Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: When you think about the word Gothic, you think about dark, foreboding, mysterious. In literature, it is all of those things. Dr. Heidi Backes says it is often constructed to tell a tale about the underlying sociopolitical environment or economy. I'm Nicki Donnelson, and Backes is my guest today on the Missouri State Journal. She's an assistant professor in the modern and classical languages department at Missouri State University, and she's here to talk about what you can see between the lines of these Gothic tales.

Heidi Backes: A lot of what I focus on looks primarily at how our contemporary authors using the Gothic mode, using notions of monstrosity or fear to illustrate the fact that the past, the trauma from the Civil War era is still haunting us in the present. One of the authors that I study, Carlos Ruiz Zafón, he writes a whole series of novels revolving around this idea of Gothic monstrosity and the Gothic in Barcelona in the pre and post Civil War era in Spain.

Heidi Backes: As an international bestselling author, his novel, for instance, The Shadow of the Wind, became such a tremendous seller worldwide, it's been translated in over 60 languages in multiple countries around the world. Although it deals particularly with the Spanish Civil War, there are elements of the novel that touch upon World War II and other international conflicts that an international audience would be familiar with and can relate to.

Heidi Backes: As a collective group in society, we all suffer from past trauma in various ways. There's this constant lingering spectral presence where these phantoms of the past, these phantoms of the war, whether it's the Spanish Civil War, or World War II or even World War I, they have affected the entire world profoundly.

Nicki Donnelson: Gothic literature is unique, noted Backes, and that is not limited by time. It has resurfaced in multiple generations, from tales like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein all the way to Twilight in order to work through questions about the environment. One common question she said, "What is more frightening, these monsters or reality itself?

Heidi Backes: What's great about teaching Gothic fiction is that it's one of these areas that most students will have some kind of cultural connection to. Pretty much everybody knows what the Walking Dead is, or for better or for worse, they'll know what Twilight is. When students have this cultural competency already as part of their upbringing that they know inherently what some of these Gothic monsters or Gothic motifs are. It's really easy to get them to engage with the text that we're studying in class.

Heidi Backes: It's also extremely helpful that the Gothic itself, unlike a lot of other literary movements, it's not relegated to just one moment in time. When we talk about literary naturalism, we're talking specifically about the second half of the 19th century and then it's basically over, or when we're talking about romanticism, we're talking about prior to that.

Heidi Backes: Instead, the Gothic is more of a mode that continually resurfaces, and it's always in connection with socio political crises. It's one of these modes and genres that really reflects our current state, and I think that makes it a lot more accessible to students. Also, the fact that, you know, who doesn't want to study monsters.

Nicki Donnelson: Backes specifically focuses her research and teaching on Spain and works created by Spanish authors. She believes that the novel, Shadow of the Wind would be accessible to readers who are interested in taking a taste of great Gothic literature.

Heidi Backes: I think The Shadow of the Wind by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, because there is such a widely accessible English translation, would be a really good place for listeners and the audience to start if they're interested in reading Gothic, a Gothic novel, because it really demonstrates quite well the incredible relevance to our own lives now in the 21st century, and how they relate to that traumatic past.

Heidi Backes: You don't have to know or be an expert on Spain or Spanish Civil War or Spanish history to be able to really appreciate the themes at the heart of that novel, and to take away from this lesson that the Gothic inherently strives to teach all of us which is that we need to exhume these ghosts of the past. We need to give them recognition and acknowledge the trauma that we've been through as a collective society in order to learn from the past and in order to not make those same mistakes moving forward.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Dr. Heidi Backes, assistant professor of modern and classical languages at Missouri State University. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the office of university communications at (417) 836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.