover’? Why do you think this? Write these questions on the board and get students to discuss them in small groups. When they have finished, some of the groups should stand at the front of the class and share their answers with the rest of the class.

5 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 11. What is Mr Taylor doing in the picture? How do you think he is feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think he is thinking about? Why do you think this? How do you think the other men are feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think they are thinking about? Why do you think this?

Chapter 2

Before reading

6 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 1 is called Accidents. What is an accident? Who do you think has accidents in Chapter 2? Why do you think this? What do you think the chapter will be about? Why do you think this?

After reading

7 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of the Empire State Building. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and show their picture to the rest of the class.

8 Role play: Put students into pairs. Student A is a newspaper reporter and Student B is a person who has witnessed the five stories in Chapter 2. The reporter should ask the witness questions about the stories and the witness should answer them as completely as possible. When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play their conversation in front of the class.
9 **Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe one of the stories in Chapter 2. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class. The class guess which story the picture illustrates.

10 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to rename the five stories in Chapter 2. They should choose a suitable word, phrase or sentence from each story as the new title for the story. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and explain why they chose each of the words, phrases or sentences.

### Chapter 3

**Before reading**

11 **Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 3 is called *Doing Wrong*. What does the phrase ‘doing wrong’ mean? Who do you think is doing wrong in the chapter? Why do you think this? What do you think the chapter will be about? Why do you think this?

12 **Write:** Write the following combinations of letters on the board – they are anagrams of words that can be found in Chapter 3. Get students to spell the words correctly. When they have finished, some of the students should stand at the front of the class and read the words to their classmates.

- a  rtasneg
- b  brober
- c  ogd
- d  ugn
- e  neifk
- f  tah
- g  omyne
- h  abg

### Chapter 4

**Before reading**

15 **Discuss:** Put students into groups of three and ask them to think about why Chapter 4 is called *Living and Dying*. What does ‘living’ mean? What does ‘dying’ mean? Who do you think the title refers to? Why do you think this? What do you think the chapter will be about? Why do you think this?

**After reading**

16 **Pair work:** Photocopy the pictures in the book – make enough copies so that each pair of students has a copy of every picture in the book. Cut off the captions at the bottom of the pages and give the pictures and the captions to the pairs. Get them to match the pictures with the captions.

17 **Write:** Write the names of the following characters from Chapter 4 on the board and then get students to write down the title of the story that each one is from: Frank, James, John Buss and the old woman.