



Book Review

The Boggart: Folklore, History, Place-Names and Dialect. BY SIMON YOUNG. Exeter: University of Exeter Press. 2022. Pp. 229 (Hardback). £60. ISBN: 978-905826-90-3.

The Boggart: Folklore, History, Place-Names and Dialect by Simon Young successfully marries two of my favorite subjects: folklore and onomastics. It is an exhaustive, informative, and thoroughly charming survey of boggart lore and language. Simon Young is a professor at the University of Virginia in Sienna, Italy. He is a British folklore historian and co-editor of the *Exeter New Approaches to Legends, Folklore and Popular Legends* series. His fields of research are history, folklore, and infanticide. Marko Lukić has written an excellent review of this book for the Oral History Society (2022).

For those, like me, who might be unfamiliar with the term, *boggart* is originally a Northern English catch-all term for supernatural entities that have evolved or perhaps devolved into a goblinized creature. Boggarts can be ghosts, undines, Will o' Wisps, demons/devils, housebound spirits, and shape-shifters, and they are a subgroup of fairies. As basis for the book, Young conducted extensive research into this phenomenon, which he has published as a companion volume, *The Boggart Sourcebook: Texts and Memories for the Study of the British Supernatural* (2022). He also offers this material in free and downloadable form on his Academia website (2025). For the popular reader, *The Boggart* itself provides a solid foundation, but the onomast may be disappointed in the volume's limited analysis and investigation and will want to turn to the extensive material available in the companion sources.

The book is divided into three parts: "Situating the Boggart", "Lived Boggart Folklore", and "The Death and Rebirth of the Boggart". There are a total of eight chapters, with a glossary of *boggart* terms and sayings at the end. Of primary interest to the onomast are chapters 2, 3, and the second half of 4 about the etymology of *boggart*, along with *boggart* toponyms and personal names for humans as well as inhuman, supernatural beings. These comprise roughly one fifth of the entire book.

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Part one begins with Chapter 1, “Boggart Definition and Sources”, which provides the reader with a thorough taxonomy of supernatural beings in which to situate the boggart. Boggart names are divided into place names like *Boggart Bridge* and personal names such as the *Clegg Hall Boggart*.

For source material, Young first used a corpus of several types of ephemera: broadsides, letters, magazines, and newspapers. For toponyms, he used digitized archives. His third corpus was a 2019 Boggart census first executed through various media outlets and then, after that attempt failed, successfully through Facebook. In the census, Young collected boggart tales and sayings. The timeline for boggart references stretches from the 1500s to today. The most active period was the 1800s to the early 1900s (4).

In Chapter 2, “Boggart Origins”, Young summarizes the mythology and etymology of the boggart. The word *boggart* can be confidently traced back to Middle English *bugge* and is related to *bog* and *bogie*, among other words in Britain, and to the American words *boggle* and *bug*. In some counties, Young writes, the word meant ‘scarecrow’. He discounts the theory that *boggart* derives from *Bulgard* ‘Bulgarian’, which he gives as the origin of the word *bugger* (30).

In Chapter 3, “Boggart Distribution”, Young maps the geography of boggartdom. Except for a few outliers and red herrings, the area of boggartdom is limited to the northern English counties of Lancashire, with about 40% of the names, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Cheshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, and East and West Riding. Young’s 183 examples of *boggart* placenames cover a variety of common geographic features, such as hole, clough, and hill, as well as urban structures such as houses, lanes, and bridges (18). *Boggart* placenames lack the ambiguity of other supernatural toponyms, where the name could have several other meanings or roots. An example of this is the name element *Hob*, which can mean ‘a solitary spirit haunting houses and the countryside’ but can also be a diminutive for *Robert*, or mean ‘a grass tussock’ (52).

For *Boggart* personal names, Young provides only 37, far fewer than the examples he gives for placenames. The geographic spread is also smaller. Young admits that his investigation may have missed some sources and that folklore was not well documented in certain parts. Rather than provide a complete list of personal and placenames in this book, he supplies a comprehensive list of personal names and placenames in his *Sourcebook*. His supplements also include boggart ephemera and personal anecdotes from the census he conducted, perfect for the reader who would like to dive deeper (55). The onomastics section in this chapter, too light in itself to be truly useful to an onomast, serves as an excellent springboard for research.

Happily for the onomast, Young takes up the subject of toponymy again in Chapter 4, “Boggart Landscapes”, which begins part two of the book. Here he first gives some history and discusses the boggart’s notoriously bad behavior. Then he gets down to toponyms, with the preliminary observation that supernatural entities are often associated with geographic features in Britain (90). Young describes boggart houses, lanes, holes, caves, and cloughs (ravines). Boggarts lived in holes, but most boggart names are attached to houses. While making a comparison with fairy names attached to various kinds of locations, he notes that fairy names are connected only to geography, but boggart names can reference both geographic and human structures (100).

Chapter 5, “Boggart Beliefs and Transmission”, covers the various media by which boggart lore is relayed. These include storytelling and print media. In Chapter 6, “Social Boggarts”, Young explores “social boggartry” (138), the phenomenon of gatherings of people inspired by what at times seems to have been a hysteria. There were flaps when people became convinced of a boggart presence in the community; crowds formed to observe boggarts and organized hunts to find them. One last social phenomenon are fakes, where people pretend to be boggarts (139). This chapter led me to wonder whether there might be an onomastic term for these groups and where else this categorization could be applied.

Part three of the book, beginning with Chapter 7, “Boggart Death”, chronicles the obsolescence of the term in dialect and usage throughout the 1900s. And in Chapter 8, “The New Boggart”, Young shows how the term has had a rebirth, albeit a devolution through books and films like *The Spiderwick Chronicles* by Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi, and J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. In its new form, the boggart has devolved or been goblinized into just meaning a sort of goblin (213).

The appendix with its *boggart* glossary is one place where Young really shines. It is both interesting and charming, with 47 pages containing about 50 entries. It includes numerous entertaining examples, such as the boy from the 1950s who used the saying “Boggart in the throat” rather than frog in the throat (233).

Young is less successful in his approach to maps. They are presented in an antique style, in greyscale matching the historical maps also used. They lack any points of reference or geographical markers such as borders or cities, making them difficult to use and to orientate, especially for the reader who is unfamiliar with English counties and geography. I would recommend downloading a map of English counties to facilitate reading.

In every part of the book, Young’s affection and enthusiasm for his subject shine through and enliven what could have been a dry and dreary academic text. The comprehensive research is impressive. The use of Facebook was not only innovative and clever but also very productive. For the folklorist, I would dare to say this book is essential. For the onomast interested in folklore, it is also excellent, particularly when taken together with the resources on offer in Young’s extensive supplementary materials. The volume is thoroughly enjoyable and

delightful, and it serves as an inspiration for deeper research into the onomastics of folklore, mythology, and legend.

References

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