



THE BOOK OF BLACK

BLACK HOLES, BLACK DEATH, BLACK FOREST CAKE AND OTHER DARK SIDES OF LIFE



CLIFFORD A. PICKOVER

Black Cat Fear

Do black cats make you shiver? Records from the thirteenth-century Inquisition describe the prosecution of a group of people who believed that Lucifer had been wrongly expelled from heaven—and that sometime in the future, Lucifer and his followers would reclaim heaven as their home. The Roman Catholic Church referred to the group as Luciferans, who confessed while being interrogated that new members had to kiss the rear end of a black cat as part of the initiating ritual.

During the Middle Ages, belief in witchcraft became common, and some people thought that witches could change into black cats. The superstition that associates black cats with bad luck probably stems from this era. Most often, the “witches” were simply old women who lived alone and kept cats for companionship. Alas, some of these women were burned at the stake along with their cats, who were thought to be witches in another form. The editors of *Time-Life* write, “In France, there were monthly bonfires on which cats were killed, especially black ones. This grisly practice persisted into the seventeenth century, creating to this day a scarcity of black cats in Europe . . .”

Cats were not always thought of as harbingers of evil. In fact, throughout history, cats of all different colors were considered good companions. In fact, the ancient Egyptians revered a fertility goddess named Bast, often depicted in the form of a cat. It was illegal for ancient Egyptians to harm a cat. Pet cats were considered family members, and their deaths were deeply mourned.

Interestingly, the black cat is not a special breed of cat. The all-black coloration is of benefit to a cat as it hunts at night. One of the most famous black cats in history is the one that mysteriously walked onto the field at New York’s Shea Stadium in 1969 and circled a Chicago Cubs player. This incident was followed by the downfall of the Cubs and the success of the Mets, who won the World Series.

SEE ALSO Black Magic (80,000 BC), Black Mass (c. 100), Black Pullet (1740)

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476–1000

Dark Ages

Howard Pyle (1853–1911), **Joseph Henry Dahmus** (1909–2005),
Francesco Petrarca (“Petrarch”) (1304–1374)

In 1888, American author Howard Pyle dramatically described the Dark Ages as “a time when the wisdom of the ancient times was dead and had passed away, and our own days of light had not yet come. There lay a great black gulf in human history, a gulf of ignorance, of superstition, of cruelty, and of wickedness. That time we call the dark or Middle Ages. Few records remain to us of that dreadful period . . .”

More recently, American historian Joseph Dahmus wrote that the “centuries from the sixth to the close of the tenth were the most turbulent and misery-laden that Europe has ever experienced . . . These were melancholy times [when] men feared the very bases of society would dissolve . . .”

The term “Dark Ages” usually refers to the Early Middle Ages of European history, between 476 and 1000 AD. In 1330, Italian scholar Petrarch referred to the years before him as being “surrounded by darkness and dense gloom,” and later scholars used the term “dark” to refer to a seeming lack of primary information sources during this time and limited technological and cultural progress.

In the Dark Ages, political and economic development in Europe tended to be localized, and peasants were bound to the land and dependent on landlords for protection. The church served as an overarching European institution, although its authority tended to be diffused to the local bishops. Few people could read or write. Travel was often unsafe over any significant distance, which led to a decline in trade and manufacture for export.

Today, the term “dark” is often avoided, and historian Paul B. Newman writes, “Living in the Middle Ages was not as primitive and crude as it is so often portrayed. Though some parts of Europe temporarily lapsed into barbarism after the fall of Rome in 476 AD, Roman institutions and public works were such an integral part of European civilization that they rarely disappeared completely. Even during the worst years of the centuries immediately following the fall of Rome, the so-called Dark Ages, the legacy of Roman civilization survived.”

SEE ALSO Greek Dark Ages (c. 1100 BC–750 BC), Black Death (1348)

Replica of a helmet found at Sutton Hoo in England, in the grave of an Anglo-Saxon leader, around 620 in the Early Middle Ages.



1968

“Black Magic Woman”

Gábor Szabó (1936–1982), **Peter Green** (b. 1946), **Carlos Augusto Alves Santana** (b. 1947)

The song “Black Magic Woman” was written by British guitarist Peter Green and performed by Fleetwood Mac in 1968. Two years later, it skyrocketed to fame when rock guitarist Carlos Santana’s rendition climbed to number four on the U.S. song charts. The song appeared on Santana’s *Abraxas* album, which became number one on the U.S. music charts and achieved quadruple platinum status in 1986, partially due to this song’s popularity.

Santana’s version differs significantly from Fleetwood Mac’s because of Santana’s use of percussion instruments, including conga and timbales, to provide complex Latin rhythms. The song describes a woman who uses black magic in order to cast spells on a man and who is “trying to make a devil” out of him. Oddly enough, the song has special literal significance in the twenty-first century. For example, in the year 2000, a court sentenced a woman from the United Arab Emirates to four months in jail for casting a spell. The woman, angry with her ex-spouse for divorcing her, had hired a magician from a neighboring country to place a spell on her former husband. The husband soon came to believe that he was possessed by demons, sued his ex-wife, and won.

Santana’s version, the full title of which is “Black Magic Woman/Gypsy Queen,” also had musical themes from the 1967 song “Gypsy Queen,” written by jazz guitarist Gábor Szabó. When Santana, the award-winning rock musician and guitarist, was asked about his inspiration for the song from other artists, he replied, “We all borrow from everybody; the beautiful thing is that there is room in the blues to get your own fingerprints . . . Your fingerprints are your tone and the way you phrase. That’s what we encourage young people to do—learn from B.B. King, use your tape recorder, but after a while, put all that stuff away and just play by yourself in the dark.”

SEE ALSO Black Magic (c. 80,000 BC), “Coal Black Rose” (1829), “Baby’s in Black” (1964), “Paint It, Black” (1966), Black Sabbath (1969)

“Black Magic Woman” describes a woman who uses black magic in order to cast spells on a man and who is “trying to make a devil” out of him.



The Book of Black

Black Holes, Black Death, Black Forest Cake and Other Dark Sides of Life

Clifford A. Pickover



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Author, editor, and columnist in the fields of science, mathematics, and science fiction, Clifford Pickover works at the IBM Thomas J. Watson Research Center in Yorktown, New York. He received his PhD from Yale University and is the author of more than 30 books on computers and creativity, art, mathematics, black holes, religion, human behavior and intelligence, time travel, alien life, and science fiction.

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