

The Urban Legends Quiz

by A.S. Mott

1. Mama Cass Elliott died from choking on a ham sandwich.
2. In 1987, two men living in California found a human finger in a can of menudo (a food made from beef tripe).
3. When a brewing tank ruptured in Boston, a slow flood of molasses caused the deaths of more than 20 people.
4. A 12-foot alligator was found living in the sewers of Manhattan.
5. A nervous golfer chewing on a wooden tee died from ingesting the toxic chemicals used by the golf club to maintain the course.
6. A fired employee trying to commit suicide by jumping out of a window landed on and killed the boss who had just fired him.
7. Opera singer Maria Callas intentionally swallowed a tape worm in an attempt to control her weight.
8. Thomas Edison, an opponent of capital punishment, aided the development of the electric chair in a misguided effort to discredit rival George Westinghouse.
9. A girl babysitting on Thanksgiving killed the child she was caring for by accidentally putting the baby in the oven instead of the turkey.
10. A high school student was killed on prom night by a black widow spider hiding in her elaborate hairdo.

Answers to The Quiz

1. **Mama Cass Elliott died from choking on a ham sandwich.**

FALSE. There was a partially-eaten sandwich on Mama Cass's nightstand when she died, but she died of heart failure, not choking. Urban legends often target celebrities. This is one of many celebrity legends covered in the book.

2. **In 1987, two men living in California found a human finger in a can of menudo (a food made from beef tripe).**

FALSE. This widely-reported legend, like many others covered in the book, was based on a true incident. The men found what they *thought* was a finger, but further analysis proved it was a piece of connective tissue commonly found in tripe. This is one of the many food-related urban legends covered in the book.

3. **When a brewing tank ruptured in Boston, a slow flood of molasses caused the deaths of more than 20 people.**

TRUE. On January 15, 1919, over 2 million gallons of molasses spilled from a ruptured tank, unleashing a 30-foot-tall tidal wave of black goo into Boston's north end, killing 21 people and injuring another 150.

4. **A 12-foot alligator was found living in the sewers of Manhattan.**

FALSE. No alligators large enough to seriously harm a human have ever been found in the sewers of New York. It is too cold for alligators to survive the winter down there. This is one of several urban legends discussed in the book where nature retaliates against the human race.

5. **A nervous golfer chewing on a wooden tee died from ingesting the toxic chemicals used by the golf club to maintain the course.**

TRUE. In 1982, U.S. Navy Lieutenant George M. Prior died from an allergic reaction to the fungicide Daconil after chewing on a golf tee at the Army-Navy Country Club in Arlington, Virginia. This is one of many bizarre but true urban legends tracked down for this book.

6. **A fired employee trying to commit suicide by jumping out of a window landed on and killed the boss who had just fired him.**

FALSE. Many urban legends are morality tales, where people who have been cruel or abusive get their just rewards. Our belief in karma keeps these myths alive. Just because they aren't true doesn't mean we can't enjoy the many examples of justice served up in this book.

7. **Opera singer Maria Callas intentionally swallowed a tape worm in an attempt to control her weight.**

FALSE. This example of celebrity mythmaking has some basis in truth. Maria Callas did, at one time, have a tapeworm removed -- but she never swallowed it intentionally. Many urban myths reveal our prejudices against other races, genders, or lifestyle choices -- in this case, large prima donnas.

8. **Thomas Edison, an opponent of capital punishment, aided the development of the electric chair in a misguided effort to discredit rival George Westinghouse.**

TRUE. Edison thought a demonstration of the potential for alternating current to kill people on contact would result in the State of New York adopting his less-efficient direct current method for powering homes and businesses. Instead, it inspired the State of New York to build the country's first electric chair.

9. **A girl babysitting on Thanksgiving killed the child she was caring for by accidentally putting the baby in the oven instead of the turkey.**

FALSE. Many holidays come with legends firmly attached, such as Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. And babysitters are a favorite target of both urban legends and horror movies. While rarely true, caretaker calamities are a favorite at summer camps everywhere.

10. **A high school student was killed on prom night by a black widow spider hiding in her elaborate hairdo.**

FALSE. This legend dates back to the 1950s when big hair architecture was all the rage, and parents found something sinister in high hair. Like many urban legends, it was given new life on the silver screen, when director John Waters included a variation featuring cockroaches in his movie, *Hairspray*.