

Clown Panic!

Sightings of Mysterious Clowns Rattle Nerves in South Carolina

BY ROBERT BARTHOLOMEW



REPORTS OF PHANTOM CLOWNS IN THE UNITED STATES can be traced back decades and are a form of social panic. They reflect age-old fears that are dressed up in new garb—literally.

During late August 2016, police in Greenville, South Carolina, were besieged with reports of children being stalked by clowns.

In some instances, these nefarious figures reportedly tried to lure youngsters into the woods with offers of candy and money. Despite the best efforts of law enforcement the clowns seemed to vanish into the shadows and no arrests were made.¹ The sightings and rumors began at the Fleetwood Manor apartment complex on August 21st. Soon adults were spotting clowns. There were reports of clowns clanging chains, clowns whispering from the woods, clowns playing with green laser lights, and clowns seen running from homes. There were even reports of clowns firing guns and clowns living in an abandoned shack in the woods. Police investigated the boarded up building, but it showed no signs of habitation, nor were shell casings found where they had reportedly fired weapons. In short, there was no tangible evidence to corroborate any of the reports.²

On September 5th, clowns were spotted by children about 150 miles to the northeast in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.³ By the following day, there were reports of mysterious clowns as far away as Columbus, Ohio, where a schoolboy claimed to have been chased by a knife-wielding

clown. Authorities were unsure whether it was a hoax, pranksters, an attempted robbery or a thwarted abduction.⁴ Once again, there was no evidence to corroborate the story.

At first glance, it might appear that a deranged individual is intent on abducting or scaring children. Yet, accounts of phantom clowns stalking children have been recorded since at least 1981, when clusters of reports appeared in several American cities including Boston, Omaha, Kansas City, and Denver.⁵ Numerous outbreaks have since been recorded throughout North America and Europe.⁶

While every report of strangers stalking children should be taken seriously, in the absence of concrete evidence these stories should be treated with skepticism. Stalking clown folklore appears to be part of the “Stranger Danger” moral panic of the 1980s. Moral panics are periods of intense fear that crop up from time to time, and involve exaggerated threats from perceived evil-doers—either real or imagined. A classic example is the current fear of Muslims and Middle Eastern refugees in Europe and North America, where they are often stereotyped as terrorists and subversives. Some moral panics are entirely imaginary, such as the hunt for witches in the vicinity of what is now Salem, Massachusetts in 1692.

When one examines the reports of phantom clowns, a curious pattern emerges: they are almost never caught. There is also a lack of tangible evidence. All police have to go on is eyewitness testimony, which is notoriously unreliable. Most witnesses are children, who are vulnerable to peer pressure and being asked leading questions. Another curious aspect is that the children always seem to get away. On the one hand, the clowns are extremely adept at making their getaway. On the other hand, they appear to be totally incompetent at nabbing their prey.



From Funny to Fearful: The Changing Image of Clowns

Someone once joked that from a public perception standpoint there is only one major difference between a rat and a mouse: a good publicist. Perception becomes reality, when reality is socially constructed and there is no more powerful a publicist in modern society than the mass media. It is both a reflection of popular culture, and a beacon light of change. So how did clowns go bad and what role has the media played?

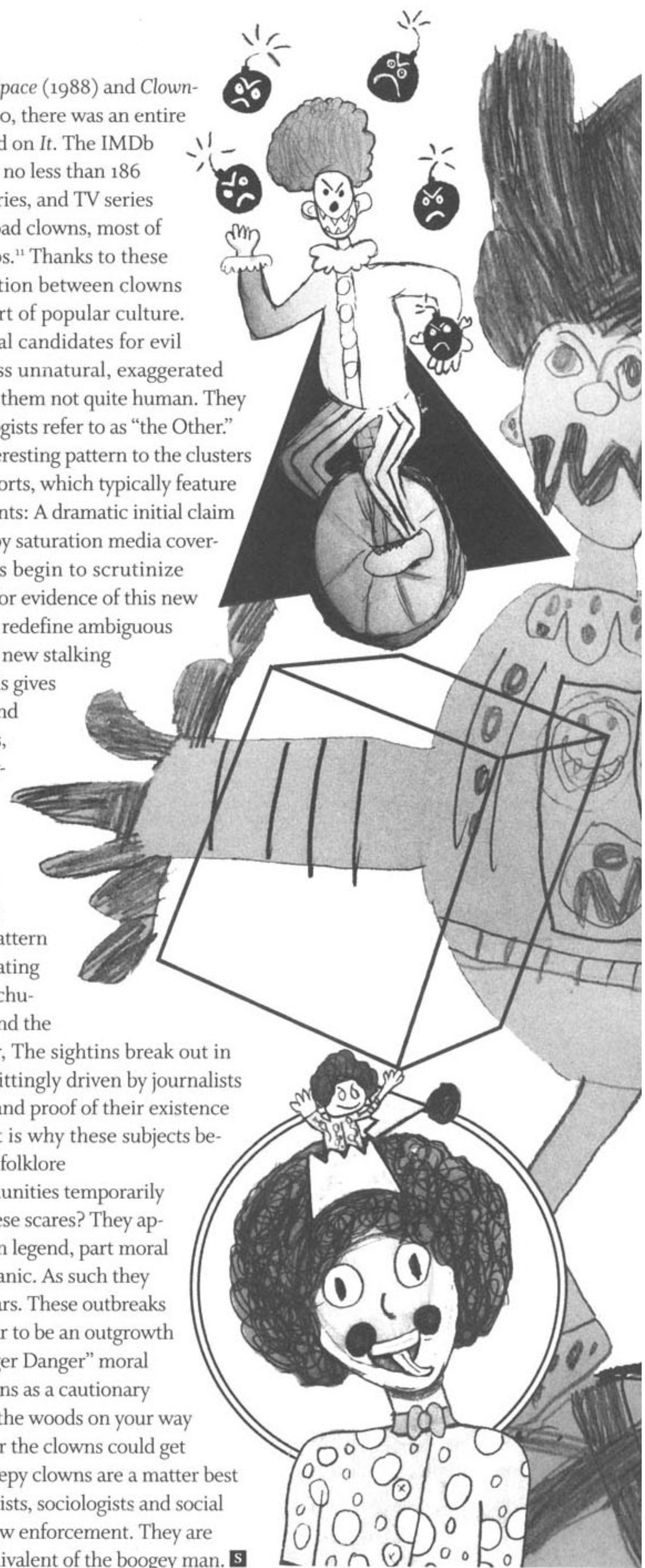
Andrew Stott, a professor of English at SUNY Buffalo, has studied the transformation of clowns, from fun-loving to feared. He found that the popular portrayal of clowns began to turn bad near the end of the 19th century in opera and theater. However, it was not until the 1930s and 40s that they took on a downright sinister persona in the sideshow debauchery and terror of the “dark carnival” that arose with the decline of traveling tent circuses.⁷ (See also Benjamin Radford’s *Bad Clowns*.⁸) The image of the clown as a sinister, morally perverted figure remained in the public imagination during this period. In 1947, science fiction writer Ray Bradbury published a series of stories around this theme in his aptly titled book, *Dark Carnival*.⁹ But with the appearance of television during the mid-20th century, the persona of clowns changed from figures that were often associated with adult entertainment, to the almost exclusive domain of children. By the 1960s, *The Howdy Doody Show* featuring Clarabell the Clown, and Bozo the syndicated clown, were both enormously popular. Linda McRobbie writes that “Once their made-up persona became more associated with children, and therefore an expectation of innocence, it made whatever the makeup might conceal all the more frightening—creating a tremendous mine for artists, filmmakers, writers and creators of popular culture to gleefully exploit to terrifying effect.”¹⁰

Outbreaks of phantom clowns coincide with the dark side of clowns that began to dominate American and European popular culture during the 1980s with the release of a series of creepy clown movies and books. Perhaps most influential was Stephen King’s chilling 1986 horror novel *It*, involving a homicidal clown, and films such as *Killer*

Clowns From Outer Space (1988) and *Clownhouse* (1989). In 1990, there was an entire TV mini-series based on *It*. The IMDb movie database lists no less than 186 movies, documentaries, and TV series episodes involving bad clowns, most of them since the 1980s.¹¹ Thanks to these images, the association between clowns and evil became part of popular culture. Clowns were natural candidates for evil because they possess unnatural, exaggerated features that render them not quite human. They are what anthropologists refer to as “the Other.”

There is an interesting pattern to the clusters of creepy clown reports, which typically feature the following elements: A dramatic initial claim or rumor followed by saturation media coverage. Local residents begin to scrutinize their environment for evidence of this new threat, and begin to redefine ambiguous stimuli within their new stalking clown mind set. This gives rise to new media and social media reports, which in turn generate more publicity and anxiety. The subsequent anxiety and uncertainty are ideal for incubating rumors. A similar pattern is involved in generating sighting clusters of chupacabras, Bigfoot, and the Loch Ness Monster. The sightings break out in waves that are unwittingly driven by journalists and social media—and proof of their existence is never found. That is why these subjects belong to the realm of folklore

Why are communities temporarily overwhelmed by these scares? They appear to be part urban legend, part moral panic, part rumor-panic. As such they reflect prevailing fears. These outbreaks of bad clowns appear to be an outgrowth of the 1980s “Stranger Danger” moral panic which functions as a cautionary tale. “Don’t go near the woods on your way home from school or the clowns could get you.” Clusters of creepy clowns are a matter best dealt with by folklorists, sociologists and social psychologists, not law enforcement. They are the modern-day equivalent of the boogey man. **S**



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CLOWN ART CONTRIBUTORS

(Page 40—top) **Terrace** is 13 years old. He likes math class best in school. In his leisure time he enjoys cycling. He is currently saving up to buy materials that will allow him to build his own computer.

(Page 40—bottom) **Andrew** is 11 years old. Science is his favorite subject in school. When he is not in school he likes playing football. In the future if he could do anything he would like to make a living playing football.

(Page 41—top left) **Isaac** is 10. He likes "DPA" in school which stands for Daily Physical Activities—a class held outside rather than in the gym. Outside of school he likes going to his friends' houses. He would like to learn how to scuba dive.

(Page 41—right) **Aurelia** is almost 5. She likes French class the best. She enjoys meeting and playing with kids she has never met before. Her plan for the future is to learn to read.

(Page 41—bottom) **Zoie** is 9. Her favorite class is music. Outside of class she likes recess the best. She would like to be a fashion designer when she grows up. Her clown uses fashion to frighten with a scary jack-in-the-box hat—perhaps an allusion to the idea that the original jack-in-the-box was a devil.

(Page 42) **Lucas** is almost 11. Gym class is his favorite school activity. Outside of school he likes to play Terraria (a video game) on his iPad. In the future when he grows up if he could learn to do anything it would be to have hands that can control gravity—so he could fly.

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