

Writing the City Film 5: The Magical

Introduction for teachers

This film focuses on the supernatural in fiction. It is asserted that belief in the supernatural is commonplace in Asian cultures, but also that acceptance of the supernatural in fiction might be universal. Participants will consider what is necessary to make the supernatural work successfully in a passage and not just be a gimmick.

Key learning points

- Readers from all cultural backgrounds can suspend their disbelief and accept 'the magical' in fiction
- The unreality of magical elements in a story does not have to lessen the bond between characters and the reader

Background Information

Hungry Ghost Festival: Takes place usually in the month of September. Chinese believe that during this time, the souls of the dead are free to roam the earth as the gates of hell are opened.

Pontianaks : Malay (and Indonesian) vampires, they are women who have died during childbirth, become undead and terrorize villages.

Diwali / Deepavali: A festival in Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism, which takes place in October and November. It involves the lighting of small clay lamps to signify good triumphing over evil.

Activities

Ask participants to share with a partner the special power they would most like to have. They should talk about what the power enables them to do, how it helps them get what they want out of life, and any negative consequences that the power might bring with it, either for themselves or for those around them.

AND / OR

Ask the group whether any participants have had, or know someone who has had, a supernatural experience. Has anyone seen or heard of a ghost? Has anyone contacted a deceased relative? Was the experience scary, exciting or both?

AND / OR

Singapore abounds with ghost stories. If your participants are Singaporeans or Malaysians at least one person should be able to share a story with the group.

Discussion: The Magical in Modern Popular Culture

Present participants with the idea that many modern 'blockbusters' have a magical element. The fact that we are becoming more technological, more secular or more scientific does not seem to be diminishing our interest in or acceptance of the supernatural. Elicit as many examples as participants can think of. (The Matrix series, Heroes, Star Wars, Battlestar Galactica, True Blood, Twilight etc).

Discussion: The Magical in Your Culture

In pairs or in groups, students share ways in which their cultures express a belief in the supernatural. This could be in the form of religious belief, festivals to do with spirits or communication with ancestors, or superstition. Anything which is somehow beyond everyday physical reality. If all participants are from the same culture this might be better done as a whole group. As a teacher be ready to give an example from your culture. If you are from a Western country you could draw from superstitions or modern expressions of spirituality – faith healing, psychics etc.

Further Discussion Questions

The following questions may be used to stimulate discussion before or after participants watch the film. Focus on drawing answers from students and discussing these. It doesn't matter if students don't produce all the answers below - some are discussed by Jeremy and Suchen in the film.

Why are people so ready to suspend their disbelief and accept the supernatural in fiction?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Belief in the supernatural might be instinctive and therefore we are still inclined to it, even with the advent of science and technology.• Magic captures the imagination and excites us in a way that the day to day world cannot.• Many of us are brought up with a religious belief and are therefore 'prepared' to accept things beyond physical reality.
Who or what are participants favourite magical characters or stories? What is it about	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participants own answers.

these characters or stories that is appealing?	
How do you make sure the magical elements in your writing connect with and move the reader and are not just gimmicky?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The magic can be 'outlandish' and extraordinary but the writer should make sure the emotions in the piece are real and the reader can relate to them. • The magic should be revealed carefully within the context of a believable emotional scenario. • Characters' reaction to magic (incredulous? excited?) may help make the appearance of magic more believable.

The Task

Participants write three scenes. In the first a character wishes for, and is granted, a special power. In the second the character uses their power to gain many of the things from life that they want. In the final scene the character begins to suspect there is a 'dark side' to their power.