

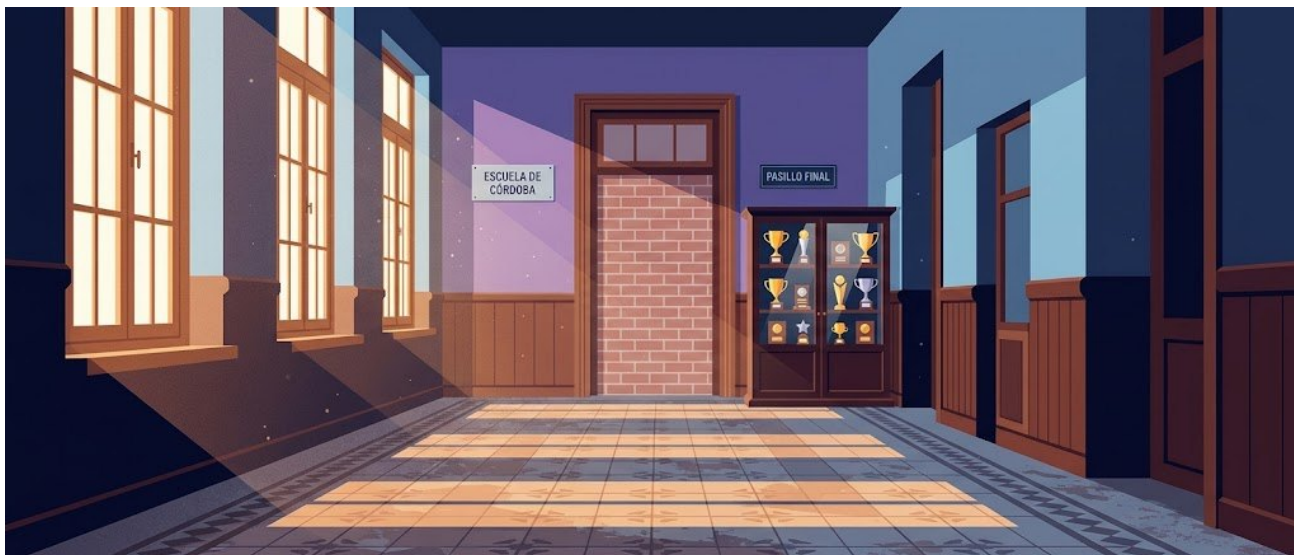
The Door That Was Bricked Up

Every school has a story about a sealed room. This one turned out to have an answer.

5 min read

Before you read

- **mundane** — ordinary and unexciting
- **sceptical** — not willing to believe something without good evidence
- **embellish** — to add details to a story to make it more impressive
- **plausible** — believable, whether or not it is actually true
- **corroborate** — to support a claim with separate evidence



A bricked-up doorway in a corridor of an old school building in Córdoba, Argentina

¹ At the end of the east corridor of a school in Córdoba, half hidden behind a cabinet of trophies nobody has won recently, there is a doorway filled in with brick. The brick is a slightly different colour from the wall around it. The frame is still there. If you did not know to look, you would walk past it every day for five years.

² Mariana knew to look, because every student does. The story arrives in the first week of Form 1, passed down with complete confidence by students who were themselves told it twelve months earlier: a girl was locked in that room during a fire drill in the 1970s and never came out, and the school bricked up the door rather than explain.

³ Mariana was fourteen and had recently become insufferable about evidence, which is what happens to some people when they first discover that adults can be wrong. She decided to find out.

⁴ The first thing she noticed was that the story had no fixed details. Three of her classmates told it to her and produced three different decades, two different names for the girl and, in one case, a caretaker who had gone mad afterwards. Nobody could say who had told them, beyond 'someone in Form 3'. Each teller was certain. None could corroborate anything.

⁵ The second thing she noticed was that the story was good. It had a victim, a secret and an institution covering something up, and it explained a strange physical object that everyone could see with their own eyes. Stories

that strong do not need to be true to survive; they only need to be repeated by someone who sounds sure.

⁶ She asked the school secretary, who had worked there for twenty-six years. The secretary laughed and said it was the boiler room, and that the boiler had been moved to an outbuilding, and that she had no idea when. This was plausible and completely unsatisfying.

⁷ So Mariana went to the municipal archive, which turned out to be free, almost empty, and staffed by a man delighted that anyone had come. Together they found the building plans. The room behind the door was four square metres with no window: a store for fuel. They found a council notice from 1981 requiring schools to remove indoor fuel stores, and a works record from the following year listing, among eleven other jobs, the sealing of one doorway.

⁸ No girl. No fire drill. A regulation and a bricklayer.

⁹ Mariana took photographs of the documents and brought them back to school, where she discovered something she had not planned for. Almost nobody wanted them. Her friends looked at the plans, agreed that she had probably proved it, and went on telling the story anyway — slightly embellished now with the detail that the school had falsified the records.

¹⁰ This is the ordinary fate of a debunked legend. The evidence does not circulate as easily as the story, because evidence is specific, dull and hard to retell at a bus stop. A 1981 council regulation is a worse thing to repeat than a girl who never came out. The story is also doing a job the evidence cannot do: it makes a dull corridor interesting, and it gives older students something to hand down to younger ones.

¹¹ Mariana is now studying history at university, which she dates to the afternoon in the archive rather than to anything that happened in a classroom. She still tells the story of the bricked-up door. She tells it as a story about how stories work, which she admits is a far less popular version.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What was actually behind the bricked-up door?

- A A classroom that was no longer needed
- B A small windowless store for fuel
- C A staircase to a closed upper floor
- D Nothing — the doorway was never real

2. What first made Mariana sceptical of the legend?

- A A teacher told her it was untrue
- B The brick was obviously modern
- C The versions she heard disagreed on names, dates and details
- D She had read about the same story at another school

3. Which documents did Mariana find in the municipal archive?

- A A newspaper report and a photograph
- B A police file and a school register
- C Building plans, a 1981 council notice and a works record
- D Letters from a former caretaker

4. How did her friends respond to the evidence?

- A They accepted it and stopped telling the story
- B They refused to look at the photographs
- C They agreed she had probably proved it, then kept telling the story
- D They accused her of inventing the documents

5. In paragraph 5, the writer says a strong story does not need to be true, only to be

- A written down somewhere official
- B repeated by someone who sounds sure
- C frightening enough to remember
- D about a real place

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences, using evidence from the passage.

6. The secretary's explanation is described as 'plausible and completely unsatisfying'. Explain how it could be both.

7. Why does the writer say evidence does not circulate as easily as a story?

8. What job was the legend doing for the students, according to paragraph 10?

9. After seeing the proof, Mariana's friends added a new detail — that the records were falsified. What does this tell you about how beliefs respond to evidence?

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. Was Mariana right to try to debunk a story her friends enjoyed? Give your reasons.

11. Think of a story that circulates at your school or in your area that nobody can trace to a source. How would you go about checking it, and would you want to?

12. Predict whether the legend is still being told at that school today. What in the passage makes you think so?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. **B** — A small windowless store for fuel | 2. **C** — The versions she heard disagreed on names, dates and details | 3. **C** — Building plans, a 1981 council notice and a works record | 4. **C** — They agreed she had probably proved it, then kept telling the story | 5. **B** — repeated by someone who sounds sure

Part B

6. It was believable — an old boiler room is an ordinary explanation for a sealed door — but she could not say when or why it happened, so it corroborated nothing. Plausibility is not evidence.

7. Evidence is specific, dull and awkward to retell, while a story about a girl who never came out is memorable and easy to pass on. Accept any answer contrasting how repeatable the two are.

8. It made a dull corridor interesting and gave older students something to hand down to younger ones. Accept answers about belonging, tradition or entertainment.

9. A belief that matters to people can absorb contrary evidence by growing to explain it away, so the proof strengthens rather than ends the story. Strong answers notice the story changed shape instead of collapsing.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. Strong answers weigh truth against harmlessness — that the legend hurt nobody, or that accepting a comfortable false story is a habit worth refusing. Reward a clear position defended with something from the text.

11. Look for a real example and a usable method — finding the original source, looking for records, asking who told whom — plus an honest answer about whether they would want to know. The reasoning is the skill, not the example.

12. A strong answer ties the prediction to the passage — the story survived documented proof, so it will very likely still be told, possibly with Mariana herself now part of it. A weaker answer predicts with no link back to the text.

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