How the Heartland Inspires Coonrod's Teaching and Research

Coonrod engages with students in his speech course.

When Dr. Joshua Coonrod walks into a classroom at Missouri S&T, he has more than a lesson plan. He brings a curiosity about how people communicate, a love of writing that began in his hometown of Rolla, and an interest in research for horror films that stretches from low-budget festivals in Indiana to broader cultural debates about the Midwest itself.

Now in his second year as an assistant teaching professor of English and technical communication, Coonrod teaches a range of courses, including composition, public speaking, and occasionally horror literature and film. He sees each course as an opportunity to encourage and show students how to think critically, not just about the subject at hand, but about the broader questions underlying it.

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"The main thing I want students to take away is to be contemplative," Coonrod says. "Whether it's a speech, a research paper, or even a horror movie, I want them to ask: Why this? What does it mean? Where does the information come from?"

Coonrod grew up in Rolla and always gravitated toward writing. He recalls filling his time by reading journals and stories, even when there weren't many outlets for young writers in a small town. "Whenever I got the chance to visit St. Louis or another city, I'd immediately want to stop at a bookstore," he says. "Writing was both something I enjoyed and something that helped me imagine larger worlds beyond my own."

That early love of writing led him to journalism, with stops at the *Rolla Daily News* and the *Columbia Missourian*. He quickly realized the newsroom wasn't the best fit for him. The fast pace and rigid style limited the kind of exploration he wanted to do with ideas. Graduate school in English and communication opened new doors, allowing him to connect writing with cultural analysis, and eventually, with horror films.

At Missouri S&T, Coonrod has adapted his teaching style to students who arrive with varying levels of enthusiasm for public speaking and writing. His strategy? Passion and practice.

“I tell students to find the topic they can’t stop talking about,” he explains. “If you’re excited about it, your audience probably will be, too. And then it’s just about repetition, getting up there enough times until it feels natural.”

Even in his horror classes, Coonrod connects storytelling to structure, encouraging students to see the overlap between writing an essay and analyzing a film. “I’m a structural guy,” he admits. “Even when we’re talking about Frankenstein or slasher films, I want students to make clear points that connect to a larger argument. It’s the same skill you need in a composition course.”

Coonrod’s research focuses on the cultural role of horror, particularly in independent filmmaking. While completing his Ph.D. at Indiana University, he immersed himself in a local horror film festival in which small-budget filmmakers screened movies made with little more than personal savings and creativity.

“These weren’t Hollywood blockbusters,” he says. “They were films made for $10,000, distributed on DVDs at convention or mailed to festivals in Germany or Australia. Sometimes they even get banned overseas. I was fascinated by how these communities worked, people making movies because they loved horror, not because it was profitable.”

Lately, he has turned his attention closer to home, studying how the Midwest is represented in horror. From the eerie farmhouses of *Children of the Corn* to the isolated small towns of *Clown in a Cornfield*, the “Heartland” often becomes shorthand for vulnerability, emptiness, or menace.

“As someone from Rolla, I find it interesting to see how horror depicts the Midwest,” Coonrod notes. “Sometimes it looks like fields and dirt roads, sometimes like burned-out towns. But of course, the Midwest also has cities like Chicago or St. Louis. I want to explore what it means when horror reduces it to just one version of itself.”

Whether he’s in the classroom coaching students through their first speech or at a conference presenting on horror fandoms, Coonrod sees communication as the thread tying it all together. Stories, whether spoken, written, or filmed, help people make sense of themselves and their communities.

And for Coonrod, Missouri S&T is an ideal place to continue asking those questions. “I’ve taught at other universities, but here I see students who are eager to engage once they realize they can bring their own interests into the work,” he says. “That’s what excites me, the moment when they realize their voice matters, whether they’re writing an essay, giving a speech, or just figuring out why we keep coming back to Frankenstein.”