Folklife Today
July 2019: "Is 'Ring Around the Rosie' About the Plague?" A Look at Children's Songs.

Library Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington DC...

Child: Ring around the rosie
Pocket full of posies
Ashes, ashes
We all fall down!

Steve Winick: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm Stephen Winick, and I'm here with my colleague John Fenn.

John Fenn: Hello! We're both folklorists at the American Folklife Center here at the Library of Congress. I'm the head of Research and Programs, and Steve is the Center's writer and editor, and the creator of the blog Folklife Today.

Steve Winick: When people think about the kind of work folklorists engage in, they might assume that we record and study the folk stories told by the community's elders. And that is really important to us. But it's also important to keep in mind that all people have folklore, not just a certain community or age group.

John Fenn: One way we sometimes talk about this is to use the idea of "folk groups," that is, subsets of a larger group that might share certain kinds of culture. We've already talked about some folk groups on the podcast, like the occupational communities who share similar jobs and workplaces, who contribute to the occupational folklife project. Another kind of folk group is the age cohort—children and adolescents often have specific folk traditions that differ from those of older folks.

Steve Winick: That is a great point. We've all probably noticed that American children have a lot of shared songs and games. So if you go to a playground in New York City and another in Birmingham, Alabama, and even one in Los Angeles, and you're likely to find some of the same songs and games. And in fact, some kids' folklore is more widespread than that. Pretty much anywhere people speak English, you're likely to hear such classics as "Miss Mary Mack," "London Bridge," or "Ring Around the Rosie."

John Fenn: These songs and rhymes come with associated body movements, and are often referred to as "singing games," because, just like in other games, there are rules and expectations about what everyone is going to do while singing the song. On this episode of the "Folklife Today" podcast, we'll take a closer look at some of those singing games and other children's songs.
Now Steve, you were inspired to write about these specifically because of a blog post claiming that "Ring Around the Rosie" was related to a terrifying plague in English history, is that right?

**Steve Winick:** Yes, it's the well known origin story that the rhyme originated as a description of the bubonic plague or pneumonic plague, or even specific plague symptoms. So we're going to discuss and evaluate that story later on in the show. But first, since we'll be talking about children's songs and games, we thought we'd consult with someone at the Library of Congress who has a lot of experience with that material, and who better than the Library of Congress’s most recent teacher-in-residence, Carolyn Bennett?

**John Fenn:** Steve was lucky to catch Carolyn just before her term as Teacher in Residence here ended, so we'll be dipping into that interview during this podcast. Let's hear some now:

**Steve Winick:** Carolyn, what do you do as Teacher-in-Residence?

**Carolyn Bennett:** So the role of Teacher-in-Residence is to help make Library of Congress resources useful and useable in the classroom. And this is the first time they've had an arts educator in the position, so my role is kind of twofold: I help people who serve educators here at the Library understand the needs and priorities of educators, and then I uncover and share helpful Library of Congress resources with teachers. Specifically this year, I’ve been digging into a lot of music.

**Steve Winick:** Obviously you've been a teacher for a while. How long have you been observing kids at play and kids singing?

**Carolyn Bennett:** As a child I was very analytical, especially when it came to music. I remember my father used to sing "On Top of Old Smoky" to me. Except his version was "On Top of Spaghetti," and he lost the meatball...you might be familiar with the version.

**Steve Winick:** Right!

**Carolyn Bennett:** And he would sing it, and it would give me this overwhelming sense of sadness until I burst out bawling, and it was kind of like his party trick! And I remember being really frustrated, and trying to figure out how that worked, and what it was about the song that gave me those feelings. And on the other side, I still see music through a very childish lens, and I'm drawn to music that is fun or engaging, not because the music contains a certain musical concept that I want to teach. And as I pick apart why it's engaging, there's always some pedagogic gem at the root of it that makes it engaging and also makes it a great teacher.

**Steve Winick:** so name some of the ways in which you've seen kids using singing or rhyming in their play.

**Carolyn Bennett:** A lot of songs set up a competition that could be something like a race or like a battle of wits. Some songs set up this situation where someone is chosen
and gets to be special, you know, something like "London Bridge" or "follow-the-leader" type games. And then a lot of songs and rhymes are meant to coordinate a rhythmic movement, and that can be all the way from jump-rope and clapping together, and even as sophisticated as square or line dancing or circle dancing. And lastly, I think a lot of songs fit into a purpose of reinforcing group identity.

**Steve Winick:** So what are some of those complex social functions that you've seen these songs have in groups of kids?

**Carolyn Bennett:** So I think there's kind of three layers to that onion. There's the stated context of the game, but underneath that there's the role of the game in child development, and then underneath that I think is the biological, maybe even evolutionary reason why we have these games in the first place. So I think that, on the surface, these songs are kind of like inoculations of complex adult social skills. So they take some big intimidating social concept like courtship, or occupations, or death, and they make it so silly and small that it's manageable for kids to process. But underneath that, even as the songs parody grown up tasks, I think they also provide a context for children to practice real social skills that they'll need later in life. When they play "London Bridge," if they can get through that game and NOT have a meltdown when they're not the chosen person, then they're one step closer to being ready for their first high-stakes job interview as an adult.

**Steve Winick:** That makes sense, yeah.

**Carolyn Bennett:** And then underneath that, I think there's a biological level that we're continuing to learn about through academic research. Studies are increasingly showing that something called "interpersonal synchrony," which is clapping together and moving together, it nurtures pro-social and altruistic behaviors in the very youngest and the very oldest subjects of our population. So where that synchrony involves breathing, as in singing activities, that link is even stronger, so engaging in synchronous singing and rhythmic activities can promote positive changes in social, emotional and even cardiovascular health. So I think from like an animal behavior perspective, it makes a lot of sense why we do these things.

**Steve Winick:** Wow! What are some of your favorites among these rhymes?

**Carolyn Bennett:** so there's a few that I really love that I want to focus on because I discovered them here in the Library collections. We have a recording of "Mary Was a Red Bird" by Henry Truvillion, Jr., and one of the reasons why I love it is because before he sings it, he recounts this whole lineage of his ancestors: "and then so-and-so sang it to so-and-so, who sang it to his grandmother, who sang it to...and he goes down the line. And then he sings it with his 8-year-old daughter. So I like how tangible that makes the lineage of the song and where it came from. And he talks about how if you're singing this to a baby, and if the baby isn't asleep yet, well you just keep on making up verses until that baby is asleep! So there's an implicit invitation to be creative in the song, and I like
that freedom is kind of built into the song, and Henry Truvillion specifically says "it's okay to play with this, it's okay to be creative!"

**Steve Winick:** So let's hear Henry Truvillion singing "Mary Was a Redbird."

**Henry Truvillion:** Ready?

(sings) Mary wore her red dress, red dress, red dress,
Mary wore her red dress, all day long
Mary wore her red hat, red hat, red hat,
Mary wore her red hat, all day long
Mary wore her red shoes, red shoes, red shoes,
Mary wore her red shoes, all day long
Mary wore her red gloves, red gloves, red gloves,
Mary wore her red gloves, all day long
Mary cooked a red cake, red cake, red cake,
Mary cooked a red cake, all day long
Where'd you get your shoes from, shoes from, shoes from,
Where'd you get your shoes from, all day long
Got 'em from the dry goods, dry goods, dry goods,
Got 'em from the dry goods, all day long
Where'd you get your butter from, butter from, butter from
Where'd you get your butter from, all day long
Got it from the grocer, grocer, grocer
Got it from the grocer, all day long
Where'd you get your shoes from, shoes from, shoes from,
Where'd you get your shoes from, all day long
Mary was a red bird, red bird, red bird,
Mary was a red bird, all day long

**John A. Lomax:** What's that song? Tell me all about it.

**Henry Truvillion:** This was a song sung to the babies way back in the cotton fields of slavery. Back in...back yonder in about 18...45. Handed on down from old man Gyp Truvillion, down through the lines of old man Jim Hanson down to old lady Hannah Stepney, come on down in to Henry Truvillion Jr., the man who sang it at the present, him and his little 8-year-old baby Ruby Lee by name.

**John Fenn:** Again, that was Henry Truvillion, Jr., singing "Mary Was a Red Bird" which was one of Carolyn Bennet's favorite kids' songs from our collection. And we
were just listening to Steve's interview with Carolyn, who was the Library of Congress teacher in residence.

**Steve Winick:** Yes, Carolyn mentioned another song as one of her favorite kids' songs, and that's "Go Tell Aunt Rhody." I thought it was worth pointing out that, although we have lots of versions of that song online from the fieldwork of John A. Lomax and Sidney Robertson Cowell, interestingly, none of them is called "Go Tell Aunt Rhody." We have "Go Tell Aunt Dinah," "Go Tell Aunt Tildy," "Go Tell Aunt Patsy," "Go Tell Aunt Nancy" and "Go Tell Aunt Tabby."

**John Fenn:** That's great, and it suggests, of course, that kids were adapting the songs to their own lives and maybe plugging in the name of their own aunt!

**Steve Winick:** Yeah, my favorite version is "Go Tell Aunt Tabby," which John and Ruby Lomax recorded from Hasel Futch and Corine Jackson at the women's dormitory of the Raiford penitentiary in Florida, on June 4, 1939. It reminds us that some of the people Lomax recorded in prison weren't that far out of their own childhoods, and others might have recently had small kids of their own. It gives a very human dimension to the lives of some of the folks who sang for Lomax in prison.

**John Fenn:** Let's hear it!

**Hasel Futch and Corine Jackson (sing):**
Go Tell Aunt Tabby, Go Tell Aunt Tabby, Go Tell Aunt Tabby,
Go Tell Aunt Tabby, The old gray goose is dead

The one she's been saving, the one she's been saving, the one she's been saving
To make a feather bed

She died last Friday, she died last Friday, she died last Friday
With a pain in the back of her head

Go to sleep you baby, go to sleep you baby, go to sleep you baby
On your feather bed

Hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm, hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm
hmm hmm hmm hmm, hmm hmm hmm hmm.
Steve Winick: The rhymes in the post have diverse origins and histories, but the author, James FitzGerald, was arguing that they all describe dark and portentous matters from English history.

John Fenn: And one of these was “Ring Around the Rosie?”

Steve Winick: Right. And that one particularly stuck out to me because it tells us interesting things about folklore and our ideas about folklore.

John Fenn: Excellent! Now let's hear a couple of versions of "Ring Around the Rosie" that you and Jon Gold and Carolyn collected in the field at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School here in Washington DC:

Child (sings):
Ring around the rosie, pockets filled with posies
Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!

Child (sings):
Ring around the rosie, ring around the rosie
Ashes, ashes, we all fall down
Picking up the flowers, picking up the flowers
...And that's all I know!

Children (sing):
Ring around the rosie, pocket full o' toesie
Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!

John Fenn: Of course, there are lots of different versions of this rhyme.

Steve Winick: Yes, and one thing we noticed is that lots of kids don't know the word "posies" anymore, and say "toesies" at that point in the song!

John Fenn: That's great! And there are other differences between that version and the one discussed by James Fitzgerald. So just to be clear what we're talking about here, in Fitzgerald's version, the rhyme goes:

Ring-a-ring-a-roses
A pocket full of posies
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down.

Steve Winick: Right, and Fitzgerald states pretty emphatically that this rhyme arose from the Great Plague, an outbreak of pneumonic plague that affected London in the year 1665. As he put it,

“Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses is all about the Great Plague; the apparent whimsy being a foil for one of London’s most atavistic dreads (thanks to the Black Death).”

John Fenn: This is an interesting interpretation of Ring Around the Rosie! What exactly is his evidence?
Steve Winick: well, there isn’t much. All the evidence he gives is really just interpretation of the lines of the rhyme. So in his words:

The fatalism of the rhyme is brutal: the roses are a euphemism for deadly rashes, the posies a supposed preventative measure; the a-tishoos pertain to sneezing symptoms, and the implication of everyone falling down is, well, death.

John Fenn: OK, so, let’s break this down: the roses represent a rash?

Steve Winick: Right

John Fenn: I seem to remember in my childhood version that the “rosie” was your cheek, and the “ring around” it was a rash.

Steve Winick: Yeah, that’s what I heard too. But his version has no rosie or ring around it, because it’s "Ring-a-ring-a-roses."

John Fenn: Hm. Interesting. Now, as for the posies being a preventative measure, I’ve heard this refers to carrying flowers because in the old days they believed the stench actually caused illness, so people carried flowers to protect themselves.

Steve Winick: Yup, that’s how the plague interpretation goes.

John Fenn: And then, I see Fitzgerald’s version has “a-tishoo,” and he says that refers to sneezing. That’s also different from the one I grew up with, which has “ashes, ashes.” Some people do say that refers to cremation. And then the one I knew does end with “all fall down.” Still, that’s only two out of four lines mine has in common with the one Fitzgerald references.

Steve Winick: Yes, and we found the same thing when I talked to Carolyn. Here’s the part of our interview where we discussed the plague story.

Steve Winick: About "Ring Around the Rosie," what was the story that you heard about its origins?

Carolyn Bennett: Well, I heard that it was about the bubonic plague. And I recently corresponded with an elementary school librarian here in DC, and I mentioned the title “Ring Around the Rosie,” and it was the first thing that she said about the song too, that it was about the plague. So I think that’s a pretty well known origin story.

Steve Winick: Sure, and do you remember specific correspondences between lines of the rhyme and the plague?

Carolyn Bennett: Yeah, so I think the "Rosie" was supposed to represent a boil or a red spot on the skin, and then when it got a ring around it you would know that the infection was spreading. And then this was before people understood germs, and many of them believed that stench was the thing that would infect you, so they might carry a bouquet of flowers when they went to visit a sick person. And then of course the falling down at the end was meant to represent death.
John Fenn: Interesting. So, the version she knew was slightly different from the version I knew too, with a ring forming around the initial rash. So, it looks like more and more what we really have is a bunch of different versions of the rhyme, with several different ways to argue that it fits a story about symptoms of the plague.

Steve Winick: That’s a really important point. Like most folklore items, this rhyme exists in many versions and variants.

John Fenn: So, the one Fitzgerald knew and the ones we grew up with and Carolyn’s are all relatively similar, and all of them can be made to fit the plague interpretation. But are there others?

Steve Winick: It turns out there are. And specific images Fitzgerald associates with the plague don’t occur in all or even most versions. Many versions have no words that sound like sneezes, no ashes, and no falling down. For example, Iona and Peter Opie give an 1883 version that goes like this.

A ring, a ring o’roses
A pocket full of posies
One for Jack and one for Jim and one for little Moses
A curchey in and a curchey out
And a curchey all together

John Fenn: Now I’m assuming here that “curchey” is just a dialect form of “curtsey,” so the kids are doing a little dance of curtseying there?

Steve Winick: Exactly. Now, the Opies found earlier versions of the rhyme from Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, among other places. Meanwhile, there’s no evidence the rhyme existed in English until the mid 19th Century.

John Fenn: Well, in the book “Games and Songs of American Children,” William Wells Newell, writing in 1883, did say that the rhyme was known in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1790

Steve Winick: Yeah, that is true, but he gave no evidence, and none has come to light. So after that unsubstantiated claim, the rhyme doesn’t turn up in English until the 1850s.

John Fenn: More importantly, Newell provides a few other versions of the rhyme which don't contain any plague-like images, and in which the posies, or bunches of flowers, are very different. For example, there are these two:

Round the ring of roses
Pots full of posies
The one who stoops last
Shall tell whom she loves best

And then there's
Ring around the rosie
Bottle full of posy
All the girls in our town
Ring for little Josie

**Steve Winick:** Yeah, those are interesting versions because the flowers are in a pot in one version and in a bottle in the other. So they’re not handheld bouquets for warding off smells, they’re a bouquet in a vase, and a flowerpot with flowers growing in it. So no lines at all seem closely related to the plague.

**John Fenn:** Okay, but...do they maybe reveal other functions and meanings?

**Steve Winick:** I think so. I mean, "all the girls in our town ring for little Josie" and especially "The one who stoops last shall tell whom she loves best" suggest not death but courtship. So let’s listen to another version of Ring Around a Rosie that John and Ruby Lomax recorded in 1939, in Wiergate, Texas. They collected this interesting version for the Library of Congress, from a group of African-American schoolgirls.

**Group of Children:**
Ring around the roses
Pocketful o’ posies
Light bread, sweet bread, squat!
Guess who she told me, tralalalala
Mr. Red was her lover, tralalalala
If you love him, hug him!
If you hate him, stomp!

**John A Lomax:** Do it again!

**Group of Children:**
Ring around the roses
Pocketful o’ posies
Light bread, sweet bread, squat!
Guess who she told me, tralalalala
Mr. Red was her lover, tralalalala
If you love him, hug him!
If you hate him, stomp!

**Steve Winick:** So the Lomaxes transcribed that as:

Ring around the roses
Pocketful o’ posies
Light bread, sweet bread, squat!
Guess who she told me, tralalalala
Mr. Red was her lover, tralalalala
If you love him, hug him!
If you hate him, stomp!
And I noticed also that they changed the name of the lover the second time they sang the song, so it was Mr. Sonny. And that signals that it wasn't always Mr. Red but that a different person was chosen as the lover each time.

**John Fenn**: Wow, so the Lomaxes transcribed the last line as if you love him, hug him, if you hate him, stomp...but it sounds to me like "If you hate him, don't."

**Steve Winick**: So this version of the rhyme, combined with most of the ones from Newell’s book, suggest a different interpretation: the rhyme is often used as a playful courtship game in which children dance in a ring, then suddenly stoop, squat, curtsey, or in some cases fall to the ground. The last to do so (or the one that jumps the gun) has to pay a penalty, which is sometimes to profess love for (or hug or kiss) another child.

**John Fenn**: In this case, it looks like there's also the option not to hug if you don't want to. Which is nice...it adds an element of consent. And the whole game also lets kids play with courtship. I mean, if a kiss is the penalty for being last, but a child is curious about kissing, he or she can throw the game and come in last on purpose.

**Steve Winick**: Great point. And the rest of the rules kind of recognize that possibility, because in a lot of versions, the child who lost the last round sits one out, by taking up a place in the middle of the ring, representing the “rosie” or rose bush. Anyway, Newell explicitly states that the game was played like this in America in the 1880s, and European analogs from the same time are pretty similar. And a similar function for the game is pretty obvious in a version recorded from unidentified children in 1939. Let’s hear that.

**Unidentified Girls**: Ring around the Roses  
A bottle full of posies  
Last to squat has to tell who her sweetheart is

**Herbert Halpert**: Now d'you know how...how do you play that?

**Unidentified Girl**: Just go around. And squat down when you get to “last to squat has to tell who her sweetheart is,” and the last to squat has to tell who her sweetheart is!

**Steve Winick**: so in that version, the rhyme ends with “last to squat has to tell who her sweetheart is,” and then they all squat. And the last to squat, as the rhyme commands, has to tell the others who her sweetheart is.

**John Fenn**: so, it looks like the roses and posies might signify what flowers often signify in traditional European culture: not suffering and death, but courtship and love. In that case, the plague interpretation is not looking too solid. Is there any direct evidence for it?

**Steve Winick**: No, it's really quite the opposite. Folklorists who recorded the rhyme in the 19th and early 20th centuries never mention any connection to the plague, although they certainly would have if they knew the theory. And of course there are meticulous
accounts of day-to-day life in London during the plague, which never mention any such rhyme.

**John Fenn:** so when does the theory about "Ring Around the Rosie" and the plague first emerge?

**Steve Winick:** The first evidence I’ve seen that people were connecting the "Ring Around the Rosie" with death and disaster is actually from 1949, when the newspaper *The Observer* ran a parody of the rhyme beginning “Ring-a-ring-o’geranium, a pocketful of uranium” and referring to the bombing of Hiroshima. In 1951, we find the first direct reference to the plague interpretation, and that’s Iona and Peter Opie stating that some people believe the rhyme refers to the plague, but they are not themselves convinced.

**John Fenn:** OK, the plague happened in 1665, "Ring Around the Rosie" first appears about 200 years later, and the story of a connection between the two emerges 100 years after that. So for this to be accurate, the rhyme would have to go unrecorded for 200 years after it first appeared, and the story about a connection to the plague for 300 years.

**Steve Winick:** Right. And that’s farfetched, but it’s not impossible. But also consider this: if the people in 1950 or so who believed there was a connection to the plague had any actual evidence, why didn’t they give that evidence? And why haven’t scholars uncovered that evidence in the last 70 or so years, now that we’ve been looking for it?

**John Fenn:** Food for thought. It means that evidence isn’t likely to exist at all—we’d just be taking the word of someone in about 1950 that this story had been in the oral tradition for 300 years. But there wouldn’t be any way for that person to know if it were true!

**Steve Winick:** Right. Now, in the blog, I point out that whether it’s true or not, the story of the plague theory is itself folklore: a tale that was passed on first by word of mouth, then in writing and online media. And since it is also about folklore, folklorists sometimes classify it as “metafolklore”: folklore about folklore.

**John Fenn:** We’ve already seen that the story, like most folklore, exists in different versions. So in some stories “a-tishoo” is a sneeze and in others “ashes” is cremation. Are there still other variants?

**Steve Winick:** It turns out there are. The two main variants are that the rhyme refers to the Great Plague of 1665, and that it stems from another plague, the Black Death of 1347.

**John Fenn:** And within those variants are there other variations?

**Steve Winick:** Yes, within these two main variants, there are sub-variants: in particular, FitzGerald and others say the 1665 rhyme originated in London, while others say it came from Eyam, which is a village in the English Midlands that was also infected
with plague in 1665. And then, each individual version has its own quirks. The plague can infect different parts of the body and cause different symptoms. People know about or imagine different historical health practices, and different versions of the rhyme have different specific words. So plague stories vary widely in the correspondences they find between words and plague experiences. We’ve already noticed that for some, “a-tishoo” signifies a sneeze, while for others “ashes” signifies cremation. For some the "Rosy" is the cheek, for others it’s the rash. For supporters of the bubonic plague, the "ring" is a red inflammation around a black buboe. And then there’s supposed contextual information—one article I found even claims children sang it “while dancing around the victims!”

**John Fenn:** Morbid! I also notice that a lot of older versions of the rhyme like the ones from Newell’s book DON’T have the lines that seem to contain plague references, while more modern versions do. If the song were originally about the plague, you’d expect the OLDER versions to have the most references to the plague and the newer ones to have lost some of those references.

**Steve Winick:** right, and it's just the opposite. The lines said to resemble the plague are exactly the lines that were common in the 1950s when the plague interpretation first appears, not the lines that were common when the rhyme itself is first recorded.

**John Fenn:** so, all in all, it seems likely that the story didn’t grow from any compelling evidence. Instead, it looks like evidence has been gathered or imagined to support a compelling story. And that story, “Ring Around the Rosie” is about the plague, was probably dreamed up in the late 1940s or early 1950s.

**Steve Winick:** Yes, that was my conclusion, and it’s pretty much the conclusion of other folklorists as well. So, Steve Roud for example, calls the story of the rhyme being associated with the plague “complete nonsense,” and the Opies rather famously wrote “We ourselves have had to listen so often to this interpretation that we are reluctant to go out of the house.”

**John Fenn:** That seems a bit extreme! But Steve, given that there’s really no evidence for it, what has been so interesting about this story of “Ring Around the Rosie” in association with the plague? Why do people love this interpretation?

**Steve Winick:** That’s a hard question to answer, John. But I did talk about that with Carolyn Bennett, too, and she had some interesting thoughts on it.

**John Fenn:** let’s hear them!

**Carolyn Bennett:** I had a group of 7th graders in a general music appreciation class a few years ago. This particular class was mostly male, and they also needed pretty strong hooks to get them engaged in our content. And we were about to start studying the middle ages. So I led with the story of “Ring Around the Rosie,” because I figured there’s nothing like a story about dying a very gross death to catch the attention of your typical middle school boy. So I started describing the lyrics on the first day of the new unit, and
I definitely had them hooked. I was really digging in. “Once you saw the ring, you knew you had the disease, and all you could do was watch as the boils got bigger and bigger.” So they were really riveted, and then I noticed one gregarious, usually self-assured boy in the back row, and he was looking a little nervous. So I switched gears real quick, and I said, “BUT, now we understand germs, and we have antibiotics, so even though there are small outbreaks of the plague today, pills work really well and keep us healthy!” And then all of a sudden, this young man stands up, and blurts out, “But I can’t swallow pills!” And he absolutely lost it!

**Steve Winick:** Oh no!

**Carolyn Bennett:** So that was the last time I ever taught the story about “Ring Around the Rosie.” But I confess I may have even heard that the story was a myth before I shared it with that fateful seventh grade class. I think sometimes modern life makes us feel like we’re always competing for attention, and we’re trying to be heard over a cacophony of other inputs, so I think people often have a tendency to catastrophize, because if something is sensational it’s perceived as more worthy of attention.

**John Fenn:** That was a great story from Carolyn Bennett, along with her thoughts on why the story might be popular even when there’s very little evidence.

**Steve Winick:** Yes, and I really agree with her there. As I wrote in the blog, in the marketplace of ideas, a good story often outsells mere facts, and her point about sensationalism helping to sell the story is a really good one.

**John Fenn:** Steve, you also noticed some specific patterns in the kinds of people who like to tell the plague story.

**Steve:** Yes. For example, the plague story is very appealing to historians, for whom a glimpse of the distant past in the present is always exciting. It’s especially compelling to historians of the plagues themselves; and in fact, standard works of scholarship about the 1347 plague and the 1665 plague recount this story as fact.

**John Fenn:** I guess part of the challenge for medieval historians is to explain how such long-ago events have continued to influence our lives, and the chance to mention a rhyme everyone knows and connect it to this deep history is irresistible.

**Steve Winick:** Also, I noticed that the story is often told by advocates for particular places. Travel blogs spread the Eyam story, because Eyam is a travel destination largely on the basis of its plague history. And of course Londonist, whose version got me to think about this question, is a blog celebrating London specifically. Advocates for medical education and even for sanitary sewers have used "Ring Around the Rosie's" supposed connection to disease to suggest that their particular expertise remains relevant to anyone who has heard this common rhyme. And I’d also add to this that there are just many people out there with a love of horror and the macabre, and nothing is much more disturbing than the idea of little children dancing in the midst of pestilence and death.
John Fenn: The story is so popular that you even got pushback in the comments to the original post, didn’t you? I mean, there are several comments disagreeing with you to the point of saying that any attempt to debunk the plague story was hogwash.

Steve Winick: Yes, and I should say I love the folks who commented, whatever side they took. Because in addition to those naysayers, there are also people who gave their own versions. In one case, a commenter from Ireland said that in the 1950s, the disease was said to be tuberculosis. In another, a woman whose local version of the rhyme had the nonsense lines "E spur, I spur, squat" suggested that it was originally “ye purge, I purge, squat,” which is getting almost graphic and gross. And one commenter even pointed out a published version of the rhyme from 1855 that previous scholars had missed! So even though not all the comments agree with me, I’d say this is a time when you definitely want to read the comments.

John Fenn: So, is there anything this plague story teaches us about children’s folksongs like “Ring Around the Rosie?”

Steve Winick: Well, interestingly, I asked Carolyn Bennett that too, and she had a very eloquent answer, so let’s let her have the last word.

Carolyn Bennett: So the true value of these songs is in how they connect us to the viewpoints of people from the past, and often people who have otherwise disappeared from history. And we often don’t know their names but this one thing remains, and we can bring our students into that tradition by singing and participating in these songs games with them. And learning these songs can often open students’ eyes to the voices that are present in their own community, and be more open to learning from those voices. So as I thought about the plague myth, I realized that it revealed something about how I view folk music as a whole: folksongs are often about the smallness of life, and if they’re about a tragedy it tends to be a personal one. So this is an important reminder for me as an educator: yes, it’s my job to expand students’ minds, so they’re ready to wrap their minds around monstrously big ideas. But it’s also my job to shrink the world so it’s small enough to relate to my students. That idea is one of the reasons why I love folk traditions so much. They remind me that everyday life is worth making art about. They don’t focus on the most famous or most disastrous moments in history, they’re just about the daily acts of living life. And if I venture to guess, I bet the origin of “Ring Around the Rosie” was so unremarkable that no one has bothered to remember it or pass it down, so most likely we’ll never know for sure. And if that feels like a letdown to me, if I long for that sensational mythic narrative, then maybe I’m missing the point of what makes folk traditions beautiful.

Steve Winick: Carolyn, thank you so much for being on “Folklife Today”

Carolyn Bennett: Thank you Steve!

John Fenn: Once again, that was Carolyn Bennett, who recently ended her tenure as Teacher in Residence at the Library of Congress, with some lovely closing thoughts. We should thank some folks before signing off: of course Carolyn Bennett, as well as Monica
Valentine from the Young Readers Center here at the Library of Congress. The children and teachers and parents of Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in Congress Heights for letting us record their versions of the rhyme. Henry Truvillion, Hasel Futch and Corine Jackson for being recorded and John A. and Ruby T. Lomax for recording them. Herbert Halpert for his recordings of Melinda & Roselee Vaughan and of unidentified children. And thank you Steve!

**Steve Winick:** Thank you as well, John. Let’s also thank Jon Gold for going above and beyond and recording material in the field in addition to his usual work on the show. Mike Turpin, Jay Kinloch, and the music division for use of the Jefferson Building studio. Jim Tani and the developers who get audio loaded on the blog for us. And colleagues throughout the Library of Congress who help us deploy this podcast once it’s made. And let’s give special thanks to Gabriel Cowan, our intern, who did some of the writing and finding of audio assets for this podcast. And of course, thanks to all of you out there for listening to the Folklife Today podcast!

**Boy:** It’s like a game! You gotta hold hands. And you gotta ring around the roses. And then we all fall down. You gotta do that, you gotta fall! Ring around the roses, atcha tatcha tosis, We all fall down!

**Girls:** Ring Around the Rosie Pocket full of toesies Ashes, Ashes We all fall down!

**Girl:** My grandmother taught how me to sing it. Well, my grandmother is 24. She’s young!

**Announcer:** This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov