



THE CRYPTID FILES: MEXICAN DEVIL **BY JEAN FLITCROFT**

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Cryptid Files: Mexican Devil is an adventure story in which a young teenager, Vanessa Day, on holiday on a ranch in Mexico with her friend Nikki, comes up against a bizarre and mythical-sounding creature called the Chupacabra. Although the creature is unknown to Vanessa, she finds that others do believe in it, and she even discovers that her mother had a cryptid file on it. Vanessa has a particular interest in cryptozoology (the study of apparently mythical creatures that may turn out to be real), because her mother, who has died, was herself a cryptozoologist. In a previous book, called *Loch Ness*, she has already investigated the mystery of the Loch Ness monster.

Vanessa's visit to a ranch in rural Mexico proves to be full of strange new experiences. From the outset, Vanessa finds Frida, Nikki's aunt, very distant, but Nikki's cousin, Carmen, is friendly, and Carmen's brother Armado is handsome and ... well, interesting. Vanessa quickly makes friends with the family's cook, Izel, a motherly woman with a sense of fun. But Izel is also a Nahuatl: one of three million people in Mexico with their own language and who are direct descendants of the Aztecs, with strong spiritual beliefs. The Nahuatl have an unspoken fear of *naguals* – people who can transform into animals in order to do mischief.

So why is it that as soon as Vanessa arrives, odd things start to happen on the ranch? Vanessa begins to find the atmosphere increasingly oppressive. There is something very suspicious about one of the ranch hands and even the family dog, Xolo, is behaving strangely. Is the ranch really cursed? Has it something to do with the fact that the local shaman is missing? Then farm animals start to be attacked in the night, and Vanessa herself has a bloody encounter with something in the dark. Could it be the Chupacabra, a bloodsucking, dog-like cryptid? Or a *nagual*? Vanessa has to find out ...

Although this is a fictional story about Vanessa and her friends, the book is infused with non-fictional elements. At the start of each chapter is a fact about people's experiences of or beliefs about the Chupacabra. This creature is not well known in Europe, but has quite widespread belief in Mexico and other Latin American cultures. This is particularly relevant to those cultures, such as the Aztecs, where blood-sucking rituals were common. And it is fascinating that the reverberation of these myths still echo through modern-day Mexico.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean Flitcroft is a scientist by training (she has a doctorate in physiology from Oxford University), a travel writer for the magazine *International Living* and the author of the Cryptid Files series, which consists of three titles: *Loch Ness*, *Mexican Devil* and *Pacific Giants*. She lives near Dublin with her husband and sons.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The word *cryptid* comes from the Greek word for 'hidden' and refers to animals that have documented sightings but have not been proven to be real. The most famous of them all is the Loch Ness monster, but the Chupacabra is also well known in the Americas.

Cryptozoology is the study of these animals. Many are based on mythological creatures and have some deep cultural significance to the people of whatever country they are found in. The modern myth of the Chupacabra, is likely to have its roots deep in the blood-sucking practices of the Aztecs. The word 'Chupacabra' means 'goat-sucker'.

TEACHERS' NOTES

Cryptids live in that glorious space between fact and fiction and make an ideal core concept for the exploration of a variety of themes in this book.

Some ideas are given here for themes you might like to think over and explore with your class as they read the novel or after they have read it.

MEXICO: GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, CULTURE

This book is set in Mexico, a part of the world the children will probably know about, but most of them won't have visited it. Maybe before you read the book at all, it would be good to get them to find out a bit about Mexico. If you are lucky enough to have a Mexican child in the class, ask him or her to give a little presentation.

The questions in the sections on Mexico below, and in the section on shrunken heads, can be put to the children for them to research:

Explore modern Mexico

- What continent is Mexico in? (Careful!) Find it on a map of the world. What are the neighbouring countries?
- What is the capital? How many people live there?
- What is the currency? What is it worth?
- What is the main language spoken in Mexico?
- Can you find out about any other languages spoken there?
- Is Mexico any good at football? Prove it!
- Mexican food is quite popular in other parts of the world. Can you name a kind of Mexican food? Maybe you could find a recipe for it.
- Can you find out anything about Mexican music?

As you read the book, note anything it tells you about Mexico. When you get to the end of it, check how many things you learnt about Mexico as you went along.

Explore Mexico's past

Izel is from the Nahuatl tribe. Who are they? How do they relate to the Aztecs?

You can find Nahuatl dictionaries on the web e.g
<http://whp.uoregon.edu/dictionaries/nahuatl/> or
<http://www2.potsdam.edu/schwaljf/Nahuatl/eng-nah.htm>

Make a list of words you like, look them up and see if you can even pronounce them!

It is well known that chocolate came from Mexico, but did you know that the word comes from a Nahuatl word – *xocolatl* – which means 'bitter water'? Follow the evolution of chocolate from

Mexico 1000 BC, where it was a bitter drink used in sacred ceremonies and sacrificial rituals, to 19th century Britain and John Cadbury, who developed a way of emulsifying it into a solid and created the modern chocolate bar.

Xolo is the name of the dog in this book, but the xolo dog is actually a rare breed of hairless Mexican dog that the Aztecs thought to have special spiritual abilities. These dogs are still considered by some to have curative powers, removing aches and pains and protecting from ill-health. What breed of dog do you like and what powers would you give it if you could?

Aztecs were very interested in games. Find out more about their favourite ball game, Ullamalitzli (Mexicans still play a form of it called ulama) and their board game, Patolli. See if you can work out the rules and play it. Can you devise a new board game for yourself and your classmates to play?

SHRUNKEN HEADS

When you read the book you will discover that Vanessa always travels with a shrunken head which she found in the attic along with her mother's cryptid files. It belonged to her grandfather Todd.

Have you ever seen a real shrunken head in Ripley's Museum? Find out all you can about the Jivaro – the tribe in the jungles of Ecuador who were head-shrinkers. How did they do it? What were their beliefs?

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Myths and legends are a kind of 'cultural memory' of a people. Many legends have some basis in fact, which gives rise to questions about the nature of truth, knowledge or understanding. Myths and legends vary around the world and yet often have common themes, which make their way into children's literature – sea serpents (Jules Verne's adventure stories), hairy hominids (*Five Children and It* by E Nesbit), flying dinosaurs or dragons (the Harry Potter books).

Ask the children if they believe in **vampire bats**. Most will think they are fictitious, and it makes for an interesting exploration of real animals versus mythical ones. How does the existence of the vampire bats colour the idea of Chupacabra?

Some facts about vampire bats:

- Vampire bats are the only mammals that survive by drinking blood.
- They make puncture wounds on an animal such as a cow and lap the blood.
- They have a huge wingspan compared to their tiny bodies because they drink so much blood: they need the large wings to take off after feeding.
- There are three species of vampire bat all native to Central and Southern America.

SPOT THE CHUPACABRA

The Chupacabra features in lots of books, TV programmes (for example *Scooby-Doo*) and lots of films. Ask the children if they have heard about the Chupacabra before.

HOW MANY MONSTERS?

You could ask your class to identify other monsters from books that they know. Pool your information and see how a long a list you can make as a group.

Research and creative work: Ask the children if they can name (or find out about) a strange creature from Irish mythology. (In Irish stories, animals are often people in disguise, not unlike the *naguals* for the Nahuatl and shape-shifters in Native American Indian stories. You can find lots of Irish myths online, or check out a book such as *Spellbound* by Siobhán Parkinson and Olwyn Whelan (which has some great pictures of strange animals).

Ask them to write a paragraph about their chosen creature, or to make a picture of the beast. The children could also make their own story featuring the creature.

MAGIC AND BELIEFS

Vanessa, the heroine of this book, has a kind of sixth sense. She tends to ‘see’ things that may not really be there – or are they? Ask the children to find two or three examples of this in the story. Is there anyone else in the story that has this kind of gift? How do they know?

Class discussion and creativity

Read with the class the chapter where the children visit the museum and Vanessa has a strange experience. This is a real museum in Guanajuato in Mexico where the bodies in the ground were found to be naturally preserved mummies. Nobody knows exactly why. Discuss the possibilities.

Have the children heard of Shamans and witch doctors? How do they fit in with our beliefs compared to other countries around the world?

Do the children know any stories from their own locality about people who can ‘see’ things – people who can tell fortunes or see ghosts or whose dreams come true?

Discuss with the class whether or not these stories could be true or partly true. How do we know what is real and what is imaginary anyway?

The children could write a short story about a person who has this kind of psychic gift. The story could explore the idea whether they ‘really’ see things or have they got an over-active imagination.

SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

Scientists need to keep an open mind about things. Most scientific discovery started out as unbelievable ideas: in the days before the advent of flight, for example, the Wright brothers had

the faith that it could be done, even though it seemed impossible. Copernicus was ridiculed for claiming that the earth rotates around the sun.

Research task

Ask the children to find out about Copernicus or about the Wright brothers, concentrating especially on what people thought about them *before* they were proved right.

BELIEF VERSUS FACTS

This book is useful as a way into thinking about the nature of belief and how belief differs from scientific evidence. Discuss how beliefs differ depending on where you are born and how you are raised and educated.

Thinking and discussing

If you have a copy of *The Cryptid Files: Loch Ness*, the class could do a comparison of the evidence for existence of the Loch Ness monster and that for the Chupacabra, as it is represented in these two books. Which of these mysterious creatures does the class think is more likely to really exist?

WRITING

The following questions and exercises can be put to the class:

Prologue

Discuss the use of the prologue in this book. Why do you think the author put this piece from later in the story at the beginning?

Does it affect you as a reader?

Does it make you want to read more?

Which other short extract from the book do you think would work well as a prologue?

In this book the prologue is really an extract taken from later in the book and used as a kind of introduction. Have you ever read a book with a different kind of prologue? Can you describe it? Can you think of another way of using a prologue?

Discussion: How does fiction work?

Discuss the difference between fact and fiction.

How do you know if a book is factual or is 'just a story'? What kind of hints do you get from the cover, for example?

If you know a book is fiction (a made-up story), do you read it in a different frame of mind from when you read a book you know is full of facts (like a school book or an encyclopedia)?

Writing task

Suppose you wanted to write a story about some mythical person or beast or place. How can you make your readers 'believe' it, even though it is just a story?

Try writing a paragraph about a non-existent place or person, describing it as if it really existed. Could you use this paragraph in a story? If so, how would you use it? If not, why do you think it wouldn't work in a story? Is there anything you could do to change it so that it was believable?

Now try to build that paragraph into a whole story. You could do this as a group with some of your classmates. Talk about it first and work the story out, then get one person to write it down. (If you can do it on a computer, that's best, because then you can make changes very easily.) Then read it back and see how you can improve it. (This is how real writers work. They write, they read, they rewrite, they get it right!)

FRIDA KAHLO

When the author Jean Flitcroft went to Mexico to research her book, she came upon the work of the famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and found her life and paintings inspiring. As a result, she decided to call the main adult character in this story Frida and to make her an artist. The character in this story is not, of course, meant to be the real Frida Kahlo, who had a very different life.

Online quiz

With your class, research Kahlo and her work, and then have them take this online quiz and see how well they do. <http://www.funtrivia.com/playquiz/quiz2335471abd830.html>

Study Frida Kahlo's art

Choose one of Kahlo's pictures and note her sometimes odd use of plants, animals, fruit, masks, pottery and jewellery etc. Then discuss these questions:

- What does this painting tell you about Frida Kahlo?
- What does this painting tell you about Mexico?
- What is most interesting to you about the picture?
- What questions would you ask Frida if you could discuss this painting with her?
- What other questions would you ask Frida about her artwork in general?

Art activity

Get the children in your class to take on the artist's role. Think about your immediate world – your culture, heritage, where you live, how you dress, holidays you celebrate – and make a list of things that are most important to you from this immediate world – pets, clothes, favourite food etc. From this create a visual scene in your head and then either write about it or, better still, paint it!