



Cats and Ladders: Ancestral Superstitions

Sue Lisk looks at superstitions, their origins, and how they connect us to our roots

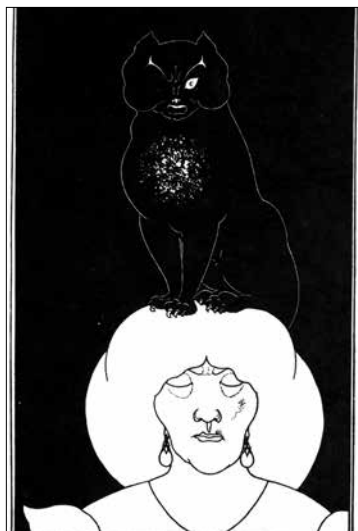
MY GRANDMOTHER HAD A COLD. FEARING I might have caught one, too, she asked how I felt. When I assured her that I was fine, she replied, “Let’s hope you don’t get sick – knock on wood.” And then she knocked her knuckles three times against the wooden table before us.

When I asked why she’d done that, she explained that it would help prevent me from becoming ill. I told her again that I knew I’d be fine and informed her that I absolutely refused to knock on wood. The action made no sense to me. Suffice it to say that I made

Grandma very upset.

Superstitions have long played an important role in the belief systems of many. Some of these ideas may have been part of the lore of your ancestors or would have been familiar to them.

Let’s take a look at a number of these superstitions, how some of them may have originated, and how they connect us to our roots.



The black cat, Aubrey Beardsley.
(Library of Congress)

Superstitions from Britain

Numerous websites focus on distinct nationalities and their superstitions of yesteryear and today. Some of these superstitions, although not all, accompanied emigrants to the places where they settled.

Take the British, for example. You’ll find an article describing some of their superstitions at www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/British-Superstitions.



Although this is a “ladder of fortune”, perhaps some people would avoid walking under it to avoid bad luck, c. 1875, Currier & Ives. (Library of Congress)

Even within one country, these types of beliefs may vary from place to place. According to the author of this piece, in Dorset, some believe that slow-boiling kettles may be hiding a toad within. In fairy tales, we often find the notion of a toad being included as a common ingredient in witches’ brews, as if it were a sort of supernatural chicken stock. Another superstition, seemingly designed to intrigue family historians, used to be found in Yorkshire; there, people believed that bread failed to rise if there was a corpse close at hand.