

## Phantoms, Cars and Corpses: A response to Main and Hobbs

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In a paper published in *Tradition Today* No. 2, David Main and Sandy Hobbs critically examine an essay of mine, “Phantom Hitchhikers and Bad Deaths” that appeared in the first issue of the ejournal. While they find my interpretation and analysis “interesting” they conclude that “a larger and (importantly) chronologically later gathered sample [would not be] as well served by [her] interpretation of the VH [Vanishing Hitchhiker]”. In other words, my sampling was inadequate and my conclusions were deficient. I would like to take issue with these conclusions.

First I should state what the focus of the paper was, and what it was about. Though it was substantially revised for *Tradition Today*, it was first given at a conference on death and dying. Its focus was on cultural attitudes to dying, and it was about ghosts. In it I sought to explore contemporary conceptions of a “bad death” by examining a body of familiar stories in which the dead would not, or could not, stay dead. My idea was that an examination of ghostlore might throw light on what it means to die “badly” in any particular time or place. By using the term “Phantom” Hitchhikers in my title and discussion, I thought I was making it adequately clear that I was not talking about vanishing hitchhikers in general. It was the phantom-ness of the hitchhikers that interested me, not their vanishing-ness.

Thus the stories I chose to interrogate were a subgroup of the legend in which the hitchhiker is eventually identified as a ghost. Though I pointed out that these stories corresponded to what two of the earliest commentators on the legend of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” (Beardsley and Hankey, 1942) called types A and C, only eighteen of my sample of 100 texts were taken from this study. The others were made up as follows: twenty texts from Jansen Cox’s 1966 MA thesis (possibly the best and fullest study of the legend); ten texts from Rosalie Hankey’s “California Ghosts” (1942); five texts from L. C. Jones’ study of American ghostlore, *Things that Go Bump in the Night* (1959); four stories from Ruth Anne Musick’s *Coffin Hollow* (1977); and four stories from *Urban Legends ... Tall Tales and Terrors* (Bennett and Smith, 2007). There were also texts from twenty two folklore journals dated from the late 1940s to the 1990s, four from magazines such as *Fate* (dated 1977-1984), and three texts downloaded from the internet in 2010. The remainder were taken from ten standard legend compilations such as Brunvand’s *Vanishing Hitchhiker* (1981) and popular collections such as Bennett Cerf’s *Try and Stop Me* (1945) and Healey and Glanvill’s *Urban Myths* (1992). From the many texts available I selected those that featured phantoms as hitchhikers and which were performed fully enough to contain analysable detail. These sources were clearly listed in my bibliography.

I want to emphasise the nature and purpose of my sample because the thrust of Main and Hobbs’ criticism is that I did not use a “chronologically later” sample than Beardsley and Hankey’s 1942 narratives and failed to include stories in which the hitchhiker was a prophet or a sacred being (Beardsley and Hankey’s types B and D). Their own sample of 102 texts is indeed more heterogeneous than mine, though in no way “chronologically later”. Main and

Hobbs' sample includes all forty one of Beardsley and Hankey's 1942 texts, twenty stories taken from Marie Bonaparte's 1947 *Myths of War* (of which, more later), and forty one stories from sources later than Beardsley and Hankey.

Another thing that Main and Hobbs fail to acknowledge in comparing my sample and conclusions with theirs is that my paper was not about the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" and I was not analysing the legend as a whole. As I have said, what I was discussing was the "Phantom" subset of the legend and my object was to look at modern attitudes to dying. In Main and Hobbs' paper, however, the terms "Phantom Hitchhiker" and "Vanishing Hitchhiker" are used interchangeably, as if they are synonymous, and as if I, too, had been using them that way. This muddle falsifies all their discussions and makes nonsense of their statistical tables.

The "Vanishing Hitchhiker" is one of the most collected, most popular and most discussed contemporary legends. It is also a story that particularly interests me as a researcher into supernatural beliefs. I gave my first academic paper on this legend in 1982 and I have been collecting and studying it ever since. So, in the remainder of this paper, I would like to examine Main and Hobbs "alternative perspective", the wider issues it raises, and the concept of "SPEN" (substitute personal experience narrative), in the promotion of which my arguments have been so badly misrepresented. The topics I wish to cover are:

1. Which texts should be regarded as examples of "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" and where should the boundaries between it and related legends be drawn?
2. What is the SPEN concept and how does it apply to the stories considered by myself and by Main and Hobbs?
3. What contribution to the SPEN concept is made by stories of the "Double Prophecy" type (Main and Hobbs' "CC" stories) which they include in their sample of 102 texts?
4. Are "CC" stories relevant to a study of the "Vanishing Hitchhiker"?

I should perhaps make it clear that, unlike my original paper, this essay will deal with the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend as a whole.

1. *Which texts should be regarded as examples of "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" and where should the boundaries between it and related legends be drawn?*

Claiming that "none of the scholarly writers offer a formal definition", and taking Beardsley and Hankey's 1942 paper to be the first and most authoritative study of the legend, Main and Hobbs propose that a "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend will contain the following elements which they find to be common to Beardsley and Hankey's corpus: a Protagonist (they refer to this personage as "P") who travels in a vehicle on a road and who encounters an "Other" ("O") whom they regard as a normal human being. Later information shows that "O" was not a normal human being after all, thus bringing about a cognitive shift in "P"s understanding of the events and the understanding of the audience too.

However, there are at least a couple of alternative starting points which they might have considered, and which might have been more convincing. By 1942 the story was already quite well known. It had, for example, been noticed by such shrewd observers as

Alexander Woollcott in his “Shouts and Murmurs” column of the *New Yorker* (November, 1931). Ernest Baughman, one of the earliest scholars to take an interest in contemporary legend, reported a “rash of vanishing hitchhiker stories” and recounted one which clearly must date from the mid-nineteenth century (Baughman, 1947). His later *Type and Motif Index* (1966) has a narrow but perfectly adequate definition of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend under number E332.3.3.1, which it would have been quite appropriate to use. Or they could have referred to the researches of New York folklorist, writer and historian, Louis C. Jones, who generously put aside his own projected paper on “Hitchhiking Hattie” when Beardsley and Hankey published their paper. His own study appeared a year later under the title “Hitchhiking Ghosts in New York” and proposes a perfectly adequate definition. “In its essence,” says Jones:

[T]his is a story about a ghost who appears as one of the living, utilizes the aid of one or more travellers to reach a certain place ... and who, after that place has been reached, disappears, whereupon the traveller realizes that his companion is a revenant (Jones, 1944, 288).

And here is the definition which Baughman gives under motif number E332.3.3.1:

Ghost of young woman asks for ride in automobile, disappears from closed car without the driver’s knowledge, after giving an address to which she wishes to be taken. The driver asks person at the address about the rider, finds she has been dead for some time. (Often the driver finds that the ghost has made similar attempts to return, usually on anniversary of death in automobile accident. Often, too, the ghost leaves some item such as a scarf or a travelling bag in the car.)

But where should the boundary be drawn between this central core and its many variants? Baughman lists many of these – among others: E332.3.3.1(d) (Woman or old woman given a ride in automobile, makes a prediction or prophecy; she disappears suddenly or gives other evidence of ghostly nature); E332.3.3.1(e) (Ghostly rider makes merry with driver of automobile, drinking and love-making); E332.3.3.1(f) (Ghostly woman asks driver to take her to her dying son. She is found to have been dead for six years); E332.3.3.2 (Deity as ghostly rider). Further removed from what Baughman considers to be the core story, we find E332.3.1 (Ghost rides on horseback with rider) and E332.3.2 (Ghost drives in horse-drawn vehicle, disappears suddenly at certain spot). All these have at one time or another been considered as examples of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend. It is just a question of where the line is drawn between narratives that are plainly variants of the central story and those that are merely related or adjacent types.

We can see that multiple opportunities for exciting storytelling spin out from the simple core like spokes from a wheel. Developing the possibilities of motif number E332.3.3.1(d) led Main and Hobbs to include stories of “The Double Prophecy” (“Corpse in the Car” type) in their sample of “Vanishing Hitchhiker” texts. Developing the possibilities of E332.3.1 and E332.3.2 led Jones to argue for the inclusion of stories that pre-date the automobile and to suggest that researchers might even consider accounts of ghosts

accompanying pedestrians (Jones, 1944, 289). Narratives in which the ghost is encountered at a dance or on the road to a dance and romantic dalliance ensues (motif number E332.3.3.1(e)) might conceivably lead one in the direction of another story of supernatural sex, “The Devil at the Dance”. As it happens, there is at least one story which would seem to form a bridge between these two types, the story of “The White Lady of Longnor” (see Bennett and Smith, 2007, p.292; Bennett, 2012, p.169). Or a storyteller might develop motif number E332.3.3.1(f) (Ghostly woman asks driver to take her to her dying son) and pass on to stories like “The Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Man”. Such an approach was taken by an early observer in a 1950 issue of *New York Folklore*, where R. W. G. Vail’s “A Philadelphia Variant of the Hitchhiking Ghost” tells a story a local doctor had heard told at a medical meeting “years ago” (the storyteller died in 1914, says Vail). This story has several elements in common with “Vanishing Hitchhiker” stories. It fits in quite well with Jones’ comment that the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” “in its essence ... is a story about a ghost who ... utilizes the aid of one or more travellers to reach a certain place.” Later developments of this type commonly fit Jones’ observation even more closely, for the protagonist (a doctor or priest) may actually accompany the ghost to the house where his help is needed. I heard such a story in the late 1940s or early 1950s in a church service, where it was presented as an example of the efficacy of prayer (see Bennett and Smith, 2007, pp. 284-285; Bennett, 2012, p. 175), and it forms the basis of a another religiously-motivated story told-for-true in *Lord Halifax’s Ghost Book*, 1936, pp. 133-140).

So, returning to Main and Hobbs’ essay, it must be asked why none of these possible threads was followed in their discussion and analyses. Most, if not all, would make good examples of “SPEN” narratives and would appear to answer their purpose. However, the only thread Main and Hobbs explore is the one that, at its extremity, leads to Marie Bonaparte’s *Myths of War* and away from phantom hitchhikers, as we shall later see.

## 2. *What is the SPEN concept and how does it apply to the stories considered by myself and by Main and Hobbs?*

As I understand it, Main and Hobbs’ idea is that legends such as the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” are often presented to readers/hearers to challenge disbelief in the supernatural. On the principle that personal experience is usually considered the most convincing evidence for the supernatural, these narratives are structured in such a way that, though the stories are told at second or third hand, they “substitute” for personal experience. Hence the term “substitute personal experience narrative” (SPEN).

One of the ways this works, Main and Hobbs say, is that there is a surprise-ending which causes a cognitive shift in the protagonist’s, and thus in the audience’s, understanding of events. The surprise-ending is possible because events are unfolded in the same way as personal experience unfolds, all the facts not being known until the very end. I can go along with this, though I would just make a couple of remarks. Firstly I would note that the withholding of essential information is a characteristic of many, if not most, contemporary legends, supernatural or not, as Daniel R. Barnes persuasively argued in an early essay. In his paper “Interpreting Urban Legend”, Barnes answers the question “What is it that is ‘hidden’

or ‘covert’ in the urban legend?” with this observation: “[It] is simply much of the *plot* itself ... what is to be dis-covered (un-covered) is the ‘real plot’, as opposed to the ‘apparent plot’” (Barnes 1984, 70). Secondly and conversely, it has been my experience that many personal experience stories do not conform to this pattern but circle continuously round one or two pieces of central information (see, for example, Bennett, 1999, pp. 115-137). Leaving these quibbles aside, I am happy to agree that the SPEN format is a common pattern in fully performed “Vanishing Hitchhiker” narratives, especially the “Phantom” subset.

I stress “fully performed” because a number of Beardsley and Hankey’s stories (Main and Hobbs’ “VH Early” texts) are not fully performed: they are really story summaries or references to stories. Beardsley and Hankey’s story number 23, for example, reads as follows:

(This was supposed to be a true story. The narrator heard it from a man who had just been released from the navy.) It concerned picking up a young girl who had been previously killed at the spot she was picked up.

Story number 24 is similarly sketchy, and story number 25 too:

(This is supposed to be true, and all that stuff.) A couple were driving to Covington, Virginia. They picked up a girl who left some article in the car, after they had dropped her. They took it to her folks, who told them she was dead.

The SPEN concept predicts that storytellers will include three vital “convincers”: the hitchhiker will disappear; the events will recur; and some evidence of the hitchhiker’s supernatural nature will be left or revealed. One can see that the stories quoted above between them have only one of these features, and that in the vaguest possible form “[she] left some article in the car”. The hitchhikers do not disappear and there is no claim that the mysterious events frequently recur. They do not fit the SPEN format and they do not – surely cannot! – present an effective challenge to disbelief. These examples are not untypical. Eight of Beardsley and Hankey’s forty one narratives are similarly brief and so are seven out of eighteen “CC” legends in Bonaparte’s book. It is tempting to ask how many of Main and Hobbs forty one “VH Late” texts are similarly unformed and uninformative? What can legitimately be concluded from narratives as sparse as these? Failure to find any specific feature in these narratives has no significance whatever; maybe it merely shows that they should not have been included in the analysis?

This brings me to another question. Main and Hobbs take particular issue with me on matters of detail such as: whether “P” is a solitary traveller; whether “O” is female; whether the events happen in the dark; and whether there are atmospheric effects such as bad weather (see their Table 1). They find that, though these were common features of the hitchhikers in my sample, they are less common, or positively infrequent, in their more heterogeneous sample which includes a few hitchhikers who are sacred personages (Jesus, or the volcano goddess Pele) and a number of saints and mysterious strangers who make prophecies. Disregarding for a moment the fact that narratives as brief as the ones I quoted in the

foregoing paragraph are too sparse to have any sort of detail at all, so it is quite irrelevant that they have no atmospheric effects, I confess that I do find this an interesting pattern.

I have confirmed this by looking at the fifteen narratives in Jan Brunvand's classic *Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings* (1981) and at twenty four of Main and Hobbs' forty one "VH Late" texts which I have been able to check because they come from standard folkloric sources. In Brunvand's book six hitchhikers ("O"s) are modern hitchhiking phantoms and five make prophecies. Only one of the "phantom" type does not use the night-and-rain scenesetting (Story A), and only one of the five "prophet" types *does*. Similar results come from looking at twenty four texts from Main and Hobbs' "VH Late". Sixteen of these are the "phantom" type and eight are the "prophet" types. Of the sixteen "phantom" type all but one have a scenesetting of night and/or rain (this is Brunvand's Story A) or where a night-time setting is implied by the dance/party motif or the "formal" gown worn by the hitchhiker. None of the prophet type had this sort of scenesetting. So Main and Hobbs are on to something here.

But there is a simple reason for this pattern, of course. It is surely a question of what sort of "convincers" are appropriate to each sort of story. Whereas darkness is almost always, and adverse weather is often, associated with ghosts, neither darkness nor bad weather is associated with prophets. It would serve no useful purpose for a storyteller to include such scenesetting in the narration. The "convincer" needed in these cases is that the prophecies come true; that is why in so many stories of this type the prophecies are doubled up. In fact, tradition provides so little in the way of circumstantial evidence for encounters with a prophet that all the storytellers can do is double up the one clue folklore offers them. Probably all Main and Hobbs' analysis proves is that darkness and bad weather are not part of the folkloric construct of a prophet. Including twenty "Double Prophecy" stories in the discussion therefore looks a bit like fixing the evidence.

3. *What contribution to the SPEN concept is made by stories of the "Double Prophecy" type (Bonaparte's "Corpse in the Car", Main and Hobbs "CC" stories)?*

The short answer to this question is "very little".

Psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte's *Myths of War*, published in 1947, opens with a chapter called "The Myth of the Corpse in the Car" from which Main and Hobbs take their "CC" term, and which Bonaparte interprets according to Hubert and Mauss' theories of sacrifice. The book contains twenty seven stories current in the early days of the Second World War, of which eighteen are of the type described in Main and Hobbs' essay (Main and Hobbs say there are twenty "CC" stories, but I found only eighteen). Here, Main and Hobbs say, "a person met by P correctly predicts that in the near future there will be a dead person discovered within the P's vehicle". This latter occurrence vindicates a previous prophecy, about the death of Hitler or the end of the war.

Using the blindfold-and-pin method, I chose a story at random for discussion. Here is story 12:

One fine morning a Swiss woodcutter goes off to work in the woods. On the way he meets a gypsy. They start talking, and the man begins telling her he is worried, has no idea what to do, he would like to buy some land, but is afraid there will be war. The gypsy then says: 'You may be sure there won't be any war because Hitler will be dead two months from now.' She is as sure of that as, that very evening, he will have a dead man in his cart. The same afternoon some sportsmen shooting in the woods come in search of him saying: 'We see you've a cart; there's been a shooting accident; can you take the injured man to the village?' The man is placed in the cart and the woodcutter sits in front: when they reach the village and he turns round, he sees that the man is dead in the cart (Bonaparte, 1947, pp. 29-30).

Here, we do indeed have a story in which two prophecies are made, both of which come true. But only by stretching a point can the events be interpreted as supernatural. Surely the story is just an example of a gypsy doing what gypsies are traditionally supposed to do – tell fortunes? And where are the “convincers”? The gypsy does not disappear, the events are not said to recur, and there is no other evidence of the gypsy's “otherness” – no coat on the grave, no portrait of a dead person, no seaweed left on a car seat – indeed no hitchhiker, for the gypsy makes her predictions and, one assumes, walks off and that is the last we hear of her.

Here's another story, taken at random, also featuring a gypsy (number 6):

A motorist is stopped on the road by a gypsy. 'Your father has had an accident and you'll have a dead man in your car. It's as true as that Hitler will be dead in three months.' So it happens. (Bonaparte, 1947, p. 25)

Altogether there are nine gypsies, one fortune-teller, and three “women” or “old women” among the prophesiers in *Myths of War*. In fact, gypsies as “O”s are common enough in such stories for one observer to have called the “CC” type “the gypsy story”. Bonaparte reproduces a letter from “one of the Mass Observation organisers” who refers to it this way and says that in “various forms it has been current for five years” (Bonaparte, 1947, p. 28). It came up at the time of Edward VIII's abdication, the observer says, and the time of George VI's coronation. “It always seemed to imply a death wish about the ruling person concerned.”

The other “O”s in *Myths of War* are equally un-supernatural. Main and Hobbs' assumption that “having an encounter with a person who demonstrates visionary prophetic powers [is] a facet of the Supernatural” is not demonstrated in these narratives at least. There is nothing supernatural about a sailor (story number 25), a maths professor (story number 13), or an “old shabby grubby European-looking man” (story number 24). The rest of the “O”s are an equally motley collection. The nearest any of them come to mystery is a “poet or a tramp” (number 4). I would suggest therefore that the history of “CC” stories comes through a tradition of prophesying gypsies, rather than through the traditions of hitchhiking saints and prophets with which Main and Hobbs implicitly connect them.

#### 4. Are “CC” stories relevant to a study of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker”?

An examination shows that in eleven of Bonaparte’s eighteen “CC” stories the “O” is not a hitchhiker and does not vanish; in a further five the “O” does take a ride in the protagonist’s vehicle but does not vanish; and in a further two the prophecies are made on trains.

My conclusion is that not a single one of these “O”s is a vanishing hitchhiker.

So the next question must surely be “why were ‘CC’ legends included in Main and Hobbs’ discussion?” It is hard to avoid thinking that they were chosen for polemical reasons, to provide a body of stories that had the least possible similarity to my phantom hitchhikers.

### Conclusions

Main and Hobbs ask the question, “How important are the differences and similarities emerging between the samples? ... If [a second] sample turns out to have different characteristics it calls into question how representative that first sample was of the whole ‘population’ of texts.” Just so.

But let us leave statistics aside and try a bit of ordinary rationality. Consider the three stories below. Which of these would it be most appropriate to include in a sample of 100 stories of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” type, and which would provide the most effective challenge to disbelief?

#### Story 1

Michael’s teacher ... they were talking one day about ghosts and she said that her friend at Leeds had been out for the evening with a friend of hers—a gentleman friend—and they’d spent the evening in Leeds and were driving home late, very late, on a very wet, dark night. And they lived on the outskirts of Leeds somewhere and as they were driving home, they passed a bus-stop and there was a young girl—a youngish girl—standing at the bus stop, and they drove straight past and then thought it was odd she should be standing there so late ... So the young man said he would take his friend home and then go back and see if the young girl was still at the bus-stop, and if she was still there he would give her a ride home. So he went back to the bus stop and found the young girl still there and asked if he could give her a ride because she was getting very wet and there were no more buses that night.

So he asked her where she lived. She gave him the address. So they set off. Driven a little way when they came to some traffic lights—he had to stop at the traffic lights—and when he looked, she’d gone! Couldn’t be seen! He couldn’t understand it at all. Next morning he went round for his friend .... and told her what had happened. Very perplexed about it.

So they decided they’d go to this address that the young girl had given. Knocked at the door. An elderly lady answered it and they said, did—you know—did a young lady or anybody, live there—because they’d given a ride to this young lady the night before who’d given this address and couldn’t find her. She’d just disappeared, didn’t know where she was. And the old lady burst into tears and said that was her daughter who had died years earlier on that same day in an accident at the traffic lights! (Bennett, 2012, pp. 179-180).

## Story 2

I was sitting in my office late one night when I heard a knock and, going to the door, found a little girl crying, who asked me to go at once to her home to visit a very sick patient. I told her that I was practically retired and never made evening calls, but she seemed to be in such distress that I agreed to make the call so wrote down the name and address she gave me. So I got my bag, hat, and coat and returned to the door, but the little girl was gone. However, I had the address and so went on and made the call. When I got there, a woman came to the door in tears. I asked if there was a patient needing attention. She said there had been—her little daughter—but she had died. She invited me in. I saw the patient lying dead in her bed, and it was the little girl who had called at my office. (Vail, 1950, 254).

## Story 3

Three people in a railway carriage. One says: ‘The war is nearly over.’ ‘How do you know?’ ‘Just as I know that you’ll have a corpse in your car this evening and that gentleman over there has so much in his pocket.’ The man then alights and gets into a car. On the road he picks up an injured man who dies on the way to hospital. (Bonaparte, 1947, story number 11, p. 28).

I used the first of these stories in my “Phantom Hitchhikers and Bad Deaths” and Main and Hobbs include it in their “VH Late” list. Story 2 is not listed as one of Main and Hobbs’ “VH Late” texts, and I did not include it in my sample of 100 phantom hitchhikers. It would now be thought of as a variant of “The Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Man” but was contributed to *New York Folklore Quarterly* in 1950 under the title “A Philadelphia Variant of the Hitchhiking Ghost”. Story 3 features a double prophecy and a corpse in a car. It comes from Marie Bonaparte’s *Myths of War* and I think we can be sure that it was included among the twenty “CC” narratives that Main and Hobbs analysed. There is no ghost involved, so it was not among my sample of 100 phantom hitchhikers.

So which stories might be suitable for a wide-ranging examination of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend? Story 1 obviously; most observers would agree that this is the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” in its classic, and most effective, guise. Now suppose that you were collecting together a sample of 100 “Vanishing Hitchhiker” texts to demonstrate how they functioned as SPEN narratives to combat disbelief in the supernatural. Story 1 is already included and you have got ninety eight others, so you need just one more to complete your sample. You have two to choose from – story 2 (the “Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Man”) and story 3 (the “Corpse in the Car”). Which will you choose? The answer is what these days they call a “no brainer” –it must be story 2. But Main and Hobbs chose story 3.

Now let us try another thought-experiment. If you were to ask David Main and Sandy Hobbs to gather together and analyse a further sample of 100 “Vanishing Hitchhiker” texts (all of them fully-performed), omitting their “CC” narratives but including Vail’s narrative and other examples of the “Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Man” type, then ask them to add a selection of older stories where hitchhiking ghosts take rides in farm carts, and stories that utilise motif number E332.3.3.8 (car passes the same hitchhiker in the rain three times)

and motif number E333.3.2(a) (ghost of murdered woman rides in buggy with traveller to burial spot) – all of which at one time or another, according to one scholar or another, have been seen as perfectly permissible variants of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” story – what sorts of patterns would they find? Would they still want to say that only 56% of “P”s were solitary travellers, only 48% of “O”s were female, the events happened in darkness in only 31% of cases and bad weather was a context in only 14.6%? Or would my own figures (87% solitary “P”s, 96% female “O”s, 100% darkness and 33% “sympathetic weather”) seem nearer the mark? I wonder.

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