

STORY PROMPT: SCARY STORIES AND 'THE OTHER'



Stories include strangers or 'others' a lot. Sometimes they're nice, and sometimes...not so much.

Good 'others' are characters like ET, the Iron Giant, or even the Christmasaurus. They remind us that getting to know new and different people can be brilliant.

However, 'Otherness' can be used in a different way by writers. Stories with this kind of 'other' aren't about getting to know people.

These 'others' remind readers of ancient fears. Fears of the strange and unfamiliar. That deep, ancient, fear is the perfect emotion for a scary story.

Most stories try to take the reader through an emotional journey, and fear is one of our deepest and oldest emotions. This is why scary stories have so much impact.

Scariest 'others' are characters like Thanos in the Avengers movies. You can also find them in 'The Last Kids on Earth' books. Jack Sullivan and his friends face countless zombies and monsters. Every one of these would count as scary 'others'.

SETTING THE SCENE

Setting up the strangeness of your 'other' is a vital part of any scary story. Here's a fantastic example of setting up 'otherness'.

Before we even meet him, we know a lot about him.

The book he appears in is colourful, ordinary...almost. The first page shows a perfectly ordinary mouse in an ordinary forest. He's a talking mouse, but we're used to that in storybooks.

We meet a fox, an owl, then a snake. All the while the mouse describes another creature. Something completely different from the ordinary animals he meets.

He couldn't possibly be real? He sounds extremely strange, and a little gruesome:

His eyes are orange...his tongue is black...he has purple prickles all over his back...

Then it happens... We join the mouse's confusion. The 'imaginary' creature, the most 'otherly' thing the mouse could think of, is standing in front of him, ready to eat him.



MEETING THE 'OTHER'

Oh, help...oh no... it's the Gruffalo!

Take a second to think about how amazing Axel Scheffler (illustrator of the Gruffalo) is.

Imagine that, instead, Quentin Blake drew him. Blake is also an unbelievably talented illustrator. He illustrated most of Roald Dahl's books, as well as many of David Walliams' books. Often he draws characters far more gruesome than you might imagine.



Think of that 'poisonous wart', those 'terrible teeth', the 'purple prickles', or his 'black tongue'. How would Blake's picture look?

The Gruffalo is deadly. We know that he wants to eat the mouse. In fact, the mouse's cleverness is the only reason he doesn't.

Axel Scheffler still creates a threatening, terrible, creature. Though he makes it into one you can show to a three-year-old. (Axel Scheffler's first Gruffalo was actually 'far too scary'.)

'The Gruffalo' is a wonderful use of 'the other' as something scary. He wants to eat the mouse. He is dangerous. His deadliness is as real as that of any xenomorph in the Alien movies. (By the way, Xenomorph is Greek for 'strange form'. Another way of saying 'other').

Our fear of 'otherness' is ancient, but when it comes to other people there are often more similarities than differences. Human beings aren't often 'other' enough for scary stories.

However, when we imagine something beyond that. Something *totally* alien. You have something that can give people a *real* scare.

YOUR WRITING CHALLENGE

As the nights grow darker, try to imagine an 'other' to tell a story about (or draw a picture of). Experiment with ideas of 'otherness'. Think of how positive it can be, and how negative.

It could be good to take your reader from fear to a sense of comfort. Is your 'other' misunderstood? Could they learn to get along? After all, being 'other' and being 'special' are very similar.

Instead, you may want to embrace the scariness of your story. The thing you are imagining may be too different by far for anything good to happen.

I hope you have enjoyed this writing prompt and I look forward to you sharing your creations. All the best, John

