

Memoirs of a Halloween Enthusiast

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Halloween is growing in popularity in the United Kingdom. This is a personal reflection on the importance of Halloween as a tradition on both an individual and community level, based on memories of Halloween from childhood into adulthood. It proposes that in popular culture Halloween can be read as increasingly removed from the religious or the spiritual. On an individual basis that can be experienced as a secular ritual centred around performance, dress up and adopted alternative personas.

Key Words: Halloween; tradition; childhood; memories; imagination

My first memories of Halloween are not my own. They are taken from *Eerie Indiana* (1991-93), *Hocus Pocus* (1993) and other American imports, with a pinch of the animation that accompanied Modest Mussorgsky's 'St John's Night on Bald Mountain' (1867) in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940). (I am aware that St John's Eve is in June, but my younger self did not have Google). Growing up first in Kenya, then Jordan, before moving back to the United Kingdom before I had started school, I am not sure I had a clear sense of my cultural identity. For a child who vividly remembers visiting the tomb where John the Baptist was beheaded, and the guide describing the gush of gore across the walls and floor, Halloween seemed like a good tradition on which to hang my pointed hat, or devil's horns. Alongside this, I was brought up atheist, so standard festivities were not imbued with faith. I quickly grew out of Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy, though I played along for my younger sister.

Where an element of belief seemed integral to many of my childhood traditions, either of a deity or a supernatural entity, Halloween seemed to be about make-believe and performance. It was fancy dress, face paint, glamour: houses and themed parties lit like a stage, where the shadows they created added to the make-believe atmosphere. The Halloween I saw on the screen made it clear that those who partook did not truly believe in vampires, and witches, and werewolves. The revellers might have been connecting with earlier folklore and myth, but it was at a remove; the pleasure coming from being someone else for a night, a darker and/or better version of yourself. Even when the narrative lapsed into actual instances of the supernatural, notably in *Hocus Pocus*, I still knew that witches were not real - much as I wanted them to be. Despite not believing, I was a child who took the ritual of dressing up very seriously.

I never wanted to be a princess. Halloween was the perfect outlet for this. The appeal of Disney was in the bad guys – Ursula, the Wicked Queen and, beyond compare, Maleficent. On a family holiday in Wales, I met a girl who had been to the Disney shop and bought the official fancy dress. My first question was if they stocked Maleficent's outfit. They did not. Disappointed, I asked to see my new friend's Jasmine costume. Lovely as I thought she looked, I complained to my mum later that the quality was shocking – nylon and polyester? Where was the silk, the satin, the velvet? What was the point of dressing up if you could not get as close to the real thing as possible? The verisimilitude disintegrated up close, the illusion broken. The spell of Halloween demanded commitment and attention to detail. And I was committed. Cheap plastic fangs appeased me for one year only, before I realised that individual ones gave a far better effect. My capes were velvet. My dresses lace. I was not to be fobbed off with cheap face paint, squeezed into paper wrapped tubes, that was offered to children at fancy dress shops. Later, my mum started face painting, and she took me to a professional theatrical make-up shop to buy supplies. Here I learnt how to apply the pale glow of the vampire without looking chalky and caked-on. (Years before the Cullens taught us to sparkle [Spooner, 2013, pp. 146-64].)

Unfortunately, rural Lincolnshire in the nineties was not the destination for trick-or-treating. The knocks at the door were few and far between, and the container of sweets I insisted my parents kept in the porch were mainly eaten by my sister and me. During primary school, I persuaded my best friend and her brother to dress up and join in. After dark, we walked around our town, knocking on doors where we were met with confusion, grumpiness and the odd beneficence of candy. As an adult, I'm more sympathetic to not wanting strange children banging on my door, but at the time I was disappointed that people would not play along. In my mind, I overlaid the scene with a fantastical version of the streets I walked - here every house had a shining pumpkin-beacon outside, and lawns were littered with fake gravestones; ghosts hung from the trees and cobwebs entwined the bushes. My friends in the USA and Australia still send me pictures of the decorations around their community.

Even at a young age, I sensed that the resistance to Halloween practices such as trick-or-treating were due to the perception that they were American imports and watered down British cultural practices. More recently, there seems to be a growing sense that Halloween, or Samhain or All Hallows' Eve, is a practice that is making an uncanny return – or perhaps revival – to British Shores. There are multiple articles on academic and popular news sites that trace the history of both the celebration itself and the traditions

associated with it.¹ I am conscious that for many people Halloween has a significant religious or spiritual element. However, my engagement with Halloween does not exist in the religious or research paradigm. Instead, it lies with the modern, lived experience of this tradition – the thing I do. Although the pictures of carved turnips are far creepier than vibrant pumpkin, I prefer not to look too closely in case the whole conceit falls apart; I leave my academic robes at the door in preference for a satin cape. I tend to believe, from an unscholarly position, that rituals are kept alive through action. Debating historical semantics or the writings of the Venerable Bede gets in the way of applying eyeliner and mixing a suitably themed drink. As a literature scholar, fictional narratives appeal and if the storyline is compelling, I am happy to play along. Though I admit I remain a purist in one area only: for all the wonderful things that American Halloween has spawned, I believe that Halloween fancy dress must be spooky – superheroes are not suitable Halloween costumes, except for Batman and Catwoman (the Michelle Pfeiffer version). Traditions, it appears, makes pedants of us all.

From thwarted childhood spookiness, my university experience allowed my love of Halloween to flourish on multiple levels. In the early noughties, university students revelled in a chance to dress up and get drunk. Here also, my annual tradition could translate into my research. From BA to doctorate research, monsters crawled from my computer screen in the essays I typed. Years, and a few depressive episodes later, my therapist asked me why I was interested in vampires, werewolves and other monsters. I had given this a lot of thought. As someone who still has a childlike idealism, being good and kind matters to me. Monsters were a way of exploring what evil means without the jarring presence of reality. Just as evil spirits, devils and demons reinforce the morality and goodness of religious faith, creatures of the night gave me a blueprint of what not to be. However, since I did not believe in them, I could more easily explore and dismiss the out-of-date morality that surrounded them. Historical anxieties surrounding sexuality could be identified, contextualised and rejected.

At the same time, there was a vicarious thrill in reading about monstrous acts committed without guilt. Halloween is a time to play with this possibility. For one night a year, I can imagine what it would be like to embrace darkness. To not give a damn, and robe myself with the carefree cool that it brings – a modern-day Bacchanalia with a dollop of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. And in the morning, I can wipe away the fake blood and know that none of it was real. As I've got older, and my celebrations more muted, Halloween offers other ways to play against type and enjoy myself guilt-free. I am, in

¹ The popularity can be seen through a quick glance at *The Conversation* where academia and journalism come together. Articles range from those looking at 'How was Halloween invented?' (Owens, 2022) to wondering about the copyright implications of dressing up as your favourite character (Potter, 2023).

general, a millennial mother against plastic. But as spooky season approaches, like a child, I am entranced by the decorations offered even though I know they'll only be seen for less than a month and many will end up in the bin. A small rebellion against decency and decorum it may be, but I am a middle-class, nearly middle-aged suburbanite far removed from the decadence of youth. (This is the one time of the year where I will not be drawn into discussions about consumerism and capitalism. My love for this season is too visceral and vulnerable; I'm scared the magic will be stripped away).

The Halloweens of my twenties and early thirties were more easily filled with spooktacular fun. In the background I heard the murmurs of bubbling enthusiasm. Beyond myself, new traditions were (re)formed and (re)created. I started a family and bought a Dracula-themed counting book. My twin sons are four years old now. They know that monsters are not real, but they also know it is fun to pretend. They like the bad guys, and their bookshelf is lined with stories of bats, vampires, werewolves, and ghosts. From the 1st of October to 31st December, they can watch *A Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) every day. This year, I might even show them *The Addams Family* (1991). Since they've been born, I have been able to relive the Halloween of my childhood, but this time I am not alone. My children are caught up in the magic, and for all of us, it is reflected in the shop window dressings, and the overflowing containers of pumpkins in the supermarket, and the cornucopia of ghostly activities taking place throughout October. It seems the spirit of Halloween has returned from the dead.

Last year, on the way to nursery, we counted pumpkins outside houses and watched as oversized spiders crawled up houses alongside ghostly window decorations. On the night itself, my partner was put on trick-or-treater duty, handing out candy in my mini cauldron. The twins and I donned our outfits and ventured into the night. It was the first time they had been old enough to trick-or-treat, and the first time I had done so since being a child. I steeled myself for childhood disappointment. Instead, around a corner, near the park, were streets filled with witches, pumpkins, fairies and myriad supernatural beings. Candles and twinkling lights beckoned us to doorways where our cries of 'Trick or Treat?' were greeted with enthusiasm and, most importantly, sweeties. The adults smiled and chatted and agreed what fun this had been, and how nice it was to see the children having a lovely time. But, if you will allow my imagination to wander, I think I saw just as much joy in their eyes. And for me, overreaction it may be, but oh! I was a child again. Bad memories exorcised as I delighted in sharing a ritual I love with so many other people. The magic of tradition is amplified in community. Buckets overflowing with treats, we returned to find the cauldron in our house was empty. Even Lincolnshire has embraced this tradition with giant inflatable monsters decorating the cathedral city of Lincoln (Coyle, 2023). I don't believe in the supernatural, but I do believe in the

enchantment of fancy dress, face paint and glamour, the closest thing to fey magic. And if you believe hard enough, perhaps dreams – or should that be nightmares – really do come true.

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