

Reading skills practice: The history of zombies – exercises

Zombies are big news at the moment, but do you know how it all started? Read this to find out where zombie mania comes from.

Preparation

Write the sentences in the correct group.

a. They change from human to beast when there is a full moon.	b. You can kill them by putting a stake through the heart.	c. Their brains don't work properly and their bodies are decomposing.	d. They eat human flesh.
e. They sleep in coffins.	f. They drink human blood.	g. They are hairy, with sharp teeth and long claws.	h. You can kill them by cutting off the head and destroying the brain.

Zombies	Werewolves	Vampires

THE HISTORY OF ZOMBIES

Zombies are everywhere these days – on television, in movies and in books. The current image of the terrifying flesh-eating zombie comes from George Romero's 1968 classic film *Night of the Living Dead*. Nowadays many people like to frighten themselves with the idea of the 'Zombie Apocalypse', and enjoy learning how to destroy zombies by decapitation or shooting them in the head.

However zombies are not new. The term, from the Kongo word *nzambi* which means 'spirit of a dead person', has been long associated with the Vodou religion of Haiti (popularly known as Voodoo). As with West African Vodun, from which it is descended, Vodou has strong ties to the supernatural and magic practised by witch doctors called *bokors*.

In Haitian culture zombies are not evil creatures but victims. They are said to be people who have been killed by poisoning, then reanimated and controlled by *bokors* with magic potions for some specific purpose, usually to work as slave labour. The *bokors* were widely feared and respected. It is said that they used to be in the service of the secret police and those who defied the authorities were threatened with being turned into the living dead.

For a long time most people assumed that zombies were nothing more than mythical figures, like werewolves and vampires. However this changed in the 1980s when a man called Clairvius Narcisse claimed that he had been turned into a zombie by means of drugs and forced to work on a sugar plantation for two years before escaping. Wade Davis, a Harvard scientist, investigated the claim and obtained something called 'zombie powder' from Haitian *bokors*. The main active ingredient was a neurotoxin found in puffer fish which could be used to simulate death. The *bokors* also explained to Davis that a second poison, made from the *datura* plant, known as the zombie cucumber, was given to victims after they were revived from their death-like state. This kept the 'zombies' in a submissive state so that it was easy to force them to work. Davis wrote several books on the topic, including *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, later made into a horror film by director Wes Craven.

Although the book was very popular with the public, some scientists were sceptical of Davis's claims. They said the amounts of toxin in the powder samples he found were inconsistent and not high enough to produce zombifying effects. Although many people in Haiti still believe in zombies, there have been no publicised cases in the last few decades and Davis's theory remains controversial. The Zombie Apocalypse seems unlikely to take place soon.



1. Check your understanding: multiple choice

Circle the best option to complete these sentences.

1. According to the text ...
 - a. zombies are represented in different ways in different TV programmes, films and books.
 - b. our current understanding of what a zombie is comes from a seminal sixties film.
 - c. people do not find zombies as frightening now as they did in the past.
 - d. people like zombies because they show us the dark side of humankind.

2. 'Zombie' ...
 - a. is a Haitian and West African religion.
 - b. is a witch doctor who practises magic.
 - c. comes from the Kongo word 'nzambi'.
 - d. means 'victim'.

3. In Haitian culture, zombies are ...
 - a. living people who are kept in a death-like state by poisoning.
 - b. dead people who have been brought back to life by poisoning.
 - c. people who are being punished for disloyalty to the secret police.
 - d. witch doctors who have poisoned themselves with their own medicine.

4. Clairvius Narcisse ...
 - a. claimed he was a real-life zombie.
 - b. said working on a sugar plantation turned people into zombies.
 - c. took 'zombie powder' to appear dead in order to escape the plantation where he worked.
 - d. told a Harvard scientist that he knew how to turn people into zombies.

5. Wade Davis ...
 - a. identified the poisons in Clairvius Narcisse's blood.
 - b. experimented with different substances naturally available where Clairvius Narcisse lived.
 - c. thought Clairvius Narcisse's condition was psychological.
 - d. asked local witch doctors how to make a zombie.

6. *The Serpent and the Rainbow* ...
 - a. proved Narcisse's theory with rigorous scientific evidence.
 - b. presented the case with scepticism.
 - c. was popular with zombie fans but not scientists.
 - d. was a fictional account based on the real-life story.

2. Check your vocabulary: gap fill

Complete the gaps with a word from the box.

widely	controversial	mythical	sceptical
evil	horror	submissive	inconsistent

- In Haitian culture, zombies are victims, rather than _____ (*morally bad or wrong*) creatures.
- In Haiti, the 'bokors' were _____ (*by a large number of people*) feared and respected.
- Many people think that zombies are _____ (*based on a traditional or legendary story*) creatures, like vampires or werewolves.
- The 'bokors' told Wade Davis that poison was used to keep the 'zombies' in a (*obedient and unresisting*) _____ state.
- The Serpent and the Rainbow* was made into a _____ (*a genre made to cause fear in the audience*) film.
- Some scientists were _____ (*not convinced*) about Davis's claims.
- They said the amounts of toxin in the powder sample were _____ (*not always the same*) and not enough to cause zombifying effects.
- Many people still believe in zombies in Haiti, but Davis's theory remains _____ (*causing public disagreement*).

Discussion

Are you a zombie fan?

Why do you think people like frightening themselves with zombies so much?

Vocabulary Box

Write any new words you have learnt in this lesson.