

**MODERN FOLK HORROR:  
THE NEW REVIVAL**

Webinar for Writing Magazine

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> April

With Alex Davis

Lecturer – Workshopper – Author -  
Event Organiser

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# MODERN FOLK HORROR: THE NEW REVIVAL

Welcome everyone, and thanks so much for joining me for this session! I'm going to run through a few 'house rules' before we get the ball rolling for the evening...

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# MODERN FOLK HORROR: THE NEW REVIVAL

Mics off generally works better, though  
cameras on or off is up to you

Feel free to pop any questions or thoughts  
in the chat bar throughout – I'll pop a  
quick hello there now!

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# MODERN FOLK HORROR: THE NEW REVIVAL

Be sure your chat messages are set to 'everyone' rather than just me or other people!

Throughout we'll have a mix of discussion points, talks and exercises

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**MODERN FOLK HORROR:  
THE NEW REVIVAL**

We will be recording the session, which is **PURELY** for you as ticketholders and won't be otherwise shared.

**Did anyone have any final questions before I hit record?**

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## DISCUSSION POINT 1

Have a think back about some of the folk horror you've read or watched of late – what for you are some 'modern' examples of the form?

If you're not totally sure it is folk horror then let's discuss that!

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## DISCUSSION POINT 1

Thanks a lot for all those thoughts everyone – I wanted to look at modern folk horror in particular tonight because so often when we think of the term we immediately tend to think of the classics and maybe the ‘unholy trinity’.

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

*As a starting point for us, I wanted to serve up a few examples of classic vs modern folk horror. Has the genre changed fundamentally over the course of time or not?*

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

### **Witchfinder General (1968)**

Rural setting, isolated communities

Historical setting (17<sup>th</sup> c)

Witchcraft and satanism

The evils of humanity

Skewed belief systems

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

### **The Blood on Satan's Claw (1971)**

Rural setting, isolated communities

Historical setting (Medieval)

Satanism and occult beliefs

Strong supernatural elements

Skewed belief systems

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

### The Wicker Man (1973)

Rural setting, isolated communities

Main character as outsider

Strong religious elements

Skewed belief systems

Contemporary setting

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

### Midsommar (2019)

Rural setting, isolated communities

Main character as outsider

Strong religious elements

Skewed belief systems

Contemporary setting

Light rather than dark

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

### **The Ritual (2017)**

Rural setting, isolated communities

Main characters as outsiders

Supernatural elements

Skewed belief systems

Contemporary setting

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

### In The Earth (2021)

Rural setting, isolated communities

Main characters as outsiders

Science vs nature

Skewed belief systems

Contemporary setting

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

So, has much ultimately changed over the course of the last 50-60 years?

I would say some things do remain common while others have changed.

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# THE FOLK HORROR CHAIN

From 'Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange', Adam Scovell

1. Landscape
  2. Isolation
  3. Skewed belief system
  4. Summoning/happening
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## THE FOLK HORROR CHAIN

In terms of serving up a definition of what we mean by folk horror, I think that chain has a validity that we can apply to the work of the 60s and 70s and well as the 2000s and 2010s.

But I would posit that there certainly have been some tweaks to the nature of folk horror as time has gone on.

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

One of the main differences for me is the leaning towards a contemporary setting. While there are some exceptions (Apostle, The Witch), all the movies we looked at today as set in the current era, along with books by authors like Andrew Michael Hurley and Adam Nevill as just a couple of examples.

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

I also feel like the main character as an outsider is something that is far more fixed and rigid within modern folk horror – there is some variation on this theme in classic folk horror, with cases where our protagonist may already be part of an isolated community with those skewed belief systems that we discussed.

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

I would also argue the case that folk horror has become far more international – not just in terms of where it is coming from, but also where British-written books and films are setting their stories. We may think of it as a very British tradition, but that for me is becoming less the case as time goes on.

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

I feel that we could be on the verge of a wave of international folk horror, which may well have a very different feel and concerns to what we have seen in British folk horror. Here's a few I would definitely suggest looking at...

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# CLASSIC VS MODERN

Demon (Poland)

Hagazussa (Germany/Austria)

Impetigore (Indonesia)

La Llorona (Guatemala)

Lamb (Iceland/Sweden/Poland)

Luz: The Flower of Evil (Colombia)

November (Estonia)

The Old Ways (USA)

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

One thing I would also argue is that the size of the casts has often increased, with not just one outsider but often two or more, allowing for folk horror stories to become more character focused and character driven. The relationships between our 'outsiders' often get as much exploration as the outsiders with the community they are entering into.

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## CLASSIC VS MODERN

Given everything I've said, I might even suggest that *The Wicker Man* belongs more in the modern bracket than the other two often listed in the Unholy Trinity. For me if you want an Unholy Trinity the third part of that should be *The Devil Rides Out*.

Any thoughts or questions before we move on?

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

The original wave of folk horror that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s is well acknowledged, but for me we are very much seeing a similar revival in the form through the 2010s and still ongoing.

So here's a discussion point...

**WHY DO WE THINK THIS MIGHT BE THE CASE?**

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## THE NEW REVIVAL

Thanks a lot for those thoughts everyone! It's probably not the easiest of questions, and there's a lot that you could posit. But I would like to spend a little bit of time theorising why folk horror is suddenly back in the spotlight. And in order to do that we might also need to think about some of why the original wave of folk horror emerged too.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 1) Ecological concerns.

Folk horror has often been a genre fixated with nature and the land, and its relationship with humanity – which can often be an antagonistic one. As environmental and ecological concerns rise, it makes sense for folk horror to emerge into the limelight once more.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 1) Ecological concerns.

Folk horror often takes us away from cities and civilisation and takes us to rural settings that are often not familiar to the characters. We may see our protagonists come to peace with the land or come to appreciate what its true value is, potentially abandoning 'the city' entirely.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 1) Ecological concerns.

Equally we may see a sort of ‘eco-revenge’, with the land seeking retribution against humanity and those that would seek to harm it. In both of these ways landscape is a key element not just as a backdrop, but can serve the role of being a key character or plot driver.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 1) Ecological concerns.

We are also seeing the term ‘eco-horror’ in and of itself gaining some traction, and I expect some debate in times to come on how different and how similar this is to folk horror. However the movement may yet be a bit new for firm conclusions there.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

1) Ecological concerns.

Sealed, Naomi Booth

The New Wilderness, Diane Cook

Growth, Jeff Jacobsen

Eden, Tim Lebbon

Annihilation, Jeff Vandermeer

The Beauty, Aliya Whiteley

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 1) Ecological concerns.

Sad to say it's unlikely that these issues are liable to vanish any time soon, and this might potentially lead to more longevity for folk horror as an exciting and prescient medium to explore that particular cultural issue – especially as something that so many younger people are engaged with.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 2) Class and poverty.

One reason posited for the initial wave of folk horror was that Britain was enduring a difficult time, with a lot of austerity and financial trouble. It can be argued that folk horror was a look at what life may have been like away from crowded cities and the urban struggle.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 2) Class and poverty.

Of course we've all lived through the last few years, where COVID has certainly had a heavy economic toll – let alone the many deep impacts it has left – as well as rising prices for food and essentials, more pressure on paying bills, more strikes for fair pay etc.

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## THE NEW REVIVAL

### 2) Class and poverty.

Folk horror definitely has something to say in this debate, and some of this boils down to class. One accusation levelled at folk horror is that it is at its core classist – it depicts sophisticated city-dwellers heading to ‘backwards’ communities with arcane and outdated beliefs.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 2) Class and poverty.

Indeed, while the ‘folk’ in ‘folk horror’ can and does pertain to ‘folklore’, it is also very much folk as in of the ordinary people and the ‘common folk’. You could say the very name of the genre has a class question at its heart.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 2) Class and poverty.

Of late we have seen cities growing increasingly large, more homes and flats being built to pack people into those cities, and all of that against a backdrop of growing inequality and the gulf between the working class, middle class and upper class expanding all the time.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 2) Class and poverty.

This is ultimately the perfect backdrop for folk horror to have a renaissance – you could maybe even see folk horror as the working class or ‘the folk’ lashing out against those ‘sophisticated’ outsiders that would rail against their way of life, or try and smash it aside completely.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 2) Class and poverty.

While these issues remain sadly prevalent in society, there is a good chance that folk horror will be a highly relevant form in which to explore those questions of country vs city and rich vs poor in years to come.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 3) COVID

And while it's not necessarily a nice thing to discuss, an event like the pandemic is bound to leave its psychic imprint on humanity, and also to have its impact on culture and artistic expression.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 3) COVID

If you see some of folk horror as nature lashing out against humanity, or warning the species, COVID or any other pandemic could be presented in that light. It also massively enhanced isolation in society – something which is also a key thread in folk horror and one that is liable to chime with a readership.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 3) COVID

As a final point on this one, for me as someone living in an urban area, during lockdowns there was a definite hankering for the countryside that for me personally did often go unfulfilled. It's possible that this could lead to a desire for more rural stories, which folk horror could absolutely slip into.

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# THE NEW REVIVAL

## 3) COVID

And last but by no means least, COVID did have a role in potentially making cities seem less desirable places to live. That very population and overpopulation we discussed enabled COVID to spread – and again, characters escaping city life is very much a folk horror motif.

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# BREAK

OK then folks, I'm going to suggest that we take a break of about ten minutes there – in the second half we're going to switch gears a little to delve deeper into that country vs city question and get you doing some writing in our main exercise for tonight!

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# WELCOME BACK

Welcome back everyone, and thanks for all your great contributions in the first half of the session! We're going to change tack a little into the second half to consider one more aspect of modern folk horror before moving onto our writing exercise to bring us home for the evening!

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## URBAN FOLK HORROR

I do also feel there is a more significant shift happening, which is maybe more slow and steady, but I'm very drawn to the idea of urban folk horror. When we say folk horror we almost always think right away of forests, fields, rolling hills – but should we be thinking a little differently?

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# URBAN FOLK HORROR

From 'Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange', Adam Scovell

1. Landscape – **there's nothing to say this has to be rural...**
  2. Isolation... **isolation can still happen in urban settings...**
  3. Skewed belief system
  4. Summoning/happening
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# URBAN FOLK HORROR (SPOILERS INCOMING)





# URBAN FOLK HORROR

## ARCHIVE 81

Based on the 2016 podcast and released as a Netflix series in 2020

Dual timeline – modern day story follows Dan, who is hired by an eccentric millionaire to go through VHS footage taken by Melody in the 90s in a mysterious building.

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# URBAN FOLK HORROR

## ARCHIVE 81

There is certainly a splash of analog horror here – something that is a close partner of folk horror – but I would argue this is another great instance of urban folk horror in action.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibxKEqxA\\_RkE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibxKEqxA_RkE)

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# URBAN FOLK HORROR

1. Landscape – Building in the 90s has an uneasy mood, as does the location Dan works
  2. Isolation – Helen is an outsider in the building, Dan is forced to work alone in a remote location
  3. Skewed belief system – Cult beliefs in building, Dan suspects motives of employer
  4. Summoning/happening – Dramatic conclusion to both timelines with supernatural elements
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# URBAN FOLK HORROR

Other examples you might want to consider in this subgenre (or sub-subgenre!) include...

Beasts (Nigel Kneale)

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage

Candyman

Creep

Death Line

Hereditary

The Ghoul

Rosemary's Baby

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# URBAN FOLK HORROR

Are there any final questions at all on this idea of urban folk horror, or anything else related to our look at modern folk horror, before we move on?

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# URBAN FOLK HORROR

I want this to be the basis of our task for today, to see how we can take folk horror out of its traditional rural setting and into a significantly more modern sort of location. This will take up most of the rest of our session today.

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## EXERCISE

As a first step for today, I'd like you to refer to **HANDOUT 1** which you were sent ahead of time. On this sheet you'll find a series of images of places and landscapes – all I want you to do for now is select one.

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## EXERCISE

Take a look at the location and note down ten words that come to mind right away – this'll just serve to get the creativity and ideas flowing!

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## EXERCISE

Next, I want you to think about the people who would live in this area – consider these the ‘folk’ in your text. Consider...

Is the area wealthy or poor?

What are the houses/homes like?

What do people living there do as a job?

Is it family-oriented or more for single people?

It is a safe or dangerous area? What is its reputation?

What sort of amenities does it have? Good or bad?

Are there any stories around the area?

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## EXERCISE

Next up, I want you to think of an outsider to interject into that setting. Consider...

Have they been there before? Could even have been born there...

What are they doing there? What's their purpose/aim?

What makes them an outsider? How are they different?

Do they settle in well or not?

Does their presence there upset people?

Do they hear any stories about the area? If so, what do they make of them?

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## EXERCISE

Next, I want to you to expand from those character ideas to consider the skewed beliefs that might exist in the story. What might the folk be doing that the outsider might encounter, and indeed likely disapprove of?

Consider first the beliefs themselves, and then the values and the behaviour that it might lead to.

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## EXERCISE

And finally, with all of that in place, let's move to the final part of the folk horror chain for a look at the summoning or happening that might occur at the end of the story. Use everything you've just built as inspiration for that.

If anyone does want to share any of the work they have done so far, then do feel free to do so in the chat!

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## EXERCISE

Thanks a lot for taking that on everyone, and I hope that has proved how an urban setting can provide a distinctly more modern setting for your folk horror and give it that more current feel!

Are there any final questions before we draw things to a close?

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## EXERCISE

Thanks so much for joining me tonight – do keep your eyes peeled for an email from Writing Magazine, which will contain a Dropbox link to the recording for this session and numerous other resources that I hope will prove useful going forward!

And here's a few other events I'm involved in soon that might prove of interest...

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# REALMS OF FANTASY

Fantasy Writing Day  
Online

Sat 27th April

[http://tinyurl.com/  
realmsoffantasy3](http://tinyurl.com/realmsoffantasy3)

# ONLINE TERRORS: CREEPYPASTA AND HORROR

**Writing**<sup>MAGAZINE</sup>



Webinar  
for Writing Magazine  
Wednesday 1st May

<https://tinyurl.com/creepypastawebinar>





# SPRING HAUNTS

Horror Writing Weekend

11th–12th May, York

<http://tinyurl.com/springhaunts>

**Writing**<sup>MAGAZINE</sup>