



THE
TREASURY
FOLKLORE



Waterlands,
Wooded Worlds
and Starry Skies



Dee Dee Chainey
& Willow Winsham

SOARING SOULS AND SHOOTING STARS: Star Superstitions from Around the World

The enduring habit of humankind to attach meaning to signs and occurrences stretches back into the mists of time. When it comes to superstitious belief surrounding stars, it is tantalizingly apparent that such beliefs and ideas regarding the significance of the stars are shared across the globe.

Shooting Stars

Spotting a meteor, or shooting or falling star as they are commonly known, is a time-honoured pastime. Interpreted in many different ways, it is widely believed that catching sight of a falling star as it streaks across the night sky is an omen of good things to come. As well as a general sign of good luck, spying a shooting star can also have a variety of more specific interpretations.

According to superstition in Kentucky, USA, if a falling star was seen, someone in the family would marry soon. In Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia, a falling star could indicate the escape of a person from imprisonment or captivity. Upon seeing a star it was important not to draw attention to the fact in order to help the person stay free: instead, it was advised to either remain silent, or say, 'Behind the thorns, behind a bush hide!' According to the Yolŋu people of Arnhem Land, Australia, a meteor was a sign to a family that a relative had arrived home safely.

Being lucky enough to see a falling star could also help with health concerns. According to Marcellus of Bordeaux, writing in 350 CE, they



could cure pimples. To be free of the affliction, one should observe a shooting star and then wipe a cloth over the spots; the pimples would then transfer to the cloth and your face would be clear. There was an important caveat, however: make sure not to touch your face with your hand, otherwise the spots would simply be transferred there instead. In another example of a cure, Pliny, in his *Natural History*, stated that if a corn or callus was cut when a star was falling, it would be quickly cured.

What actually is a shooting star? Although science now tells us that the phenomenon is caused by tiny specks of space dust burning up as they enter the earth's upper atmosphere, there are many other explanations to be found. According to Romanian belief, a falling star was actually an angel flying to help someone in need. People, being sinful, could not see them, and so only saw the star. According to the Karajarri people of Western Australia, the night sky was a dome, made of hard rock or shell. Each star in turn was a nautilus shell, housing a living fish; a meteor was a dead fish falling from its shell. The Indigenous Australians near the Pennefather River, Queensland, believed that a falling star was the spirit of a woman watering yams to aid their growth.

Falling stars were not always viewed positively, however. A common belief was that a falling star signified either a death had occurred or was to happen soon. This was particularly the case if a shooting star was seen when at a sickbed or on the way to visit a sick person: one mother from Yorkshire, England, related how she knew her child was going to die because she saw a shooting star the night before they passed. A popular belief in Belarus held that it was a bad idea to look at falling stars on 5 February, as it would mean a death would follow soon after. In Russia it was also taboo to look at shooting stars on 5 March (20 Feb in the old Russian calendar) for similar reasons.

Meteors have also been associated with evil magic and spirits. According to the Tiwi of Australia's Northern Territory, the spirit of a falling star searches for living things to consume. It is told how one old woman placed infants in a bag tied about her neck to hide them from the eyes of these evil spirits. Another practice among some peoples was to kiss a baby on the forehead if they saw a meteor, so the child wouldn't be seen. In the Halliste region of Estonia, it was believed that a shooting

star was caused when an old demon threw his hot stones high up into the sky. A particularly strange meteor spirit known for its malevolence, the Jubena, was found in Eastern Cape York Peninsula, Australia. It cooked eggs and burned them on the coals, and these were seen as falling stars. The spirit was known to hunt people down and tickle them to death. According to the Arrente people of Australia, mushrooms were fallen stars imbued with evil magic; because of this, they were considered taboo and not to be eaten.

According to belief in Ukraine, if looking at a falling star, be sure to say 'Amen' three times. This means when it lands it will solidify as rosin and be harmless. Otherwise it will transform into a devil, causing great harm to people in the area. In Bulgaria, the Kervanka, or Lazhi-kervan, is the name given to a bad star of evil spirits and disaster. People followed this star as they set off in the morning and often ended up dead, attacked by evil spirits on the road.

It is also very important to show a shooting star respect. According to Belarusian belief, you shouldn't laugh at a falling star, or it might burn down your house!

Wishing on a Star

Another popular star superstition is the practice of wishing on a star or shooting star in the hope that the wish will come true. A belief found across many places and cultures, it is not always as straightforward as just making a wish, and varying conditions could be attached. The most common and widespread caveat is that the wish must be made before the star is gone from sight in order for it to come true, a belief found in nearly all areas where this superstition is followed.

It is also sometimes said that the precise star you wish on is important. The most popular choice to wish on is the first star seen in the evening. This belief is captured in the now popular rhyme:

Starlight, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.

The position of the star when the wish is made is also said by some to be important – if the star is on the right-hand side, then good luck will follow and the wish will come true, but if it is on the left, then bad luck should be expected.

Some say that you should wish on a certain number of stars in order for your wish to come true; for instance, a belief recorded in mid-20th century Swansea, Wales, held that counting nine stars on nine nights in a row would ensure that you got what you wanted.

What you did after making the wish was also important. Certain prohibitions were named in a collection of superstitions gathered from a sample of US college students; these variously specified that after wishing you should not look at the star again until you see a specified number of others, that you should throw kisses to three other stars before speaking, or that you shouldn't speak until you are asked a question that you can answer 'yes' to.

In Russia, a shooting star was said to be an angel, on its way to collect a departed soul. They did not refuse wishes at that time, so it was a good time to make a wish; as long as you could still see the falling star, the wish was likely to come true. The speed the star flew at also indicated how quickly the wish would be granted: the faster the better!

Stars are also said to be able to predict what the future might hold. Some believe they can predict how many children you will have. Just hold a piece of cloth up and look towards the evening star; the number of little stars you see around it will predict the number of children.

Pointing at Stars

According to widespread belief, pointing at stars is a big no-no. Although the precise reason for this is not clear, there are several suggestions for why pointing at the stars is a really bad idea. A popular theory is that, according to ancient belief, the stars were actually gods up in the skies. To point at one could imply disrespect – and who would want to risk angering a god? This is linked to similar beliefs of how it is taboo to point at other celestial bodies, such as the moon or rainbows.

In Germany, it was a commonly held practice to bite one's finger after pointing at a star, potentially to avoid the star having to bite the person's finger. Biting the finger would, in theory, prevent it from falling off. Superstition in Estonia decrees against pointing at a star as it falls: if you do, you might find your finger starts to decay! It was also considered bad luck to count the stars in the sky, so pointing and counting might be doubly unlucky. In the mid-19th century in Derbyshire, England, children would dare each other to count the stars, with the belief that the counter would be struck down dead upon reaching a hundred.

As with every rule, there are some exceptions. According to lore in Kentucky, USA, if you want to find something you have lost, just count a hundred stars without counting the same one twice. Counting seven stars for seven nights in a row could help with finding love; according to superstition, the first potential partner you shake hands with will be your future spouse. Similarly, sleeping with a mirror under your pillow after counting nine stars for nine nights in a row will make you dream of the person you will marry.

Passing Souls

There is a long-held connection between human souls and the stars. In Classical belief, when the world was created, the creator divided the left-over material into a number of souls equal to that of the stars in the heavens; each soul was assigned to a star. Those who lived a good life would, at its end, return to their star for a blessed existence, but it was a different story for those who did not learn the lessons they were supposed to during life: their soul would return again and again in lesser forms until they passed the test. The Ancient Greeks believed that shooting stars were falling or rising souls, depending on which way the star was going, and this belief held for centuries.

A very common belief even today is that a falling star is a soul either falling to earth or ascending into heaven. In some South Slavic and East Slavic areas, a falling star marked the death of the person it belonged to. In Bulgaria, when someone dies, the star that started to shine at their birth, will fall into their tomb. In 19th-century Yorkshire, it was believed that falling stars were the souls of babies coming down from heaven. Similarly, in Romania, stars were the souls of unbaptized children shining in the sky. To help the soul of the unbaptized child, it was important to cross yourself or give the soul a name to help it on its way. A common belief among many Indigenous groups in Australia was that a falling star was the spirit of someone who had died, falling from the sky. Some groups believed that if the sight of the star was accompanied by a loud crash, then it signified the death of a great medicine man.

The direction the star was travelling was sometimes said to be significant. If a star fell downwards, then it marked a death; if going upwards, then a birth had occurred. If a star fell towards the left, then the departed soul was that of a wicked person, and had gone straight to hell. In Belarusian belief, the sight of a falling star could mean that the deceased had not reached heaven, and their soul had returned to earth in order to put right the wrongs done in their previous life.

The star's direction could also signify *how* a person had died. In Belarus, if the star fell in a slanting direction then the person died a natural death, while if it fell fast and straight, they had been killed.

A slowly falling star indicated that the deceased had been ill for a long time before their passing.

Some believe that the way a star fell was linked to the character of the person who had died. If it fell in a straight line then they had been an honest and good person during life. A jaggedly falling star, however, indicated that the individual had been unkind.

According to the Wardaman people of Australia, after death a person's spirit passed through a hole in the sky. There it would shine as a star, watched over by the Rock Cod star, Munin (Arcturus). When its time came, the spirit fell down to earth as a shooting star. Landing in a stream, the Rock Cod looked after it once more, until the spirit was united with its mother and reincarnated as her baby.

In Lithuania, it was believed that if the star had a tail, then it belonged to a rich person, whereas a simple star signified a person in a less healthy financial position. A large star could belong to a grown-up, while children had smaller stars.

Have you ever heard the phrase that someone must have been born under a lucky star, used about those who seem to have a charmed life with everything going their way, or those who rise to great heights? Equally, there are those who seem to be constantly suffering, experiencing mishap after mishap, with nothing going right. Although obviously not supported by fact, according to some, this might not be a coincidence, and there is a belief that the star someone was born under influences their entire personalities and life ahead. In Romanian belief, the star of an emperor, for instance, was bright and large – a *luceafar* – while a small, faint star signified a poorer, less-important individual. In Bulgaria, a sickly child is said to be of a weak star, or *slabozvezdo*. In contrast, many cultures believe that a leader or great person will have a bright star that shines clearly in the sky.

DRAGONS IN THE SKY

Another popular explanation for falling or shooting stars is that they are dragon- or serpent-like spirit creatures, blazing their way through the night sky, often wreaking havoc and destruction when they hit the earth.

In Belarus, if a star is seen falling fitfully rather than in a straight line, this is a strong indication that the star is actually a *zmej*. These creatures are often linked to evil magic; when a fireball is seen, it is said to be the *zmej* or devil carrying gold or silver for a witch or wizard, and that the star will fall over the location of the sorcerer's house. Likewise in Russia, it is said that a *zmej* or fireball is actually a flying witch or sorcerer. The Romanian *zmej* or *balauri* were malevolent creatures, waiting in the dark to leap on those people rash enough to be wandering alone at night, to disfigure or even kill them.

In Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia, the *zmej* is often known as *ala* or *hala*, which means 'snake' in Turkish. This creature can come down as a thick fog that stops corn from ripening and brings bad weather in general, such as great winds and storms. They live in caves out of the way of humankind when they can, guarding their treasure jealously. At the end of their lives, they become so large and filled with power that they cannot be contained on earth any longer; they leave altogether, and can be seen as shooting stars in the sky as they fly.

In Russia, the *zmej* or *zmey* as it is also known there, targets women who either pine too heavily or for too long for missing men-folk, or those that are dead. The *zmey* appears in the likeness of the missing man to the woman (though no one but her can see it), and is said to have sexual intercourse with her. Malevolent meteor spirits in the form of dragon-serpents

were recognized by several groups in the Northern Territory of Australia. They hunted for the souls of those who were ill or dying.

Such dragon spirits associated with meteors aren't always seen as malevolent beings, however. In Belarus, there is the *kbut*, a household spirit that brings good fortune and wealth to a family. Likewise in Lithuania, the *aitvaras*, another meteor dragon, brings good fortune and wealth to the household it patronizes.

