

In praise of Snopes

Did you read about that Romanian couple who met on the internet, then named their son Yahoo out of gratitude? I love that story--even if it isn't true.

And no, I don't read the National Enquirer; I read my e-mail, often with sick fascination. We live at a time when we can send information around the globe in an instant and what are we sending? The shocking news that college cafeteria food is routinely laced with laxatives. And that a man had an embryo implanted in his abdomen and is now undergoing the world's first male pregnancy. And that Al Sharpton criticized Tiger Woods for a lack of diversity in his mistresses.

In case you were wondering, none of those were true either, which will be disappointing to you men who've always dreamed of bearing children. It should be good news to college students though--and to Tiger Woods, who could probably use some about now.

Before I hit forward and muck up the inboxes of all the people I care about, I like to check these things out on Snopes.com, a website which debunks myths, urban legends, and even old wives tales. Being an old wife myself, I was interested to read that chewing gum doesn't really take seven years to pass through the human digestive system. And fabric softener sheets aren't really effective against mosquitoes--unless maybe you run them through the dryer together. And shaving doesn't really make your hair grow back thicker, as any man who shaves his head can verify.

I was relieved to read about Robby on Snopes.com. You know Robby, the fatherless boy with no musical talent who learned to play piano like a protégé so that his deaf mother could hear his music in heaven after she died from cancer. Sadly, after serving and surviving in Desert Storm, Robby was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing while--you guessed it--playing the piano. No mention of why there was a piano at the Murrah Federal Building on that fateful day. And as Snopes.com pointed out, no mention of anyone named Robby in the Oklahoma City bombing either.

Robby's luck, if there really were a Robby, is almost as bad as that of the unfortunate soul in Indonesia who caught fire when his cell phone rang as he was filling up his gas tank. Except that, according to Snopes.com, it didn't happen. Doesn't matter; I still leave mine in the car when I fill up. There's something about an e-mail appearing in your inbox ten thousand that makes it seem true.

After getting a few too many e-mails about Sarah Palin's test scores and Barack Obama's birth certificate, I vowed to never again forward an e-mail that could destroy a politician's reputation without checking Snopes.com first--unless I don't want them to be elected.

Clearly there are a lot of frustrated fiction writers out there using their considerable talents to gum up my inbox. To be fair, Snopes.com does occasionally confirm a message that's making the rounds. For example a husband and wife in Texas really did both won the lottery after playing numbers recommended by a fortune cookie. And it is true that children should not eat hand sanitizer. It's also true that one should never, ever use gasoline on one's head lice. I'm proud to say I didn't need Snopes.com to tell me so.

But do check out the site if you're tempted to send on the e-mail saying that tax refunds will be paid in the form of U.S. Savings bonds, or that federal law prohibits you from having contact with extraterrestrial beings, or that the internet will be shut down for spring cleaning from March 31-April 2. I kind of wish that last one was true.

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