HISTORY This Week EP 421: Bunnies, Baseball, and Aliens on the Moon
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. April 1st, 2023. April Fool's Day. I'm Sally Helm.

One Spring Day when I was in elementary school, I was sleeping in. Because I didn't have school that day. It was the first day of spring break. My twin sister and I had had a friend to sleep over the night before. We were all lying around, waking up slowly, looking forward to a day with nothing to do… when all of the sudden the phone rang. Someone in the house picked it up. And then a few moments later, my mom came running into the room. She said, girls, that was the head of school, Mrs. Slaby. She said there was a mistake in the schedule, and you actually *do* have school today. It's not spring break!

I still remember leaping out of bed, my sister too, and our friend, and we were all looking at the clock, realizing how late we were… and my mom was just standing there. And then she said… April Fools.

We had not of course paused to think how weird it was that the head of school would have personally called my mom. On April first. To tell her that we needed to be at school. Like, was Mrs. Slaby personally calling every single parent? Hundreds of them?!? We did not ask that question. Not right away. Because you don't always stop to think about these things when you are the victim of a hoax.

Today: April Fools. We bring you the stories of three historical hoaxes. What does it take to convince everyone around you that the world is not as they had thought? And how can we protect ourselves from being taken in?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Our first story takes place in the English countryside, nearly 300 years ago. Karen Harvey, professor of cultural history at the University of Birmingham, brings us to its very strange beginning.

Karen Harvey: **In Autumn 1726 a woman began giving birth to rabbits in a small town called Godalming in Surrey, not very far from London.**

Sally Helm: That woman's name is Mary Toft.

Karen Harvey: **She was a poor woman, and that's really important in the story.**

Sally Helm: Mary Toft works as a servant, weeding and harvesting in a hop field. (Hops, like what you'd use to make beer.) It's hard work. Mary's life is hard. At twenty-five, she's married with two children. She's expecting another, but she suffers a miscarriage.

Karen Harvey: **It's a prolonged miscarriage. It takes place over a series of weeks. She describes in some detail what that was like, physically and emotionally for her. And it was very distressing. One of the things that she comments on is that during this episode, she's supported by some of the women around her.**

Sally Helm: Mary's neighbor, her mother-in-law, and other relatives gather to care for her. And then at some point, things take a turn. This compassionate gathering turns into something else.

Karen Harvey: **In Mary's account, she's surrounded by intimidating women, women who are older than her, who are more experienced than her, who are in some cases of a higher social class than her. And they force her to do things that she doesn't really want to do.**

Sally Helm: Mary will later say that the idea for the hoax originates with her mother-in-law. And it goes something like this. The women notice that after this miscarriage, Mary still looks pregnant. And they get an idea. *Imagine if we convinced people she was still pregnant… and then she gave birth to something unusual.* It's a strange scheme. But they think there might be some money in it.

And so, soon enough, these women call for the local doctor, John Howard. Under his watch, over the course of a month, Mary gives birth to a rabbit's head, some cat legs, and nine dead baby rabbits.

Sally Helm: **How does this hoax kind of work mechanically? How do they pull it off?**

Karen Harvey: **There's no denying that a woman can't gestate rabbits. But the fact is that animal parts, parts of rabbits were obtained by members of her family. They were cut up and they were inserted inside her body, and she kept them up there for hours at a time until they were then removed.**

Sally Helm: Removed by Doctor Howard, who is astonished at what appears to be a medical marvel. He sends word to physicians in London. *A pregnant woman is issuing rabbits!* His letters reach as far as the royal family—and they are intrigued. The king dispatches two advisors to investigate the animal births.

Karen Harvey: **This whole process of apparently giving birth to rabbits went on for a few weeks.**

Sally Helm: Mary is closely monitored by a team of doctors. And the rabbits keep coming.

Karen Harvey: **Toft and her family succeed in fooling them initially. They're very good at smuggling in the rabbit parts. Mary Toft is a very good performer. And also remember something is physically going on, and so her apparent pain and distress to some extent is also real.**

Sally Helm: Before long, Mary is moved to London, where she stays in a place called a bagnio.

Karen Harvey: **I guess it's a bit like a spa for us. It has treatments that involve water. That people undertake, not so much for beauty, but for health reasons. You can also get food and drink at a bagnio. Many people who just want to come and see this curiosity can easily have access to her in the bagnio. For many people who were watching it was a curiosity, it was perhaps a little bit funny. It was a scientific and medical interest for sure. Contemporaries describe many people being in the room, up to 10 people being in the room at one time, observing her.**

Sally Helm: Some of those people are the royal investigators sent by the king. They eventually present their findings at court.

Karen Harvey: **Some of the rabbit parts that were taken from Mary's body were preserved in a jar and taken and displayed before the king.**

Sally Helm: It's an extremely bizarre twist in the life of a poor hop's harvester. And don't forget: people *are convinced.* The hoax is working!

Karen Harvey: **It seems remarkable, doesn't it, that people believed even for a few weeks, that a woman could actually give birth to rabbits. But it was entirely possible if you believed in what's called the theory of the maternal imagination.**

Sally Helm: This was a popular idea at the time. It held that the things women looked at or experienced during pregnancy could impact their baby's physical development.

Karen Harvey: **So, for example, a particularly large birthmark might be explained during this period by this theory. The woman had looked at some red fruit, and that had somehow imprinted itself on the baby's skin while the baby was in utero.**

Sally Helm: Or… say you're working in the hop field. And you run into a little, furry creature with big ears.

Karen Harvey: **Mary uses this theory. She says that she was chasing a rabbit. And that's how it started.**

Sally Helm: To 21st-century ears, this may sound incredibly far-fetched. But Karen Harvey says, it would have resonated. People back then saw the world a little differently.

Karen Harvey: **The theory of the maternal imagination worked in a world where the immaterial and the material were so closely connected. The image that a woman saw through her eyes became physical. It was imprinted first on her brain, and then it traveled through her physical body to another part of her body, and that was the fetus in utero where again, it was literally impressed upon this soft, yet fully formed human. And that human was therefore changed.**

Sally Helm: By the 1700s, stories about the maternal imagination had been told for centuries.

Karen Harvey: **Nobody had seen this theory proven in a live birth, but it appeared to be happening before their very eyes. And that's why so many doctors thought that this was actually happening.**

Sally Helm: But some doctors have their doubts. Especially after… a porter is caught smuggling rabbit parts to Mary. He says her family paid him to do it, and the authorities tighten security around her room.

Karen Harvey: **And so, it appears that if she's kept under observation and none of her family are able to get to her, lo and behold these rabbit births dry up.**

Sally Helm: **What's the reaction when this is revealed, and how do things play out from there?**

Karen Harvey: There's a very strong reaction as soon as it's revealed that this has been a hoax. The figure of Mary Toft is vilified.

Sally Helm: The press makes fun of her for being illiterate and poor. One pamphlet reads "Most true it is, I dare to say, E'er since the Days of Eve, the weakest woman sometimes may, the wisest man deceive."

Karen Harvey: She's then incarcerated in a jail in London, and she's kept there for several months.

Sally Helm: She's forced to do hard labor. Meanwhile, the courts try to build a case against her… but eventually, the charges are dropped. This whole thing was embarrassing for medical professionals, and everyone kinda wants to forget about it. Also, there's no law against birthing rabbits. But Mary is tarred by the scandal, especially when she returns to her small town.

Karen Harvey: The parish register record of her burial. She's listed as Mary Toft, the imposteress rabbit breeder.

Sally Helm: But Harvey says, Mary's legacy does go beyond this hoax.

Karen Harvey: People don't stop believing in the theory of their maternal imagination. This runs and runs for decades and decades, but doctors and scientists believe in it less and less.

Sally Helm: A major medical advance. Thanks in part to the imposteress rabbit breeder, Mary Toft.

For our next hoax, we travel forward in time, leave the hop field, and head to the baseball field. To St. Petersburg, Florida, 1985. Where the New York Mets are in the middle of spring training.

Jay Horwitz: I'm Jay Horwitz. I'm the VP of Alumni Relations for the Mets, and I was formerly the director of PR for the Mets for 38 years. I've been with the Mets since April 1st, 1980.

Sally Helm: Do you love the Mets?

Jay Horwitz: Until I joined the Mets. I was a Giants fan. I loved the Mets from April 1st, 1980, on.

Sally Helm: That is not the only important April Fool's Day in Horwitz's career. In the spring of '85, a few weeks before the day itself, Horwitz gets called into the GM's office. He tells Horwitz a writer with the magazine *Sports Illustrated* has a strange idea.

Jay Horwitz: George Plimpton had this idea for an April Fool story. It would be how the Mets have signed and scouted a guy and we would portray him as the latest phenom in baseball.

Sally Helm: He wanted to publish a real article about this made-up Met and see if they could convince people, it was true. The name of the fictional figure is Siddhartha Finch—Sidd for short. And it's like he's been birthed from some superhuman realm.

Jay Horwitz: He had a 160 mile an hour fastball. He played an oboe or some kind of cockamamie instrument like that.

Sally Helm: I think a French horn maybe.

Jay Horwitz: Yeah, that's what it is, a French horn. Yeah.

Sally Helm: The writer, George Plimpton, gives Sidd an elaborate backstory. He'd grown up in an English orphanage, been adopted by an archeologist, then gone to Harvard. He's a devotee of meditation. And he's good at so many things that he doesn't know whether baseball is his true calling… even though he has a fastball that defies the laws of biomechanics. 160 miles per hour. Hank Aaron and Babe Ruth combined couldn't hit that.

Jay Horwitz: They actually sent me the article before it came out, so I had a sense of what was written.

Sally Helm: I think there was a sort of drama in the story too that it was like he's deciding between baseball and the French horn, this guy.

Jay Horwitz: Yeah. Whether he is gonna join us, whether he's fully committed to becoming a Met and he was still up in the air what he was gonna do.

Sally Helm: So, *Sports Illustrated* asks Horwitz: Are you willing to help out with this hoax?

Jay Horwitz: I said, I'm all in. I'll promote it.

Sally Helm: In the April 1st edition of Sports Illustrated, the magazine publishes "The Curious Case of Sidd Finch." There's a subhead beneath that headline. It goes like this:

Jay Horwitz: He's a pitcher, part yogi and part recluse, impressively liberated from our opulent lifestyle, Sidd's deciding about yoga and his future in baseball.

Sally Helm: That is a big clue. Hiding in plain sight.

Jay Horwitz: The first letters of the first words in the story said, this is an April Fools' joke, and nobody picked up on it.

Sally Helm: *Happy April Fools' Day*—that's what the first letters say.

The rest of the article, though, is told as if it's reporting the truth. There's even a photo of Sidd in the middle of his windup. His face is obscured. But you can see that he's this gangly guy with his front leg cocked in the air…and for some reason, the size 14 foot on that leg is bare… no shoe… and has what appear to be cleft toes.

Jay Horwitz: He was just the antithesis of what a baseball player should look like.

Sally Helm: He is in fact actually a local high school teacher who agreed to pose for the photo. He looks more awkward than athletic. But the Mets all swear that Sidd may seem like an odd man, not a classic pitcher, but that's what makes him great. They even show proof.

Jay Horwitz: We burnt a hole in the catcher's glove. And we said he burnt the hole with a curve ball. Not a fast ball.

Sally Helm: When the story is published… people are totally fooled. And they are worried. This otherworldly player could totally wreck the competitive balance of a major American sport. With Sidd on the mound, how could anyone beat the Mets?

Mets fans are like… is this too good to be true? But I mean…it's in *Sports Illustrated.*

Jay Horwitz: Sports Illustrated was the Bible of baseball, so if it was in Sports Illustrated, it had to be true.

Sally Helm: Jay Horwitz's phone starts ringing off the hook. Some people are upset with him.

Jay Horwitz: I got a call from the sports editor of one of the New York papers really yelling at me and lambasting me, how can I give this story to Sports Illustrated? How could you not give this to us?

Sally Helm: Other sports writers who cover the Mets feel like they've missed this huge story. They start sidling up to the players, trying to get more information. And the players are in on the joke.

Jay Horwitz: They would give interviews and say, Hey, it's great. I think he'll be good in our rotation.

Sally Helm: Of course, the reporters also want to talk to Sidd. But the Mets say, *Sorry—he's not available for comment.*

Jay Horwitz: We said, we're not gonna let Sidd talk. He's too nervous now.

Sally Helm: Then on April 2nd, right away, the team holds a press conference. There's been a major development: Sidd Finch, this once-in-a-lifetime talent, has decided to retire. His story is over before it's really begun, which makes it all the more baffling. And only creates more buzz—even non-sports fans are talking about the mystery of Sidd Finch.

And then a week later, Sports Illustrated comes clean: *Dear readers, this was all a joke. April Fools!* But even after that, the Mets can't help but keep the story going just one beat longer.

Jay Horwitz: We retired his jersey the next year. We had a Sid Finch retirement jersey ceremony.

Sally Helm: This joke goes over so well that George Plimpton writes an entire novel about Sidd Finch. People slap bumper stickers on their cars that read, "Sidd Finch Lives." He just might be the most famous athlete that never was.

After the break: another story about how you can't always trust what you read.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: For our final hoax we'll go back in time again, to the summer of 1835. New York City. It is served by dozens of newspapers, all competing for readers. And then a newcomer called *The Sun* hits the stands. Its front-page headline stops people in their tracks. It announces the first installment of an exclusive multi-part series about the discovery of life… *on the moon.*

Matthew Goodman is a writer who has written widely on nineteenth-century American journalism. And he says, in these stories, the Sun seems to have the goods.

Matthew Goodman: These newspaper articles claim to have been drawn from a Scottish scientific journal that printed for the first time these alleged great lunar discoveries made by the astronomer Sir John Hershel.

Sally Helm: The Sun says: Herschel made this discovery with a new invention. A telescope so advanced that it can peer into far-away worlds. A telescope that lets us see what we've never been able to see before.

Matthew Goodman: So powerful that it was actually able to see details on the surface of the moon.

Sally Helm: According to this article, Herschel has looked through the telescope to see lakes and mountains. Dark red flowers. Trees with glossy leaves. The moon is a tropical paradise like you might find at the Earth's equator. The public is amazed. They can't wait for part two.

Matthew Goodman: People crowded around day and night around the New York Sun offices. To be the first ones to get the next installment of the newspaper.

Sally Helm: The next day's paper breaks the news that this lunar landscape also includes animals.

Matthew Goodman: From horned goats to beavers that walked on their hind legs.

Sally Helm: Sir John Hershel is reported as saying that on Earth, these animals would be "classed as monsters." Readers can't wait for more. They're wandering around New York City, looking up at the moon, wondering, *what else is up there? What will Herschel see?*

Matthew Goodman: It culminated in the final installment of the series with the lunar man bats.

Sally Helm: The lunar man bats.

Matthew Goodman: These four-foot-tall creatures who could talk. And they constructed buildings and did art, they built lunar temples, and apparently, they fornicated it public according to Herschel, the details of which the Sun kept out of the paper.

Sally Helm: Talking man-bats building temples—New Yorkers are like, *they're right up there, on the moon, the moon I'm looking at right now.* You can read about it all in *The Sun*, which costs just a penny.

Matthew Goodman: The Sun's printing machines were working overtime around the clock to meet the demand for all of the extra copies. It became a huge sensation. This story got reprinted in newspapers all around the United States and ultimately in Europe as well.

Sally Helm: And those pennies… start adding up.

Matthew Goodman: The Sun, which was only a two-year-old newspaper, became the most widely read newspaper in the entire world.

Sally Helm: Readers want to hear more and more about the man-bats and the tropical trees and all of it. But of course, there's a problem. And it is not actually that the astronomer Sir John Hershel isn't real. He *is.* He is in South Africa doing research. But of course, he's not actually finding any of this stuff that the Sun is writing about. And he's definitely not contributing to the stories.

Matthew Goodman: The man who actually wrote the series was an Englishman by the name of Richard Adams Locke.

Sally Helm: He's the editor of *The Sun.*

Matthew Goodman: He was a political radical who had basically been exiled from England for his political views. He was very concerned about what he perceived as the increasing domination of scientific thought by religion.

Sally Helm: One theory in particular annoys Richard. A group of religious astronomers is pushing the idea that all celestial bodies—the moon, the sun, the planets, the comets—that all of them are inhabited.

Matthew Goodman: Because God in his infinite wisdom would not create these celestial objects without also creating beings to appreciate them and to worship him for his benevolence in doing so. Richard Adams Locke found all of this to be religious ideology masking itself as scientific inquiry.

Sally Helm: So, he writes this moon series in his newspaper *The Sun* to mock that idea. He writes it as satire.

Matthew Goodman: That was his intention.

Sally Helm: He thought it would be obvious.

Matthew Goodman: But what he had not anticipated was that the public had been so schooled in the ideas of the religious astronomers that when this series came out, they believed it because it simply confirmed what they had been led to believe anyway.

Sally Helm: It's the opposite of what Richard had hoped for. Everyone's like, *oh yeah. These religious scientists are right. Here's the proof, right here in these stories in* The Sun!

Matthew Goodman: By some accounts as many as nine out of 10 New Yorkers believed them to be true.

Sally Helm: Now, Matthew Goodman is quick to say: we shouldn't think that these 19th-century readers were just gullible. Or stupid. Just like with Mary Toft and the theory of the maternal imagination, you have to remember the time they were living in. And what the prevailing ideas of that time were.

Matthew Goodman: Part of why this series was generally accepted, was because this was really a time of remarkable scientific discovery. The microscope, for instance, had only recently been widely distributed. And the notion that there were worlds that existed in a drop of water was something that had never been contemplated before.

Sally Helm: Bacteria, algae, miniscule crustaceans—living things! Right here in our water!

Matthew Goodman: So of course, it was thought well, if there are fantastic creatures that are tiny and live inside water, why would it not be possible that they might be living on the surface of the moon as well?

Sally Helm: Richard Adams Locke truly did not expect this public response. It's really weighing on him. So, he meets up with a journalist friend for a drink.

Matthew Goodman: This journalist mentioned to him that his paper was about to start publishing the series that had appeared in Locke's paper. And Locke in this drunken state said to him, don't do it. I wrote the articles.

Sally Helm: With that, it all begins to unravel. Rival newspapers break the news that Richard, and *The Sun*, just made it all up.

Matthew Goodman: The Sun's rivals felt sure that once this had been exposed as a hoax, readers would stop reading The Sun. That's not what happened. Reader's sort of tipped their hats to The Sun and they said, job well done. You know, you fooled me this time. You won't fool me next time.

Sally Helm: The Sun actually wins big. But Richard… does not.

Matthew Goodman: Richard Adams Locke became known as the great hoaxer of New York. Things didn't go very well. He was drinking very heavily, and he ended up quitting The Sun in a dispute with a publisher and disappearing after a period of time into obscurity.

Sally Helm: These days, it would be harder to convince nine people out of ten that there are bat men on the moon. But that doesn't mean we don't still fall for hoaxes.

Matthew Goodman: Hoaxes are very powerful, and it is very easy to fall prey to them. And that is especially true when the hoaxes confirm what it is that you want to believe anyway.

Sally Helm: And if we're going to resist them…we'll have to work for it.

Matthew Goodman: I think that as a society, we are no smarter today than we were then, and we're certainly no more discerning today than we were then. It's not a question of technology that is going to make us no longer susceptible to hoaxes. It is a critical sense. It's always interrogating your own beliefs. Why do I believe this? Why do I think this? Am I only believing this because it confirms what it is that I want to believe? Where is the actual evidence for this? These are issues that are at least as important today as they were in Richard Adams Locke's time.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests: Karen Harvey, professor of cultural history at the University of Birmingham and author of *The Imposteress Rabbit Breeder: Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England*; Jay Horwitz, former PR director and current V.P. of Alumni Relations for the New York Mets; and Matthew Goodman, author of *The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Dueling Journalists, and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth Century New York.*

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