

Don't go into the woods – forests and the psychology of fear

[Business](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of my heroes, Stephen King, said it best: " We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.

" Horror has been recognized as a genre only in fairly recent history, but scary stories have been around at least since the advent of the written word. I came in on the action when I was a small child. My mother raised me on black-and-white horror movies. I have been in love with fear ever since. I started writing my own horror in high school, which is when I began to take an interest in the psychology of fear. Why do some elements continue to recur in a genre that is hundreds or thousands of years old? Why are certain things so scary that they are still spooking audiences today? In 2011, a film called *The Cabin in the Woods* hit theaters, both mocking and putting a new spin on the now cliché idea of a group of young people meeting a gruesome end in a quaint forest vacation cabin.

It followed in a long tradition of forest-based horror that has been touched on by such diverse parties as Bram Stoker, Sam Raimi, and two brothers named Grimm. What is it about a bunch of trees that makes a story frightening? When our protagonists go into the woods, why do we expect bad things to happen to them? I'm going to talk about two major reasons why this is so; namely, that we fear what lives in the forest and the chaos and primeval darkness that the woods represent. It isn't hard to understand why early humans would be afraid of what lived among the trees. Predators and criminals were quite real, and the forests were where they struck. Today, however, most people in our society don't venture into the depths of the dangerous wood with any regularity. The staying power of the forest in

horror is less about wolves and tigers and bears than it is about demons and witches.

Since the dawn of time, people have been afraid of what they don't know. The monster you know haunts your dreams far less than the monster that might be. What might be under the bed? On another planet? In the forest? The Cabin in the Woods features a whole host of the monsters that people have believed may populate the uninhabited wilderness, including werewolves, zombies, malevolent ghosts, and giant man-eating snakes. It isn't just monsters that people are afraid of, either. In his book *Rural Gothic*, Bernice M.

Murphy devotes an entire chapter to the way that self-styled "civilized" people regard the backwoods folk. Murphy details the trope in which redneck hillbillies are portrayed in horror as backwards, perverted, homicidal, and often cannibalistic. In a society that has become mostly urban and suburban, anyone who lives in the wilderness is looked down upon with disgust and at least a hint of fear. Urbanites don't understand the culture of the rural poor. They are a marginalized group, and humans are always quick to demonize those who are "other" to their own social circles.

Forests are becoming few and far between. Many of the large predators are also disappearing, and criminals don't frequent the wilds nearly as often. However, even in our cozy living rooms we are still a little afraid that the forest is out to get us. Supernatural forces and clans of psychopaths manifest this sense of unease, but it might go even deeper. In an article in *The Guardian* titled "The forest: from fairytales to horror films," Professor <https://assignbuster.com/dont-go-into-the-woods-forests-and-the-psychology-of-fear/>

Peter Hutchings is quoted as saying that “ the forest is often used as a source of threat in our culture [because it] represents an older, pre-modern world that we have pushed aside, but which will now come back to endanger our protagonist.” That dark, powerful world in which humankind evolved is easy to ignore during our everyday lives, but it comes back to haunt us in our more vulnerable moments.

We can't help wondering if there is still something out there in the night that we should be afraid of. There is perhaps an even deeper layer of fear underlying the cabin-in-the-woods horror cliché. It is the fear that, abandoned in a savage environment, we might lose who we are and become something else. Folklore tells us that the forest is where men became wolves and witches traded their souls for power. Will we be similarly transformed? It starts small.

The sun goes down. Maybe you lose a shoe. The flashlight battery dies, and then your phone. You lose your bearings, and then your companions. Hutchings calls it “ a landscape of increasing disorientation.” Once the panic and the confusion get inside your head, then the real horror begins.

Whatever the adversary that a character faces in the forest, there is really only one question: how far will they go? In *Cabin in the Woods*, Marty hacks a zombie to pieces with a trowel. In *Evil Dead 2*, Ash is forced to cut off his own hand with a chainsaw. Obviously, dismemberment is a common element, along with murder and cannibalism. Real life examples of the lengths people can go to are not hard to find, either. Murphy specifically references the

Donner party, whose desperate wilderness ordeal may have helped spawn the cannibalism theme.

When you get lost in the woods, whether your enemy is natural or unnatural, it changes you. The scariest part is the thought that the forest—or any conceivable sort of wilderness, for that matter—isn't forcing you to become something you're not. It is just bringing out what already lay dormant inside you. Horror stories, written or in film, have the potential to tell us more about ourselves than we are willing to accept. Even the most mindless of slasher films has something to say about what scares the human animal, and why. We make up horrors to help us cope with what really frightens us. Forests have featured in scary tales for untold generations, and that can't be mere coincidence. The deep, dark wood can terrify us because we are afraid of the unknown monsters, magical or human, that lurk within, and because we are afraid of the monster that lurks within each of us, waiting for the chance to come out. So take the advice of a half-century of horror movies, and don't go into the woods, no matter how good the deal is on that cabin.