

# ITHACA

Division of Interdisciplinary & International Studies



## Lemmings

**Project Look Sharp**  
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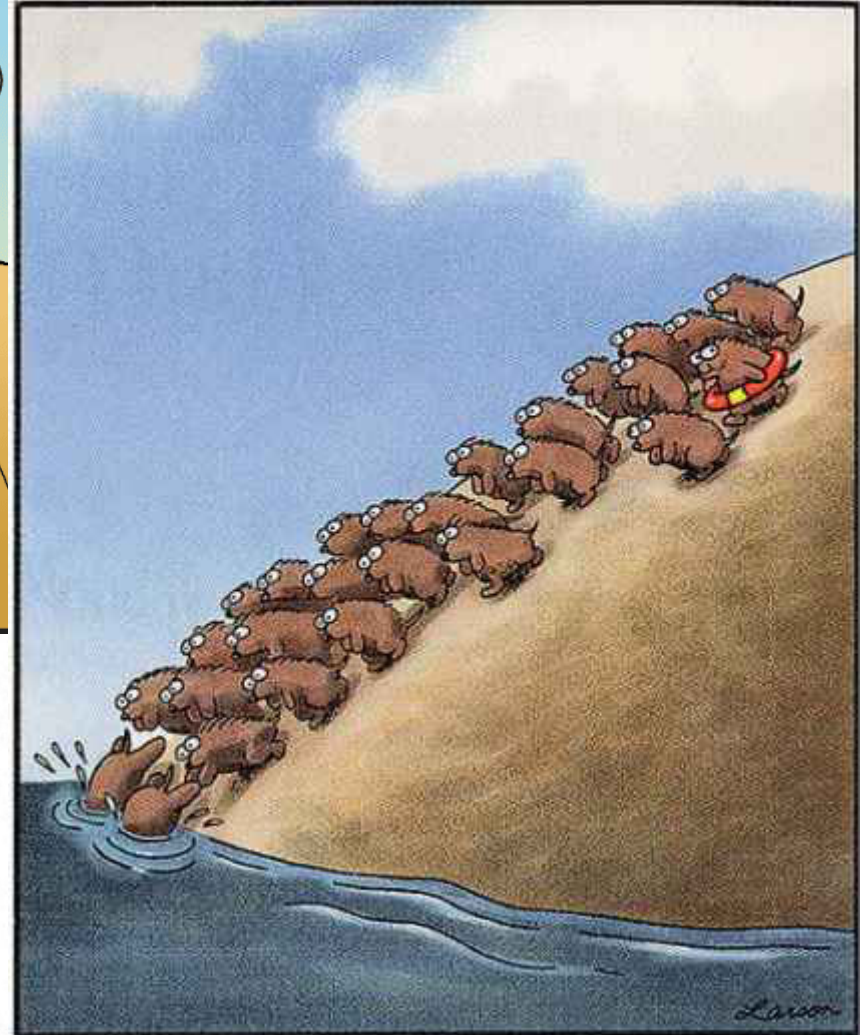
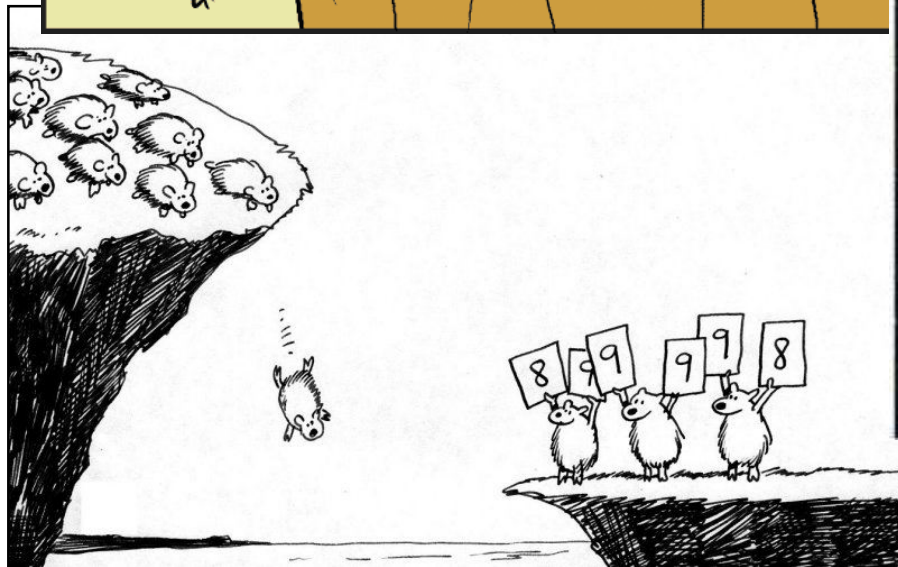
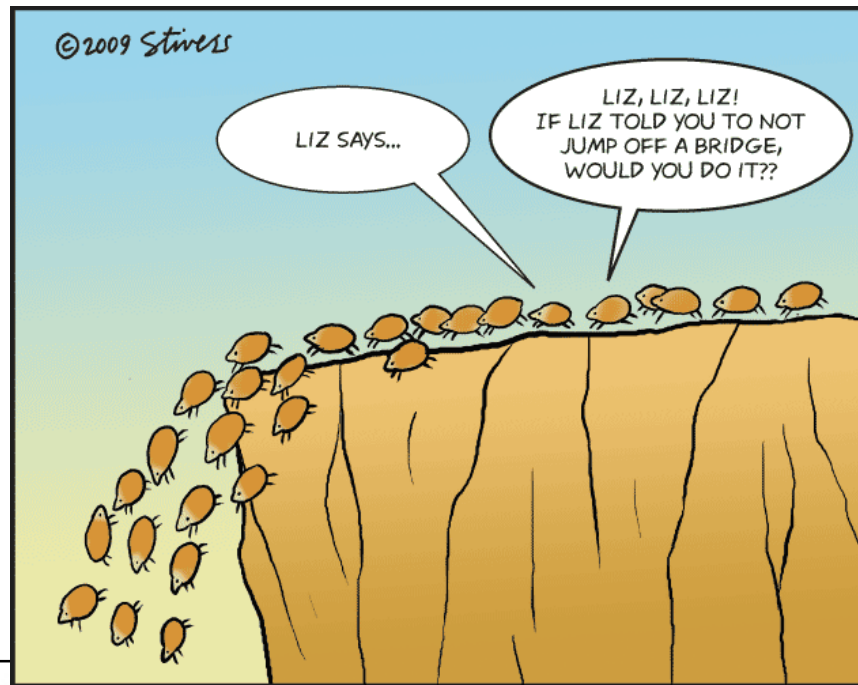
*The mission of Project Look Sharp is to  
provide materials, training and support for  
the effective integration of media literacy  
with critical thinking into classroom  
curricula at all educational levels.*

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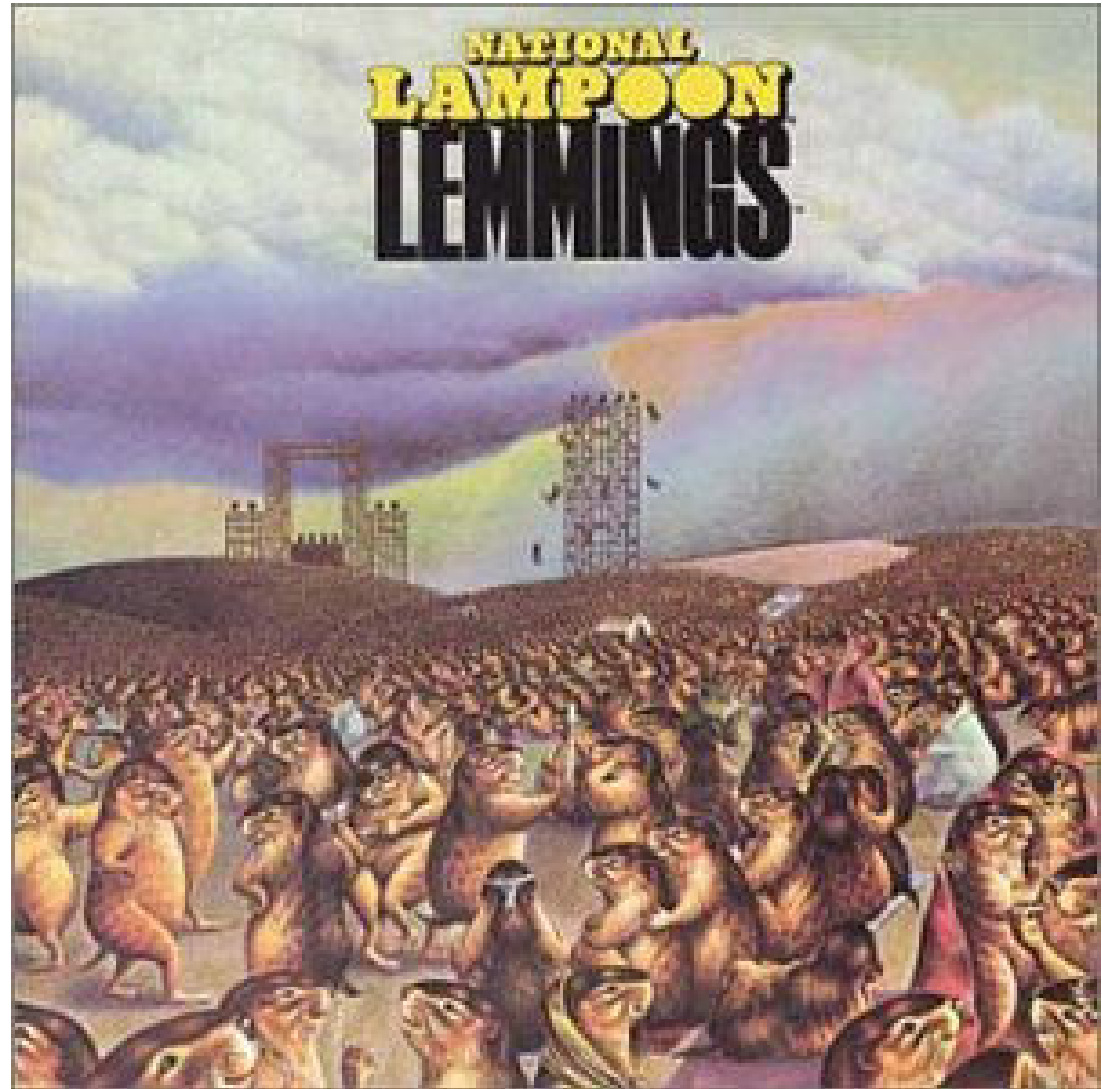
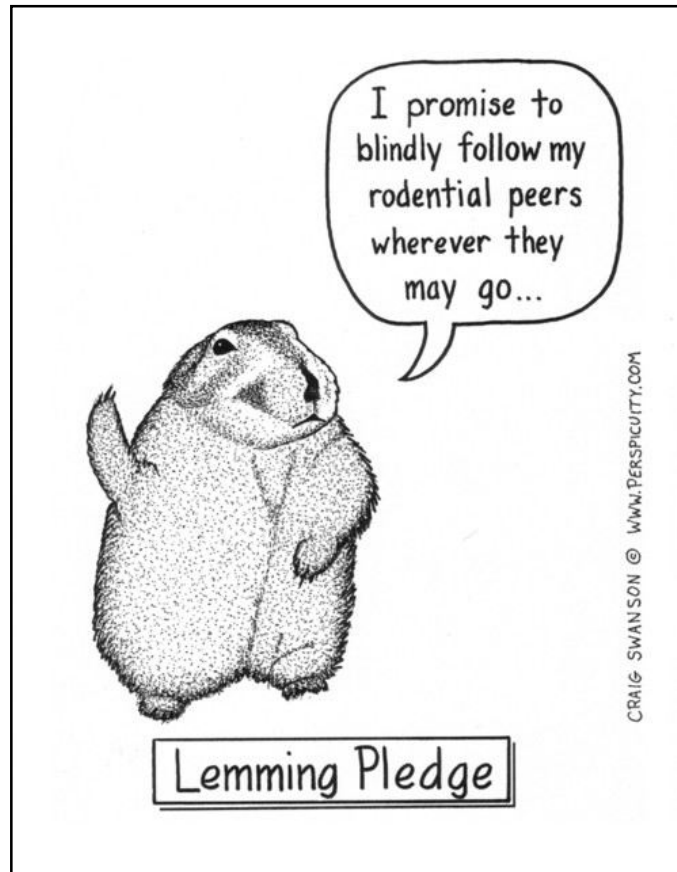
# Lemmings



# Lemmings ?

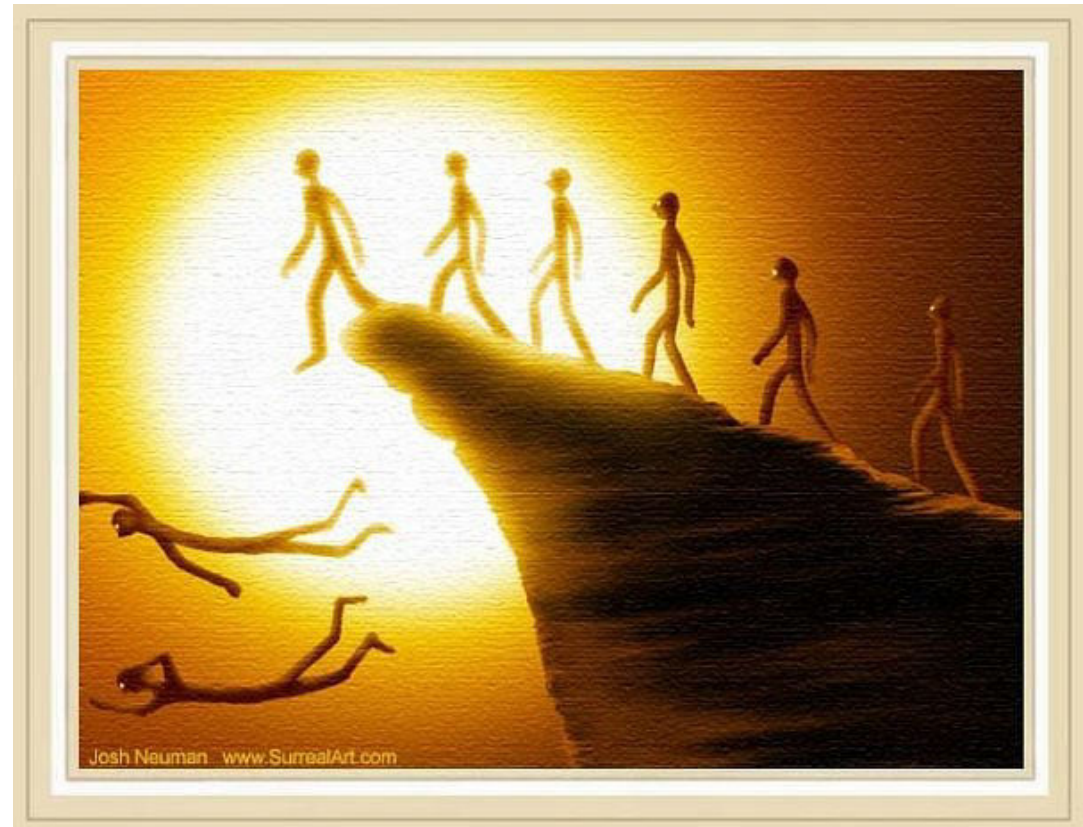


# Lemmings ?



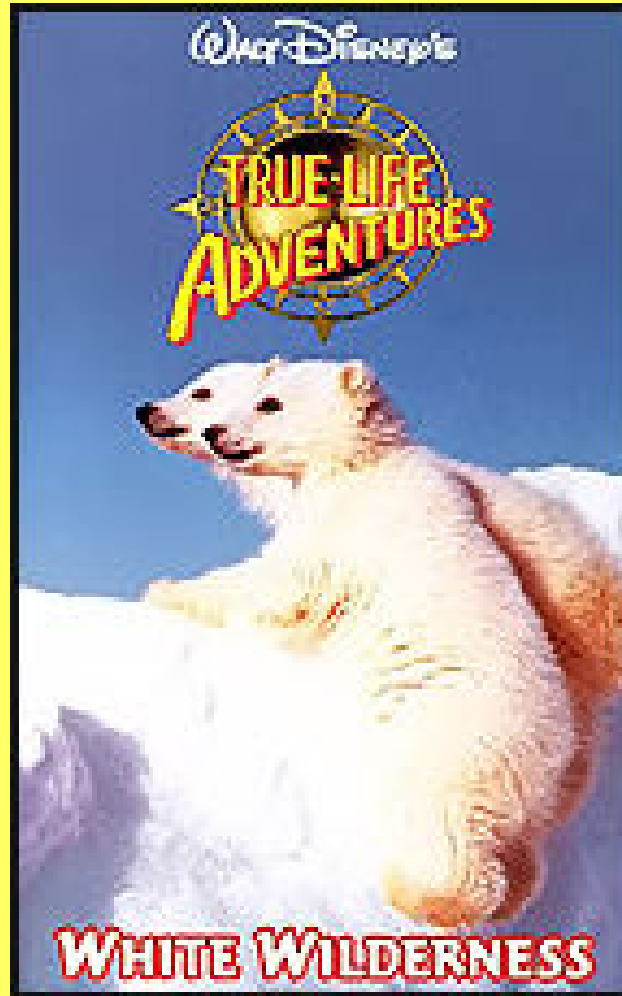


# Lemmings ?



**Follow the Lemmings**

# *White Wilderness*



“Lemmings”

# *Rumors and Urban Legends*



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From the archives:

**Ciara's Goodies:** Rumor claims R&B singer Ciara was once a man.



Autos



Business



Coke/lore



College



Computers



Crime



Crittter  
Country



Disney



Embarrass



Fauxtography



Food



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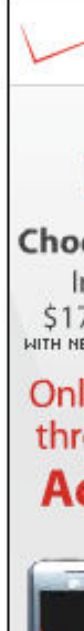
Glurge  
Gallery



History



Holidays



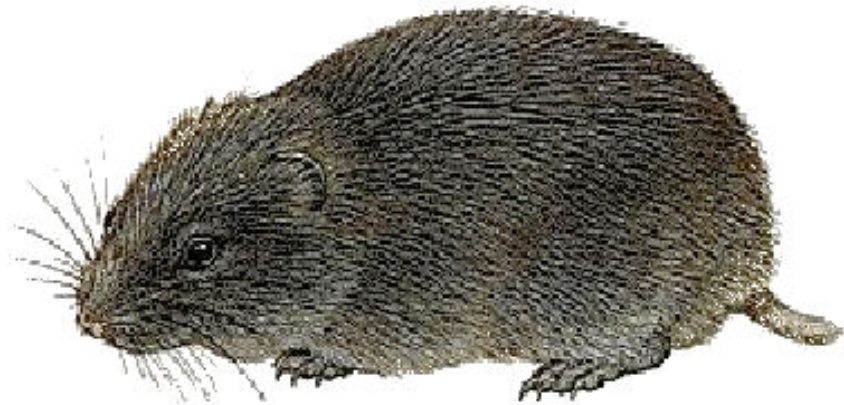


## White Wilderness

**Claim:** During the filming of the 1958 Disney nature documentary *White Wilderness*, the film crew induced lemmings into jumping off a cliff and into the sea in order to document their supposedly suicidal behavior.

**Status:** *True.*

**Origins:** Lemming suicide is fiction. Contrary to popular belief, lemmings do not periodically hurl themselves off of cliffs and into the sea. Cyclical explosions in population do occasionally induce lemmings to attempt to migrate to areas of lesser population density. When such a migration occurs, some lemmings die by falling over cliffs or drowning in lakes or rivers. These deaths are not deliberate "suicide" attempts, however, but accidental deaths resulting from the lemmings' venturing into unfamiliar territories and being crowded and pushed over dangerous ledges. In fact, when the competition for food, space, or mates becomes too intense, lemmings are much more likely to kill each other than to kill themselves.



Disney's *White Wilderness* was filmed in Alberta, Canada, which is not a native habitat for lemmings and has no outlet to the sea. Lemmings were imported for use in the film, purchased from Inuit children by the filmmakers. The Arctic rodents were placed on a snow-covered turntable and filmed from various angles to produce a "migration" sequence; afterwards, the helpless creatures were transported to a cliff overlooking a river and herded into the water. *White Wilderness* does not depict an actual lemming migration – at no time are more than a few dozen lemmings ever shown on the screen at once. The entire sequence was faked using a handful of lemmings deceptively photographed to create the illusion

**Last updated:** 19 August 2007

The URL for this page is <http://www.snopes.com/disney/films/lemmings.asp>

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## Marry Go Round

**Claim:** A woman over age 40 has a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than of getting married.

**Status:** *False.*

**Origins:** The odd little statement that "A woman over age 40 has a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than of getting married," which is so often thrown about as rock-solid fact, isn't all that difficult to classify as false. Although it is true that a formal study conducted in the mid-1980s did conclude that the likelihood of marriage for a never-previously-wed, 40-year-old university-educated American woman was 2.6%, that study has since come to be regarded as flawed and unreliable. As for the "more likely to be killed by a terrorist" aspect of the popular factlet, that came not from the study, but from a *Newsweek* article about that report which described women over 40 as "more likely to be killed by a terrorist: they have a minuscule 2.6% probability of tying the knot." (This was pure hyperbole, of course: the chances of being killed by a terrorist are still far below that level.)



It's complicated, so let's take this claim apart piece by piece.

The "forty-year-olds" referenced by that *Newsweek* quote didn't refer to all American women but only to one particular group, women with university educations. Also, even within that more restricted demographic, additional factors that are no longer in play were at work when that determination was made, which means even if the statement had been accurate back in 1985 (and it wasn't), it would no longer be applicable now.

In 1985, a threesome of Harvard and Yale folks working for the National Bureau of Economic Research served up its preliminary findings on marriage patterns of U.S. women. Buried in that report was a section having to do with university-educated women, a group that produced a rather

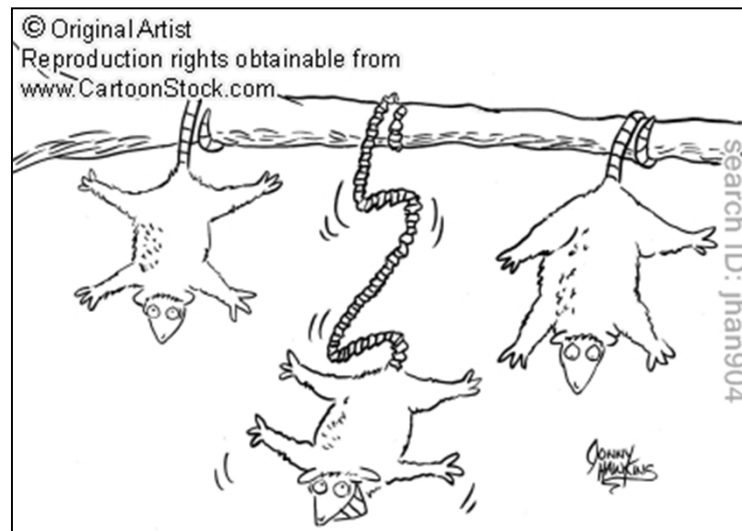


## Awesome Possums

**Claim:** Opossums can hang by their tails.

**Status:** **False.**

**Example:** *[Collected on the Internet, 1997]*



Do opossums hang by their tails in trees? I've heard that they do.

**Origins:** Opossums are misunderstood creatures, often mistaken for members of the rodent family because of their long rat-like tails. Opossums are actually North America's only marsupial, a class of mammal that carries its newborn in an abdominal pouch. (The North American opossum should not be confused with the Australian possum, which is a related but distinctly different animal.) After the first 60 days, the babies emerge to take their places on Mama's back to be further ferried around for an additional couple of months. Opossums, one might say, carry both motherhood and their offspring to extremes.)



Captain John Smith (of Pocahontas fame) is credited with bestowing the 'opossum' handle on the critter from the Algonquin Indian name 'apasum,' which means 'white face.' Smith described the animal as having "a head like a swine and a tail like a rat," a rather accurate, if unflattering, portrait.

The opossum is at home in trees. It uses its prehensile tail to help stabilize position when climbing, much the same way as a mouse will use its tail to maintain balance when it climbs a wheat stalk to nosh on the grain. Opossums do not hang by their tails, though. A baby opossum might be able to manage this feat for a second or two, but weight and body size in proportion to tail strength rule out the possibility of an adult opossum's pulling it off.

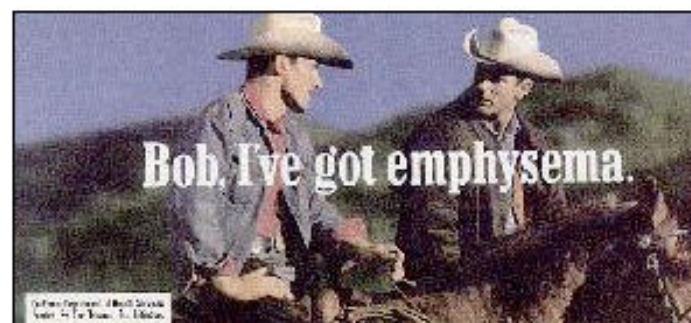


# Marlboro Manslaughter

**Claim:** The actor who portrayed the "Marlboro Man" in print and television cigarette advertisements died of lung cancer.

**Status:** *True.*

**Origins:** To the anti-smoking forces in our society, no irony could be more delicious than noting that the Marlboro Man, the advertising symbol whose appearance in the "Marlboro Country" series of advertisements was instrumental in establishing Philip Morris' Marlboro brand as the world's best-selling cigarette, died of lung cancer. Any claims about "the" Marlboro Man are a bit misleading, however, since many different men have portrayed the rugged-looking cowboys featured in Marlboro cigarette advertisements since 1954. An Oklahoma native named Darrell Winfield was the main Marlboro Man from the mid-1970s onwards, but dozens of other men (many of them "real" cowboys) have also modeled for television commercials, magazine and newspaper advertisements, billboards, and other advertising materials promoting Marlboro brand of cigarettes, and two of those men, both long-time smokers, have died of cancers which began in their lungs:



- Wayne McLaren, who posed for some promotional photographs on behalf of Marlboro in 1976, succumbed to lung cancer at age 51 on 22 July 1992. McLaren was a former professional rodeo rider who appeared in small parts in various television series and movies (primarily Westerns) throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and he modeled for print advertising between acting jobs in the mid-1970s including a Marlboro campaign in 1976. McLaren, who had a pack-and-a-half a day smoking habit, was diagnosed with lung cancer at age 49. Despite chemotherapy, the removal of one lung, and radiation treatments, the cancer eventually spread to his brain and killed him. After learning he had cancer, McLaren embarked on an anti-smoking campaign that included the production of a commercial described as follows:



**Autos**



**Business**



**Coke lore**



**College**



**Computers**



**Crime**



**Critters**



**Disney**



**Embarrass**



**Fauxtos**



**Food**



**Fraud  
& Scams**



**Glurge**



**History**



**Holidays**



**Horror**



**Humor**



**Inboxer  
Rebellion**



**Language**



**Legal**



**Lost  
Legends**



**Love**



**Luck**



**Media  
Matters**



**Medical**



**Military**



**Movies**



**Music**



**Old Wives'  
Tales**



**Politics**



**Pregnant**



**Quotes**



**Racial  
Rumors**



**Radio &  
TV**



**Religion**



**Risqué  
Business**



**Science**



**Sports**



**Toxins**



**Travel**



**Weddings**








**9/11**



**Hurricane  
Katrina**



### Ratings Key

-  = true
-  = false
-  = multiple truth values
-  = undetermined
-  = unclassifiable veracity

Select this [link](#) for an expanded definition of our rating system.

-  The Mississippi state legislature removed [fractions](#) and decimal points from the mathematics curriculum of public secondary schools.
-  Television's [Mister Ed](#) was a horse.
-  [Mobile homes](#) are so named because they can be moved from place to place.
-  The design of the [California](#) state flag was the result of a mistake.
-  The Kentucky Fried Chicken chain changed its name to [KFC](#) in order to eliminate the word "fried" from its title.
-  The nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpence" originated as a coded message used for recruiting [pirates](#).
-  The derisive [title](#) of one of George Bernard Shaw's plays was changed after it wreaked havoc on theater attendance.
-  When the Titanic hit an iceberg in the north Atlantic, the silent version of the film [The Poseidon Adventure](#) was being screened aboard ship.

## Horse of a Different Color

**Claim:** Mister Ed, the talking equine of television fame, was a horse.

**Status:** *False.*

**Origins:** Although the *Mister Ed* television show enjoyed a five-year run on CBS in the early 1960s, it was actually one of the very first series to start out in syndication and then be picked up by a network. (*Mister Ed* premiered as a syndicated show in January 1961, and CBS added it to their prime time schedule the following October.) Without network backing in the beginning, however, the show's budget was extremely tight. During the filming of the pilot episode, production costs mounted as the recalcitrant horse cast as Mister Ed refused to perform on cue (if it performed at all), resulting in large expenditures to cover the costs of additional training fees and wasted footage.

The producers of the show were ready to throw in the towel and write off the venture when one of the putative Mister Ed's trainers came up with a solution: the nearby Jungleland animal park in Thousand Oaks, California, had a trained Grevy's zebra that was being used in live shows for the park's daily tour visitors. The zebra (a female, called "Amelia" by its Jungleland handlers) was trained to perform many of the same actions (e.g., opening and closing its mouth, stamping its feet on cue) required in the Mr. Ed role, and Jungleland consented to lend her out for a few days' filming.



Amelia worked out fantastically well, exceeding everyone's expectations, and the pilot was quickly wrapped up and sold to the syndication market. The producers made a generous donation to Jungleland in exchange for continued use of Amelia, and she appeared in all the syndicated episodes as well as all the shows comprising the series' entire five-year run on CBS. Amelia retired to Jungleland when *Mr. Ed* was canceled after the 1965-66 season, where she lived for three years before being sold at auction when Jungleland closed in 1969.





How a zebra appears  
on color TV



How Mister Ed appears  
on black-and-white TV

Click the button below to contrast the appearance of a Grevy's zebra on black-and-white televisions with its appearance on color televisions.

Black and white

Zebras are noticeably smaller than horses, so the set used for Mister Ed's stable was constructed using forced perspective (the same technique employed on Disneyland's Main Street) to make it appear larger than it really was (and thus make Mister Ed appear larger than he really was as well). This gimmick also helped to mask the fact that Alan Young, the series' star, was only a diminutive 5'4" tall. Since a zebra's gait is distinctively different than a horse's, the rare episodes that called for scenes of Mister Ed running were filmed in long shots using real horses, a practice which has led to the mistaken claim (cited in several fan-related publications and web sites) that a zebra was occasionally used on the show as a



How a zebra appears  
on black-and-white TV



How Mister Ed appears  
on black-and-white TV

Click the button below to contrast the appearance of a Grevy's zebra on black-and-white televisions with its appearance on color televisions.

Color

Zebras are noticeably smaller than horses, so the set used for Mister Ed's stable was constructed using forced perspective (the same technique employed on Disneyland's Main Street) to make it appear larger than it really was (and thus make Mister Ed appear larger than he really was as well). This gimmick also helped to mask the fact that Alan Young, the series' star, was only a diminutive 5'4" tall. Since a zebra's gait is distinctively different than a horse's, the rare episodes that called for scenes of Mister Ed running were filmed in long shots using real horses, a practice which has lead to the mistaken claim (cited in several fan-related publications and web sites) that a zebra was occasionally used on the show as a "stunt double." (In later years a Palomino horse named Bamboo Harvester would often be erroneously identified as having been *the* Mister Ed, but this horse was in fact only used for promotional appearances and publicity stills; it never actually appeared in the TV series.)



When CBS switched to a primarily color prime time line-up for the 1965-66 season, both they and the series' producers were faced with a dilemma: keeping the show as a black and white entry would have presented a jarring contrast with the network's other shows, but switching to color would have given away the ruse. Eventually, a CBS executive came up with a clever solution: the show was moved out of prime time into the 5:30-6:00 PM slot on Sunday evenings for the series' final year, thus avoiding the necessity of its conversion to color.

### Additional information:



More information about this page

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# False Authority

**Claim:** Common sense dictates that you should never fully rely upon someone else to do fact checking for you. But who has time for common sense?

**Origins:** If you're reading this page, chances are you're here because something about one or all of the entries in The Repository Of Lost Legends (TROLL) section of this site struck you as a tadge suspect, if not downright wrong.

If any or all of the stories in this section caused your internal clue phone to ring, we hope you didn't let the answering machine take the call. That niggling little voice of common sense whispering to you in the background was right — there *was* something wrong with what you read.

You've just had an encounter with False Authority Syndrome.

Everything in this section is a spoof. [Mister Ed](#) was no more a zebra than the origin of the nursery rhyme [Sing a Song of Sixpence](#) had anything to do with pirates on a recruiting drive. As for Mississippi's doing away with teaching [fractions](#) and decimals in its school systems because kids find them too hard to master, that's no more true than Kentucky's imposing a [licensing fee](#) on uses of its name, [Edgar Rice Burroughs](#) naming his celebrated apeman after the city he lived in (other way around, actually), George Bernard Shaw penning a poorly-attended play called [Closed For Remodeling](#), passengers on the Titanic viewing a 1912 silent version of [The Poseidon Adventure](#) while their doomed ship was sinking out from under them, the design of [California's flag](#) being the result of "pear" being taken for "bear," or [mobile homes](#) having gained their name from the city in which they were first manufactured.