Halloween is a celebration in which we remember the dead and conjure up spirits, ghosts and other supernatural ephemera. It's also big business. The National Retail Federation estimates Americans will spend a record $10.6 billion for Halloween this year.

But our fascination with the paranormal extends well beyond one day each year.

A major force that attracts people to the supernatural is the search for meaning in a complicated world, says Eddy White, an associate professor of practice in the Department of Public and Applied Humanities. He teaches a course called Weird Stuff: How to Think About the Supernatural, the Paranormal and the Mysterious.

"There seems to be a certain degree of randomness and chaos to the lives we lead, and sometimes people want structure or explanations to human existence," White said. "Paranormal or supernatural phenomena can help provide that meaning."

Much of the meaning we look for has to do with our mortality and what happens after death, which is why people get paid as psychics, fortunetellers and ghost hunters, he says.

That search for meaning goes beyond questions about death. Belief in the paranormal can also provide people with a sense of belonging in a world where we may feel insignificant, he says.

"The world of science makes us feel smaller and smaller as we realize that the universe and the cosmos is much, much larger," White explained. "Science is discovering what is out there, but not our place in it. So people look to other areas where they can find some answers to those questions."

White says a downward trend in Americans participating in organized religion, especially among younger people, is fueling belief in the supernatural.

"For some younger people, organized religions are not appealing or are not able to provide answers that are compelling or make sense to them. So they look for answers elsewhere."

While the search for answers is part of what draws students to his popular course, White says it's also simply fun and fascinating to learn about a variety of beliefs ranging from astrology to Bigfoot. In addition, he says, students leave his class with strengthened critical thinking skills and a deeper appreciation for the mysterious in our human experience.

Fear for fun

Our fascination with the supernatural is not always rooted in deep-seated questions about life and death, says Jerry Hogle, University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English. Hogle, an international authority on Gothic literature, says sometimes it's fun to be frightened. This is why we love ghost stories and horror movies; when we're scared, but aren't actually in danger, our endorphin levels increase.

"We're in a state of heightened awareness, but we know at the same time that we are safe," Hogle said. "We can take pleasure in the endorphins going off like this without actually being threatened."

Gothic stories combine terror and romance and often feature storylines and characters torn between ancient beliefs and modern ideas.

"Frankenstein was a quintessential example of that," Hogle said. "It suggests that, in trying to create life, Frankenstein studies the old alchemists of the Middle Ages, but at the same time he's trying to use modern science."

The genre dates to the 18th century with a story called "The Castle of Otranto" by English writer Horace Walpole. Gothic stories made the jump from literature to the stage to the screen and continue today on just about every media platform, with examples being "Twilight" and "American Horror Story."

Monsters, Hogle says, tend to reflect the fear of things that we want to keep separate being together, like life and death or magic and science. He says those kind of discordant elements also often reflect the historic times during which Gothic stories surged in popularity. "Frankenstein," for example, came out in 1818, shortly after the Napoleonic Wars ended in Europe.

While times change and technology evolves, Hogle says, there are common threads to how these monsters enter our
Author Mary Shelley wrote "Frankenstein" in response to a challenge from the poet Lord Byron during a gathering at his villa in Switzerland in 1816. John Polidori, Byron's personal physician, answered the challenge by penning "The Vampyre."

Nearly 200 years later, in 2009, a challenge posted on the "Something Awful" online forum challenged people to create paranormal images. Forum visitor Eric Knudsen created black-and-white images of children being watched by a spectral figure that he called "The Slender Man." That character has gone on to be featured in video games and a feature film.

The Slender Man harkens back to Frankenstein and vampires by creating an icon that embodies our fear, Hogle says. He adds that it also uses another popular and effective tool of the Gothic story creator: the fear of the unseen.

"There's the implication that something is out there, and the viewer and the characters are invited to project into that otherness all of their fears, and that is terribly effective," Hogle said. "That's why the unseen is so fascinating."

Whether you're looking for your place in an ever-expanding universe or just looking for some frightening fun by simultaneously binging horror movies and fun-size Snickers, Hogle says fear of and fascination with the unknown is a natural human impulse.

White agrees, adding that the internet and social media will continue to provide platforms for content creators, fans, entrepreneurs and others.

Hogle’s recommended "monster" readings and viewings

The items on the list below, curated by Hogle, "show how works involving monsters reflect and symbolize deep-seated fears, conflicts among beliefs and even prejudices – all percolating in the cultural unconscious – at the times of their appearances in the audiences and cultures for which they were produced," he says.

Books

- "The Monster Show," by David J. Skal – One of the very best histories of monster movies up through the 1990s.
- "The Monster Theory Reader," edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock – Major essays on the significance of monsters and the many different kinds of monsters there are in various forms of representation.
- "American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture," by Kyle William Bishop (2010) – The second-most popular monster right now is the zombie, and this book is the best history of this figure, taking it all the way back to early Gothic fiction and to the history of slavery in Africa and the Americas.

Other content

- "Ex Machina," written and directed by Alex Garland – One of the best recent films in the "Frankenstein" tradition that suggests what a monster might be in our era of cybernetics and computer-generated avatars.
- Vampire series – This series shows how a monster story – in this case about vampires, now the most popular monster – can both revise a long tradition and get revised itself over time in ways that suggest changing priorities and undercurrents in Western culture.
  - The original Anna Rice novel "Interview with the Vampire" (1976)
  - The Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt film version adapted and directed by Neil Jordan (1994)
  - The current television series of the same title on AMC (2022), created by Rolin Jones with Anne Rice as an executive producer (now from the grave, appropriately, since she died in December 2021).