32 Superstition Origins - mental_floss on YouTube (Ep. 33)

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Hi, I'm John Green. Welcome to my Salon. This is Mental Floss on YouTube.

1. Did you know that some Christians believe Eve brought a four-leaf clover out of the Garden of Eden with her as a kind of souvenir of Paradise? We still call them lucky today. Also might be attributed to the Celts who considered four-leaf clovers powerful objects, but anyway, that's the first of many superstition origins that I am going to share with you today. I think you'll learn that you're participating in a lot more religiously-oriented practices than you know.

(intro plays)

2. It's unclear why Friday the 13th became associated with bad luck and also hockey masks- Mark, get the hockey ma- thank you. He's Canadian.

But as separate entities, Fridays and the number 13 have always been considered untrustworthy. Llike Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales from the fourteenth century usually gets credit for the Friday part, in addition to religious beliefs that Jesus was crucified on a Friday. As for the 13th, people just seem to prefer the number 12: 12 apostles, 12 zodiac signs, 12 months in a year, etc.

Fun fact: fear of Friday the 13th is called Friggatriskaidekaphobia. Laugh all you want, but FDR refused to ever have 13 guests at a dinner party. Additionally, Napoleon and Herbert Hoover were afraid of the number 13, and look how great they did! I mean, not Hoover but-but Napoleon! I guess not that great in the end- WHATEVER.

3. On the other end of the spectrum, the number 7 is often believed to be lucky. This probably has something to do with the 7 Gods of Fortune from Japanese mythology or the 7 days of creation reverenced in the Book of Genesis.

4. 666 as the number of the Beast is usually traced back to a Biblical code for the Roman Emperor Nero, due to the numerical value of his name in Hebrew.

5. And speaking of the Devil- yeah! Yeah!- throwing salt over your left shoulder after spilling it aims to get salt in the Devil's eye, who is apparently always standing behind you and over your left shoulder which is totally creepy. It's considered bad luck to spill salt because it was historically a very valuable commodity and also- wait for it- because it had some significance in early Christianity.

6. The connection between walking under a ladder and bad luck is usually attributed to disrespect for the Holy Trinity because, you know, the ladder is like this and then there's the ground, and that forms a triangle which has three sides, which represents the Trinity. Man, people back in the day spent a lot of time worrying about this stuff. As opposed to now, when we only worry about important things like the name of Kimye's (John pronounces it wrong) baby. Kimye (pronounced correctly)? Oh. Kimye's baby.

7. So why is it always said that bad things come in threes? Well, the number's just really prominent in our culture. Like, we have the Holy Trinity; we have three names: first, middle, and last; the three little pigs; the Stooges; and then you got Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

8. And why is it unlucky if a black cat crosses your path? This one goes back to the Middle Ages when many accused witches had black cats. It was even thought that witches could turn themselves into black cats.

9. And speaking of witches, horseshoes had been used to ward them off since the 1800s because witches were supposed to be afraid of horses. And I don't blame them, frankly. Like remember how Franklin Pierce ran over that lady with his horse? And remember that episode of "The Simple Life" when Paris Hilton fell off of a horse? Horseshoes are clearly good luck.

10. Yeah, I watched "The Simple Life". I'm well-rounded. By the way, you can thank Ptolemy for the last time you saw a shooting star and wished for Neil Patrick Harris to be your best friend. In the first century, Ptolemy theorized that shooting stars resulted from gods peering down on the earth.

11. Back when people used umbrellas primarily to protect themselves from the sun, opening an umbrella inside was an insult to the sun god. Now, it's actually unlucky to talk about umbrellas in public because someone might start singing that Rihanna song.

12. We hold our breath while passing cemeteries due to the age-old associations between breathing and life, which, to be fair, you know, there's some scientific evidence for that. Ancient European, Egyptian, and American Indian religions all connected the soul with the idea of breath and people still maintain this practice in order to keep others' spirits out of their own bodies.

13. Throwing a coin into a fountain, although it was popularized by "The Lizzie McGuire Movie," actually dates back to some earlier sources including the Celts and the Romans. An early example is Coventina's Well from the second century in England where thousands of coins were tossed to worship the Celtic water goddess Coventina.

14. The lucky rabbit's foot goes all the way back to at least 600 BCE in western Europe, thanks to the popularity of totemism, the belief that animals were the ancestors of humans. A rabbit's foot was believed to improve fertility because apparently, even our ancestors thought that jokes about f*ing like rabbits were funny.

15. And going back even further in time, despite the relative newness of pennies, they're considered lucky due to the mythological belief that metals were gifts from the gods. Of course, I disagree with this. Nothing relating to pennies will ever be worthwhile.

16. Step on a crack, break your mother's back. This has been one of the weirdest and most depressing superstitions since at least 1907 when it was put in print by Fletcher Bascom Dresslar his book *Superstition and Education*. I didn't know that those topics were related.

17. Speaking of broken body parts, saying "break a leg" is preferred over "good luck" for most actors. This one is more modern, originating in the United States in the 1920s, but it's an adaptation of a phrase that's been used at least since the 1670s when people used the expression "give birth to a bastard" for the same meaning, though it wasn't exclusive to actors. I wonder why that one died out...

18. According to Celtic mythology- I'm just gonna pronounce Celtic every way you can so y'all don't get mad at me- dandelions could cure diseases brought by fairies. And that's why we still wish on dandelions today- because of all those diseases created by fairies that we do not want to acquire.

19. We also wish on wishbones, which have been considered powerful since at least 1455. Early Europeans believed that a goose's wishbone could predict the weather, but before you laugh, let me remind you of Punxsutawney Phil.

20. The Romans popularized the idea that if you break a mirror, you will get seven years of bad luck. Wait a second, Amanda. You said

seven was lucky! I blame you for this inconsistency! Anyway, prior to the Romans, a lot of cultures believed that mirrors could capture people's souls which is probably how this one came to be, you know, you don't want to break your soul-capturing device.

21. But if you're fortunate enough to keep your soul away from mirrors, you ought to say "bless you" after someone sneezes because a person's soul could be ejected from his or her body via sneeze, or at least so the story goes. There are many other possible reasons to do this, but the origin is unclear. Another possibility is that the custom started around the time of the Black Death because sneezing was a sign associated with the disease, which was associated with, you know, needing a blessing because you weren't going to be on the earth much longer.

22. We knock on wood because mentioning future good luck is seen as tempting fate. (Knocks on wood) Ow! Ow! Traditionally it was believed that good spirits lived in trees, so knocking on wood was a way to like get their attention and ask for their help.

23. As opposed to the bad spirits who were believed to live in people's hair which is why it is bad luck to put a hat on a bed as the bad spirits can then you know, like get into the bed. Makes sense to me. I mean, I could never get my roommate's vomits stains out of my comforter freshman year of college. It's probably even harder to get rid of spirit stains. I'm just kidding that was my vomit.

24. Crossing your fingers was probably an ancient practice in Europe, but it was popularized by early Christians because they associated it with the cross. It eventually became a general symbol for good luck.

25. And believe it or not, a bird pooping on you also has religious connections because it is supposed to be good luck that is delivered directly from Heaven.

26. Ladybugs, due to their pest-eating habits, are very important to farmers in their protection of crops, so Christians also connect ladybugs with the Virgin Mary, so the legend was developed that it was bad luck to kill one.

27. Ancient Greeks used to bake a cake and put candles on it for the goddess of the moon, Artemis. The candles were to light up the cake so it looked like the moon. Sort of. And candles on your birthday cake are still thought to be good luck today.

28. Okay, back in 1066, King William was about to be run over by a carriage but then a chimney sweep saved his life, so the king invited the chimney sweep to his daughter's wedding and chimney sweeps are still seen to be lucky this day- particularly at weddings.

29. On that note, let's finish up with wedding superstitions. Seeing a bride on her wedding day was defined as bad luck because it was worried that if she saw the groom on her wedding day, she might get cold feet.

30. The bride needing old, new, borrowed, and blue objects dates back to English writings from the 1800s.

31. Carrying a bride over the threshold developed in different cultures for different reasons. In western Europe, it was bad luck for the bride to trip when entering the couple's new home, so the groom would just carry her. And then he would trip. In Greek mythology, meanwhile, he was protecting her from the spirits below because nothing says nothing romantic honeymoon like protecting your woman from the evil spirits in the basement.

32. And lastly, we return to the Salon so that I can tell you that dropping the wedding ring during the ceremony is considered a bad omen, and whoever drops it supposedly will die first. We don't actually know the origins of this one, but it's very depressing, and here at Mental Floss, we like to end on depressing notes.

Thanks for watching Mental Floss here on YouTube, which is made with the help of all these nice people. And also that tiger. Every week we endeavor to answer one of your questions. This week's question comes from Meredith: Why can't we have an office cat? Meredith! I am allergic to cats! Also, this is supposed to be a real question.

The real question of the week comes from Isabelle Bisjack who asks, What's the difference between regular chocolate and cooking chocolate? Well, baking chocolate is made from pure chocolate liquor and contains no sugar. There are many different kinds of "regular" chocolate: dark chocolate, which could be made with sugar and over 70% chocolate liquor; or milk chocolate made with milk and even more sugar and less chocolate liquor; white chocolate is not chocolate. It's just like milk and sugar and cocoa butter. NOT CHOCOLATE.

If you have a mind-blowing question you'd like answered, please leave it in comments below. Don't forget to be awesome, and I wish you all very well. Get it? Wish. God, I'm good at this.