

Chapter 1

Seven Master Myths in the News

Eternal Stories

On a cool November night, a 59-year-old handyman, George Bird, was beaten to death a half-block from his West Philadelphia home. He was knocked down from behind by a gang of young males, then punched, kicked, and stomped to death. His killers, at least five young men, ran off with five dollars and five cans from a six-pack of beer.

I was working as a reporter in the city. Later, I was told the murder had been covered by the 11 P.M. newscasts, and had also appeared as a small blurb in one city paper, but I don't recall having seen it. I lived about 15 blocks from Bird.

It was only later when the man's neighborhood began to take action that I took notice. The police had arrested a number of suspects, but the neighbors were not satisfied. Some residents were linking the murder to a neighborhood corner store, which they claimed sold drugs to young people and which, in fact, had been the site of seven arrests for narcotics violations. The residents claimed they had tried to close the store through legal channels for more than a year. They were now urging that the

neighborhood residents themselves close the store. Their plan was simple but potentially explosive: They would just stand outside the place and not let anyone, owners or customers, enter.

I began to follow the action closely. I interviewed grieving neighbors. And I covered the illegal picketing and sidewalk confrontations—which did eventually close the store without violence. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* wanted me to pull the whole story together as a cover piece for its Sunday magazine.

But I could not get started. I was stuck on the most basic question: Why was this a news story? From the beginning, the events seemed to have news value, yes. But writing about the events was a different story. What did those events mean to people, a lot of different people? The *Inquirer* Sunday circulation was then more than a million, scattered around the city itself and in its Pennsylvania and New Jersey suburbs.

I recognized early that readers did not need *information* about George Bird. His death had already been reported, even if superficially. Readers also did not need information about his neighbors. What the neighbors did had no real effect on the readers of the *Inquirer*. A straightforward summary news lead—"A West Philadelphia corner store, accused of being a site for drug sales, was closed recently by neighbors who demonstrated on the sidewalks outside"—seemed useless. Unless readers lived in West Philadelphia, why would they care?

I eventually came to believe that the events in West Philadelphia could not be presented in the form of news as *information*. The events were of interest as a *story*, a story with characters and a plot and a theme, a story that could be told to a city, a kind of public story. I proceeded very tentatively. Back then, I did not like this emphasis on story. For me, information always came first. The news story was simply the standard, implicit, assumed way in which information was reported. The story did not take precedence over the information. But this seemed different. Thus, the implicit became explicit, for better or maybe for worse. The somewhat melodramatic results crowned an introduction that the editors ran in large, bold-face type over the article:

What these people did, and how they did it, may offer something for other neighborhoods, not that different, where others have surrendered their streets, their peace of mind and even the very dignity of their life in this city.

Indeed these are times when being a neighbor is, more often than not,

a geographical circumstance; a good neighbor is defined by what he does not, and the best of neighbors is one who, in the name of privacy, leaves us alone. Perhaps this neighborhood has something to say, to a city of neighborhoods, about getting involved with the concerns of others and allowing others to get involved with our own concerns. Maybe then what will be surrendered is this false sense of privacy. Which is not privacy at all but fear.¹

Despite my immodest hopes and the earnest overkill of my writing, the story was relatively successful. Editors and reporters had kind words. Radio shows discussed the story for a few days. The people in George Bird's neighborhood said I portrayed the events well. But I was left with a disquieting feeling. I had struggled mightily to understand the "news" in George Bird's death. And even after the story appeared, I wasn't sure I got it right.

Years later, I could see my problem. I did not have any model for understanding news. I did not understand the social role of news. I did not understand the relationship between news and other forms of storytelling. In truth, I did not understand much. And if someone had suggested to me that my struggle with the death of George Bird had led to a modern retelling of a classic myth, that I had reproduced a story told and retold in numerous cultures, that in my story George Bird became an archetypal figure, unheralded in life, sanctified in death, an innocent victim whose sacrifice and death brought a people together—I would have snorted with loud derision.

My questions about news continued. Despite years in the classroom and in the newsroom, I somehow had never thought too deeply about the role of news in society. I had vague ideas: News was congressional votes, stock prices, fires, election results, killings, sports scores, deaths, births. If pressed, I might have said news was information about recent events of interest to people. But I was already beginning to see the inadequacy of that conception. News wasn't always information, it wasn't always about recent events, and its interest to people was not always clear.

I was a drag in the newsroom. "What's the news in this?" I would ask other reporters. "Why are you writing the story this way?" I was a deadly presence at deadlines. Eventually, my questions took me out of the newsroom and back to the classroom.

My studies first led me through the usual theories of communication and models for news and society. But convinced that news was not simply

information, certain that news was primarily a form of storytelling, I eventually wandered far outside the journalism curriculum. I was reading fairy tales and folktales, legends and myths. I studied histories of the penny press and morphologies of folktales. I followed studies of presidential press coverage with collections of Greek mythology.

Of course I continued to read the news. But strange connections began to suggest themselves to me. I was seeing myths on the front page. I found the Hero myth in stories of sports stars, politicians, and corporate executives, and in other "success stories." I saw the Victim myth narrated in accounts of senseless shootings, tragic auto accidents, and other misfortunes. I observed the Flood myth in stories of swollen rivers, storm-battered coasts, and other natural disasters. Each time I picked up the newspaper, I recognized stories told long ago. All the disparate readings seemed to come together. Many news articles seemed to have very little to do with information or politics or civic life. They seemed to have everything to do with storytelling and myth.

This book thus seriously considers a once outlandish proposition: Ancient myths are told in the news stories of today. In conceiving this book, I didn't want to offer a dry, academic treatise on news and myth. I've done those. I wanted to get the idea out of the classroom and into newsrooms and living rooms. Surely, some news readers will chortle at comparisons of local columnists to the great Greek Homer. Journalists themselves will disown comparisons of classical texts to front-page stories that end up wrapped around fish or placed at the bottom of bird cages. Chortling and disowning, however, may not be a bad start. At least a conversation will be under way.

MYTH DEFINED

At first, the connections between news and myth may appear to be the product of overly imaginative professors who have spent a bit too much time in ivory towers. In popular use, *myth* often means an untrue belief. Or myth can mean an ancient story about fantastic people and equally fantastic events. *News* usually means a report of factual events and real people. To compare news and myth may seem like comparing black and white or true and false. Indeed, myth is often contrasted with reality, as in the possible title: "The Ivory Tower: Myth or Reality?"

I will define myth in burdensome detail below. But I want to be very

clear at the outset before I start to get unclear. For this discussion, myth is not unreality. Myth is not a false belief. Myth is not an untrue tale. To compare news and myth does *not* suggest that news regularly passes down untrue stories of doubtful origins. It does *not* suggest that news is inherently false, biased, slanted, spun, or spindled.

Instead, this book sees myth—and news—as telling the great stories of humankind for humankind. It follows the lead of scholars who see the stories of myth as a rich, essential part of social life. In this view, myth is defined, somewhat stiffly, as a sacred, societal story that draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life. *

The definition emphasizes "archetypal figures and forms" and "exemplary models." I want to explain and explore further what they are. Archetypes are "original frameworks." In terms of myth, they are patterns, images, motifs, and characters, taken from and shaped by the shared experiences of human life, that have helped structure and shape stories across cultures and eras. They are fundamental figures and forces, such as heroes, floods, villains, plagues, patriarchs, pariahs, great mothers, and tricksters. Given life in narrative, they help create the fundamental, archetypal stories that are at the heart of human storytelling.

Myth enters the picture when these stories represent important social issues or ideals. Not all archetypal stories are myths, after all. Archetypes influence much storytelling, from the imaginative play of children to day dreams to romance novels to Shakespearean plays.² Myths are archetypal stories that play crucial social roles. We will see later that this seemingly simple definition can have numerous social, cultural, and political implications. It places myth near the center of social life. It sees the stories of myth as much more than interesting, entertaining, well-known tales. It sees myth—and perhaps news—as an important way a society expresses its prevailing ideals, ideologies, values, and beliefs. A hero can represent strength or bravery or compassion. A flood can represent the wrath of an angry god or the humbling power of nature. Used in this way, archetypal stories offer exemplary models. That is, they provide examples of good and evil, right and wrong, bravery and cowardice. They are models of social life and models for social life. Myth draws upon archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models that represent shared values, confirm core beliefs, deny other beliefs, and help people engage with, appreciate, and understand the complex joys and sorrows of human life.]*

Archetypes are often associated with the theories of psychologist Carl Jung.³ Though Jung provided many insights, his psychological frame-

work, such as the “collective unconscious,” is not necessary for an appreciation of archetypes, models, and myth. In fact, a staggering number of theories and theoreticians have explored this terrain. I draw most frequently upon the work of Mircea Eliade, a philosopher and historian of religion. Eliade studied myth in hundreds of societies. A Romanian who lived for years in France and the United States and taught at the University of Chicago, he had a breadth of experience that allowed him to see links among myths from many different cultures and eras, including our own. Eliade’s political positions, which seem to range from far right to far left, have troubled some. But he is a towering figure in modern studies of myth.

In his studies, Eliade found that archetypes and exemplary models were the key to myth. He stated that:

religious life, and all the creations that spring from it, are dominated by what one may call “the tendency toward an archetype.” However many and varied are the components that go to make up any religious creation (any divine form, rite, myth or cult) their expression tends constantly to revert to an archetype.⁴

Myth, Eliade argued, uses archetypes, such as heroes and floods, as models. He believed that myth is sacred, exemplary, and significant because it “supplies models for human behavior and, by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life.”⁵ For Eliade, myth is often about origins and beginnings. Myth provides models based on these creations. According to Eliade, “The foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities—diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom.”⁶ We get married in ceremonies based on age-old, archetypal models. We get educated in institutions based on age-old, archetypal models. These models often are handed down in myth.

Eliade argued that myth uses archetypal models to guide all kinds of activities, including “the act of procreation, ‘the cheering of a despondent heart, the feeble aged and the decrepit,’ inspiring the composing of songs, going to war.” Myth thus “provides a *model*, whenever there is a question of *doing something*.”⁷

For example, parents often want to instruct children to be kind to others. They may find that such instruction goes well if they can tell stories of extraordinary and successful people—heroes—who engage in acts of kindness. In Babylonian society, parents may have called upon the story of Sargon the First. In ancient Greece, parents may have told tales of the

great Ulysses. In my baseball-crazy house one day, I found myself calling upon news stories about Mark McGwire, who broke the home run record of Roger Maris, and then, instead of doing some self-celebratory, chest-pounding dance or strut, jumped into the stands and embraced the Maris family. Like Eliade, then, we will find that myth is best conceived as a sacred, social story that draws from archetypal figures to offer exemplary models for human life.

MYTH IS ESSENTIAL—EVEN TODAY

Seen in this way, myth is not ancient or old, fantastic or false. Myth is essential and always alive. The stories of myth are necessary to human lives and the societies they construct. Eliade argued that “certain aspects and functions of mythical thought are constituents of the human being.”⁸ He wrote:

It seems unlikely that any society could completely dispense with myths, for, of what is essential in mythical behaviour—the exemplary pattern, the repetition, the break with profane duration and integration into primordial time—the first two at least are consubstantial with every human condition.⁹

Another great researcher of myth, Joseph Campbell, agreed. “No human society has yet been found,” he said, “in which such mythological motifs have not been rehearsed in liturgies; interpreted by seers, poets, theologians, or philosophers; presented in art; magnified in song; and ecstatically experienced in life-empowering visions.”¹⁰ Jung too saw myth as essential. “Has mankind ever really got away from myths?” Jung asked. “One could almost say that if all the world’s traditions were cut off at a single blow, the whole of mythology and the whole history of religion would start all over again with the next generation.”¹¹ Every society needs stories that confront the ultimate issues of the human condition. Every society needs myths.

Modern societies, though, have modern conceits. They especially like to pretend that they are more “advanced” than other societies. They believe myth is for ancient or primitive societies. They believe they have no need of heroes, villains, exemplary figures, portrayals of good and evil. They believe they have replaced myth with scientific knowledge, techno-

logical advances, and objective reports of the real world. They fool themselves.

Eliade, as I noted, studied myths in hundreds of societies. He raised his gaze to the modern world—and saw classic myths all around him. He wrote that “an adequate analysis of the diffuse mythologies of the modern world would run into volumes: for myths and mythological images are to be found everywhere, laicised, degraded or disguised; one only needs to be able to recognise them.”¹²

He called these disguised mythologies “the survivals and camouflages” of myth.¹³ And he and other writers revealed the “survivals and camouflages” of modern myth in many places, from cars to suburbia to modern art—but especially in the mass media. Comic books, plays, mystery stories, radio shows, romance novels, movies, television programs, and other forms of mass media continually reaffirm the truth that modern society too needs to hear the stories of myth.¹⁴

MYTH IN THE NEWS

With this background, we can take an arresting step: We can recognize in news stories the siren song of myth. These news stories offer more than a retelling of common story forms. These news stories offer sacred, societal narratives with shared values and beliefs, with lessons and themes, and with exemplary models that instruct and inform. They are offering myths.

* There is no need to overstate the case for mythic stories in the news. Many news stories have no relation to myth. Many news stories are derived from rudimentary story forms; professional conventions of the trade; or easy formulas for writing speeches, sports results, or fire stories: Official gives speech. Home team wins. Fire destroys building.¹⁵ Even Sigmund Freud warned against the danger of overanalyzing, of seeing symbolic content in every object. “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” Freud is supposed to have said. Well, sometimes a fire story is just a fire story.

But sometimes, in describing some experience, in reporting some event, reporters and editors draw upon a fundamental story of earthly existence, a universal and shared story of humankind, and they use that story to instruct, inform, celebrate, or forewarn. Like myth tellers from every age, journalists can draw from the rich treasure trove of archetypal stories and make sense of the world.

Sometimes reporters do this consciously. They make explicit references to Icarus, infernos, Oedipus, or plagues. Sometimes they do this unconsciously. Their eyebrows raise when an observer points out ancient heroes, modern tricksters, and archetypal deluges on the front page. Consciously or unconsciously, however, journalists take their place among the generations of storytellers who tell and retell the myths of humankind.

MYTH: ESPECIALLY IN THE NEWS

I want to extend this argument still further. I have come to believe—and hope to show—that, more than any mass media, the daily news is the primary vehicle for myth in our time. News, of all things, has become the inheritor of humanity’s essential stories. Other mass media possess the ability to tell myths. But the news, when studied carefully, will reveal numerous, numinous links to myth. Though ties between news and myth will be explored throughout this book, I can suggest some preliminary connections that first grabbed my attention.

News and Myth Repeat Stories

First, like myth, news offers the steady repetition of stories, the rhythmic recurrence of themes and events. Eliade noted that societies need to have their myths told again and again. Myths, he wrote, offer an “exemplar history which can be repeated (regularly or otherwise), and whose meaning and value lie in that very repetition.”¹⁶ In more difficult language, he wrote: “What is involved is not a commemoration of mythical events but a reiteration of them. The protagonists of the myth are made present, one becomes their contemporary.”¹⁷ Myth, he argued, thus invokes

the prodigious, “sacred” time when something *new, strong, and significant* was manifested. To re-experience that time, to re-enact it as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernatural and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths.¹⁸ | ; !

News too surely offers stories that are “new and strong and significant.” Yet, like myths, news stories are not really new. More than any other mass medium, the news thrives on the ritual repetition of stories. The

news tells us the same stories again and again. Like myth, news tells us not only what happened yesterday—but what has always happened. Flood and fire, disaster and triumph, crime and punishment, storm and drought, death and birth, victory and loss—daily, the news has always recounted and always will recount these stories.

For readers, this connection between news and myth may help explain the almost formulaic recurrence of stories in the news, the strange sensation the reader has of reading stories already read before, the odd ability to glance at a story and know precisely what it says. For journalists, myth may help explain the peculiar feeling of writing stories that already have been written, the dim awareness of telling stories that already have been told. "It's an old story," reporters will sometimes explain. It is.

News and Myth Tell "Real" Stories

News and myth also share an emphasis on "real" stories. News, of course, places special significance on "the real." Distinctions are drawn, and mostly observed, between fact and opinion, between nonfiction and fiction. Journalists are punished, sometimes even fired, for making up facts, for straying from "the real." Other mass media tell "stories." Sometimes they tell *real* stories. But only news places such a heavy emphasis on being "real." Only news is first and foremost supposed to be a report of real events.

Myth too, oddly enough, has privileged "the real." Modern societies equate myth with unreal stories. But for centuries, societies have always been careful to distinguish between the "real" stories of myth and the false stories of fiction, fable, and legend. Myth, after all, explains origins, promotes order, represents social beliefs and values. Myth needs to be seen as real and true. Eliade wrote that "myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely." He added, "The myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a 'true history,' because it always deals with *realities*."¹⁹ The philosopher Ernst Cassirer also argued that the images of myths "are not *known* as images. They are not regarded as symbols but as realities."²⁰

News and Myth Are Public Stories

News and myth also share a tradition of *public* storytelling. Stories are everywhere. Some stories are told by one individual to another. Children, couples, friends, and neighbors share stories with one another. Other sto-

ries entertain an audience. Plays, radio shows, movies, and television programs offer stories to engage and entertain audiences. News and myth too address individuals and audiences. But, as we will see, they also offer stories that inform, instruct, and enlighten *a public*. They address people not just as individuals, not just as audiences, but as members of a social, civic group.

As Mitchell Stephens made clear in *The History of News*, news stories were told to publics even before the advent of writing.²¹ Tribes gathered to hear news of battles and births from well-traveled messengers. Later, towns scheduled times and places for news criers. The Roman Empire distributed copies of the *acta*—proceedings and transactions—and posted them in cities. News was understood as information of *public* interest. Myth too has addressed its audience as members of a public. As social charter or sacred story, as account of origins or geography of the underworld, myth speaks to a society *as* a society. It is a social narrative, a civic text. Myth and news are, after all, stories of public interest.

News and Myth Use Fundamental Stories to Instruct and Inform

News and myth thus will be shown to bear the closest social similarities. They offer and repeat stories. They draw stories from real life. They tell stories that confront issues of social, public life. And they use these stories to instruct and inform. They are moral tales. They warn of disaster and disease, of degeneracy and decay. They tell tales of healing and comfort, of righteousness and reform. They offer dramas of order and disorder, of justice affirmed and justice denied. They present portrayals of heroes and villains, of models to emulate and outcasts to denigrate. News and myth speak to a public and offer stories that shape and maintain and exclude and deny important societal ideas and beliefs.

Again, there is no need to overstate the case. Other mass media at times repeat age-old stories. They draw from "the real," they address a public, they instruct and inform. But only news regularly and daily shows its allegiance to myth.

SEVEN MASTER MYTHS IN THE NEWS

Trying out my tentative ideas before colleagues, friends, reporters, or students, carried away by arguments and archetypes, I was sometimes taken

aback when an engaged listener would nod, hand me a newspaper, and say: "Show me!" But of course. If news is myth, then we should be able to consistently find myths in the pages of the newspaper. We should be able to point to a set of recurring myths that normal, nonprofessorial readers can regularly identify and consider. Without such concrete examples, the discussion is doomed to remain safely suggestive and academically abstract.

The task, however, is more than a bit presumptuous. Identifying a set of regularly occurring myths in the news will necessarily be a subjective enterprise. No statistical package isolates and quantifies myths. The list offered here is thus impressionistic. It is derived from three decades of reading, writing, editing, and studying the news. It cannot be considered exhaustive or complete. In fact, as readers identify other myths in the news, the argument will be enhanced.

With that prologue, I will offer and outline seven recurring myths below. Other chapters will take up each of these myths in detail and show how they are given modern form in particular news stories. Despite the subjectivity of the list, I am quite confident that these seven myths appear frequently, if not daily, in the news. They are primordial stories that have guided human storytelling for ages. And they guide the news stories of today.

The Victim

The Victim lies at the heart of many myths.²² Myth reconciles people to the tragic and seeming randomness of human existence. Plans, careers, dreams, and lives can be shattered in an instant by a lightning strike, a rare disease, a betrayal. Life must be lived in the presence of death. Myth confronts death. Myth turns death into sacrifice. Through stories of the sacrifice of the Victim, myth offers reconciliation and elevates life in the face of death. From the ancient Greeks to the early Christians, stories about victims are told and retold. News continues such stories. News tells stories of innocent victims killed in car accidents, airline crashes, hijackings, fires, robberies, drownings. The news, as myth, elevates and transforms death into sacrifice. A life story is gathered and told. A passing is marked and mourned.

The Scapegoat

Myth plays significant social roles. It defends the dominant social order. It upholds the "social charter" of a group. It protects and proclaims core val-

ues and central beliefs. Indeed, some scholars of myth, such as Joseph Campbell, suggest that a primary function of myth is to bend and shape individuals to the prevailing beliefs and ideals of a particular society.²³ The Scapegoat, who embodies evil and guilt, often helps fulfill that role. Myths of the Scapegoat tell in dramatic fashion what happens to those who challenge or ignore social beliefs. Myths of the Scapegoat ridicule and degrade. They vilify and shun. People—and societies—seem to need scapegoats to blame and abuse.²⁴ Native Americans, the Mayans, and African tribes all had myths and rituals in which scapegoats, embodying various evils, were isolated and expelled from the group. As myth, news too degrades and demeans those who are deemed to threaten the comfort of those in control or those who stray too far from accepted social practice. Political activists, religious sects, criminals, radicals, and many others can be cast as scapegoats in the news.

The Hero

The Hero is one of humankind's most pervasive myths. As many writers from Jung to Campbell have made clear, people always seem to need stories of heroes.²⁵ Heroes remind people that they can succeed, that they can achieve greatness. Hercules, Karna, Gilgamesh, Ulysses, Achilles, and Samson are just a few heroes whose exploits are celebrated in myth. Heroes also subtly offer limitations by telling stories of *who* can succeed and *how*. As myth, news stories too regularly celebrate the exploits of heroes. From sports stars to movies stars, astronauts to artists, presidents to prime ministers, the news tells stories of heroic men and women. The news produces and reproduces the timeless pattern: the humble birth, the early mark of greatness, the quest, the triumph, and the return. The news daily brings us stories of the Hero, stories that proclaim—but also help define—greatness.

The Good Mother

Myths of the Good Mother seem to derive in part from the first deep bonds that develop between an infant and an adult, usually though not always the mother. Myths of the mother can vary from those about the Terrible Mother, a figure of fear and hate, to those about the Madonna, an icon of virginal innocence. Myths are told of Gaea, Mary, Diana, Isis, Kali, and many others.²⁶ The *Good Mother* offers maternal comfort and protection.

She represents kindness and gentleness. She often is acclaimed above all others, blessed among women. The myth nurtures and nourishes and offers people a model of goodness in times when goodness may seem in short supply. The myth can also confine and restrict, presenting rigid models of maternity and gender. As myth, news often brings us stories of the Good Mother. The news tells stories of good and kind people who comfort and care for others. Sometimes these are politicians, celebrities, or stars who volunteer (perhaps quite publicly) for relief work or holiday charity. Other times the news finds models among us. In features and human interest stories, the news suggests that models of goodness may be all around us. It's a comforting, consoling—but possibly confining—portrayal.

The Trickster

One of the most fascinating and complex mythological figures found in hundreds of societies is the Trickster. The title can lead people to think that the Trickster is simply a sly and cunning figure. The myth is much more formidable. The myth of the Trickster often portrays a crude and stupid figure, half animal and half human. He is senseless and unreflective and brings on himself and others all manners of suffering. He is a subject of mockery, contempt, and ridicule. The Trickster myth has been well documented in Native American tribes and in cultures from Asia to Africa.²⁷ News too often tells stories of crude, contemptible people, governed by seemingly animal instincts, who bring ridicule and destruction on themselves. In some stories, stupid criminals, dumb and dangerous athletes, hapless hit men, classless and crude rich people are offered up in the news as objects for mockery and contempt. In many stories, the selection and portrayal of a person as Trickster can raise troubling questions for the news.

The Other World

Humans seem naturally intrigued by lands different from their own, by those outside their social group. They compare and contrast. They listen and learn. Myth expresses how a group of people in particular historical circumstances sees itself. And often myth does so through the Other World.²⁸ Sometimes the Other World is a garden of delight, an exotic land of foreign charm. Sometimes the Other World is portrayed as a threat, as a dark and disagreeable land that harbors an enemy. Myths of the Other

World offer neat, dramatic contrasts that affirm a group's way of life, position, or place. As myth, news too tells stories of the Other World, especially in news of foreign countries. Contrasts, implicit and explicit, are drawn between our way of life and the Other's. The cold war brought news of an archetypal enemy for decades. In our times, the news often tells stories of diabolical dictators, strange beliefs, and "primitive" nations in its depiction of the Other World. These stories can have large implications for how our country acts on the world stage.

The Flood

The Flood is a myth that occurs in cultures around the world.²⁹ It represents an even larger set of myths portraying calamities and disasters. These stories depict the destruction of a group of people by powerful forces, such as the gods or nature. The Flood often comes because people have strayed from the right path. Humans can be filled with hubris and pride. The disaster humbles and reminds humans of forces greater than themselves. As myth, news regularly brings stories of disaster from around the world. Sometimes the only international news of the day will concern earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, or hurricanes. Disasters close to home receive even more attention. As myth, news reminds humans of the humbling power of nature. The humbling can be horrible and yet oddly comforting. People seem to embrace submission to the superior powers of nature. They seem to take comfort in the thought that forces lie outside the grip of human control. And as noted previously, the Flood myth can subtly accuse and impugn peoples and nations. Disaster comes to those who have done wrong.

MASTER MYTHS IN THE NEWS

These seven "master myths," I hope to show, can be fully demonstrated in the news. The evidence will be taken from case studies of the news itself. The sacrifice of the Victim will be shown in news of the terrorist killing of Leon Klinghoffer. The archetypal Good Mother, who nurtures and cares for the unfortunate, will be discovered in reporting on Mother Teresa. Myths of the Hero will be revealed in stories of home-run king Mark McGwire. The crude and cruel Trickster will be uncloaked in articles on boxer Mike Tyson.

I will also emphasize that these individual cases represent many others. The sacrifice of victims, exemplified in *New York Times* reporting on a terrorist victim, can be found in local and national reports of accidents, crashes, and other tragedies. The degrading of a Scapegoat, exemplified in news reporting about Black Panther Huey Newton, can be found in numerous reports of people outside the political mainstream. Myths appear daily in the news. Like a plodding, laconic lawyer, slowly building a case for a jury, I hope to submit exhibit after exhibit until the verdict is inescapable: Our modern society would like to think it has no need of myth, but the great stories of myth are told and retold daily in the news.

My emphasis obviously will be on *stories*. We will be drawing connections among stories that span human history. We will try to understand the constructive and corrosive implications of these stories. Though we use the words easily, we don't often consider the cultural and political significance of the *news story*. But it is through story, the subject of the next chapter, that news becomes myth.

Chapter 2

The Mythological Role of Journalism

Stories for Society

In 1980, musician Bruce Springsteen was atop the world of rock 'n' roll. He was no overnight success. For years, he and his band had bounced through the bars of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania until a series of albums in the 1970s earned him true rock-star status. To solidify that status, Springsteen began a world tour designed to coincide with the release of his album *The River*. As a concluding note to the U.S. leg of the tour, Springsteen would return to Philadelphia, not far from his Jersey roots and a place where he had long been a major attraction. He sold out the Spectrum, an 18,000-seat arena, for three straight nights.

News stories often are formed from many complex sociological and political factors. This story was not.

An editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called me to his desk.

He asked if I had ever heard of "Bruce Springboard." He said that.

I corrected him.

"Whatever," he said. "He sold out the Spectrum for three nights. No one does that. We should do a story," he said.

