



Journeys in Film™  
a project of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center



## Discussion Guide





## About the Film

An American family relocates to a small town in Colombia and finds themselves haunted by an ancient mystery in *Out of the Dark*, a disturbing and enthralling supernatural thriller from the producers of *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Impossible*.

Sarah Harriman (Julia Stiles), her husband, Paul (Scott Speedman), and their six-year-old daughter, Hannah (Pixie Davies), arrive in Colombia eager and excited to start a new life, as Sarah prepares to take over management of the family's paper mill from her father, Jordan (Stephen Rea). Settling into a sprawling old mansion, the Harrimans are fascinated to learn about the village's ancestral lore and traditions, including the tale of the Niños Santos, a group of children martyred by the Conquistadors centuries ago. Even today, the ghosts of the murdered innocents are blamed for any unexplained mischief in the town.

The imaginative Hannah begins to explore her new home, wandering into the jungle in pursuit of playmates no one else can see. The child's behavior continues to grow stranger until she falls inexplicably ill. As her parents struggle to find medical care in the remote town, the house is visited by a series of mysterious apparitions and suddenly Hannah vanishes.

Sarah and Paul's frantic search for their lost daughter plunges them into a shadowy supernatural world where they discover the shocking family secret that is at the heart of Hannah's disappearance. To save their daughter, they will have to find a way to make amends for the sins of the past.

### An introduction to Colombia

Colombia, with a population approaching 50 million, has great diversity: beaches on two large bodies of water, high plains, the Andes

Mountains, urban areas such as Bogotá, and, in the southeastern half of the country, the Amazon rainforest. The Colombian people are demographically diverse as well; more than half are *mestizo* (having both European and indigenous ancestry); about 20 percent are white and others have some African ancestry; only about one percent are Amerindian. The economy, based largely on oil and coal, textiles, coffee and other agricultural products, is growing, but unemployment and income inequality are still serious problems, as are the production of drugs like heroin and cocaine and the political violence driving farmers out of rural areas. The major environmental issues in the country are deforestation, water pollution from overuse of pesticides, and air quality, especially in Bogotá.

*Out of the Dark* draws on many elements of Colombian culture. The influence of the Spanish conquest on language, religious belief, architecture, and tradition is strong. The veneration of saints with parades and festivals is common, but so are local beliefs in vengeful ghosts that haunt certain places and sometimes hunt humans. The film shows many aspects of life in Colombia, from modernization and globalization to the persistence of indigenous traditions.



### Exploring environmental issues in *Out of the Dark*

- What is the significance of the opening sequence of underwater footage? In what way do these images help set the stage for this film?
- What environmental issues are portrayed in the film? Which issue seems most prominent? What do you already know about this environmental issue?
- Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can affect the central nervous system and cause irreversible damage to areas of the brain, especially of unborn and young children. Mercury can quickly enter aquatic ecosystems through sedimentation and make its way into the food chain. What are the symptoms of mercury poisoning as portrayed in the film?
- What is the source of the mercury poisoning in the film? Who is responsible for this environmental contamination?
- In the film, the environment was neglected for economic gain. What were the economic consequences of the actions of the paper mill? How did these affect the cultural practices and traditions of the Santa Clara community?
- When indigenous human communities are disrupted, their sustainable management practices and use of natural resources are often abandoned. Deforestation in Colombia, for example, often by illegal logging, has led to single-crop plantations and the production of illicit crops such as coca and marijuana. What evidence of these trends in the community of Santa Clara do you see in the film?

### Beyond Colombia

- What other areas in the world are experiencing similar environmental and health risks? What are the implications for the communities affected? How did you learn about these communities?
- Associations exist between environmental health risks and certain human communities. What types of communities do you think are the most affected? Why? Is it fair or inevitable for these disparities to exist? Explain.
- What environmental issues within your own community have affected the health of its constituents? What are the implications of these environmental hazards for their lives? What similarities/differences exist between your example and the scenario presented in the film?
- Do you know anyone whose poor health is the result of poor environmental quality? Who should be held accountable for this person's circumstances? What needs to be changed in the system to ensure that this doesn't happen to others?

### “Environmental racism”

- How do issues of social, cultural, or economic status factor into the story of this film? Do you see evidence of certain incidents or actions that seem specifically associated with class or ethnicity?
- Environmental justice, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, is the “*fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the*



*development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.*”\* Based on this definition, should the environmental degradation and human health concerns in the film be considered a form of environmental injustice? Why, or why not? Should environmental injustice be considered a form of racism?

- Describe the role of class or ethnicity in the film. How do you think the relationship between class or ethnicity and environmental health might shift if the population of Santa Clara were more diverse? Less diverse? What challenges might exist with a less diverse population?
- In what ways might a person’s social, cultural, or economic status affect his or her ability to confront an issue of environmental injustice in his or her community?
- What similarities exist between the environmental justice movement and other social movements? What are some reasons why minority and low-income groups may have less economic and political impact on environmental policy?
- Can you identify an example of environmental injustice affecting human health in your own community? If so, who is responsible? How is the community affected?
- How can education support the environmental justice movement?

### Assessing responsibility and bringing about change

- Was the damage to the environment and human health appropriately resolved in the story? Why, or why not? What approach do you think should have been used? Who should have been held accountable?

- What are the biggest challenges to improving racial and environmental disparities? What factors do you think might affect the success of efforts to uphold environmental justice in parts of the world like Santa Clara?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of banning environmentally destructive industries in parts of the world like Santa Clara?
- Who should be held accountable for damage to the environment that can affect human health? How can this responsibility be quantified?
- Do you think there is a strong enough citizen voice regarding matters of environmental injustice in the United States? In the world? What advice about environmental issues would you give to a political leader?

### Learn More

#### ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA):

<http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/>

Works to protect human health and the environment in communities overburdened by environmental pollution by integrating environmental justice into all EPA programs, policies, and activities.

#### GLOBAL EXCHANGE: <http://www.globalexchange.org/getinvolved>

An international human rights organization dedicated to promoting social, economic, and environmental justice.

#### NATIONAL RESOURCE DEFENSE COUNCIL: <http://www.nrdc.org/>

A national coalition that uses law, science, and the support of 1.4 million members and online activists to protect the planet’s wildlife and wild places and to work toward a safe and healthy environment for all living beings.

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\* U.S. Environmental Protection Agency at <http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/basics/index.html>.