



**HOW DISNEYLAND IS USING COCO TO ENCOURAGE
CHILDREN TO TALK ABOUT DEATH**

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LUCINDA EVERETT, FILM CRITIC



FOLLOWING last year's release of the Disney Pixar animated film *Coco* – about Miguel, a small boy in search of his departed family during Mexico's Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) - this year Disneyland chose to highlight key themes from the film, across October and the beginning of November, at its US theme park in Anaheim, California.

Already a firm favourite at all of its parks, *Coco* took centre stage at Anaheim last month. Visitors enjoyed Day of the Dead-inspired storytelling, folkloric dancers, Mariachi Diva musicians, sugar skulls known as "cavaleras", Mexican food and colourful crafts, as well as a puppet show featuring characters from the film and a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the making of the movie. In Cars Land, there was even an "ofrenda" (altar) tribute to the character Doc Hudson (voiced by the late Paul Newman) whose character (and the actor who played him) died between the filming of *Cars* and *Cars 2*.

However, as well as the entertainment, there was education and pause for reflection too – which is, perhaps, where this indicated that Disney was seeking to do something different. Visitors were invited to visit a Memory

Wall at Plaza de la Familia to honour their own loved ones and design their own paper "alebrije" (spirit guide) mask, as well as visiting "The World of *Coco*" indoor pavilion which explained the meaning of Día de Los Muertos.

Although considerable creative licence was applied in the making of the film, *Coco* introduces the idea of the "final death" - those who live in the colourful, bountiful Land of the Dead can do so only as long as there is someone to remember them in the Land of the Living; once that last memory is lost to time, that individual is truly dead. This concept draws straight from traditional Mexican ideas of the "three deaths" upon which festivals like Day of the Dead were founded – with the individual only truly dying when there is no one left who remembers them and argues that death should not be viewed as some unavoidable terror, but as a remembrance to treasure our loved ones – both the living, and the dead.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that *Coco* has proven such a good talking point for adults wishing to help children explore the topic of death in a sensitive way. During promotional interviews, the film's director Lee

Unkrich admitted *Coco*'s storyline actually stemmed from an original idea of a boy trying to get over the grief of a loss. He realised how different the Mexican attitude to death was from his own American one and so changed the premise of the film to incorporate Día de Muertos's cultural principle to never forget, to never let go.

Although some critics questioned the wisdom of proactively targeting children with a film about death, a quick look through the back catalogue of Disney films confirms that they are littered with storylines in which a major character dies or suffers the loss of a loved one (*Bambi*, *Lion King*, *The Good Dinosaur* and *Up* all require tissues at some point!) and ample evidence that this has helped young people to learn concepts that will prove vital to them in later life.

It's interesting to read some of the online discussion forums for parents about *Coco*. Although there are naturally some parents expressing concern about the film's premise and PG rating, the majority of parents on the popular chat forum Mumsnet had seen the film as an opportunity to address their child's natural curiosity about death.



Said one parent: "We saw it yesterday. My daughter (aged 7) and I both sobbed. She has lost great grandparents, attended their funerals and we are very open about death (my parents weren't open with me and it really didn't do me any good. I'm atheist. That the dead are remembered so clearly in Mexican culture is a beautiful concept to me, and I thought the film did an amazing job of encapsulating it. Yes,

she was upset, but her joy at the end was incredible and we had a very good discussion afterwards about how we remember those that have gone."

Film critic Lucinda Everett believes that films like *Coco* have an important role to play in helping children prepare for future bereavement. Writing in *The Guardian*, she said: "Some may say we're forcing kids to face issues that are beyond their years - that we should go back to the old days where, aside from the odd bereavement, most troubles were solved with a little courage and a singsong. But times have changed, and the way children experience life has changed too. There are new pressures, new fears, new opportunities and the chance to mix with people whose identities and choices are, thankfully, being newly embraced by society.

"Films are the perfect way for children to understand all this - not only via storylines that they can relate to

but in a safe space where they can ask questions freely. What's more, the common reference point that films provide means that answering those questions becomes easier for parents, and a more open and honest conversation can develop. Kids accept the society we present to them, meaning films that normalise any and every expression of what it means to be human are a key tool in moving us towards a more inclusive society.

"But, perhaps most importantly of all, films can help kids cope better when life's struggles hit them for real. They've already experienced some of the associated emotions vicariously. They've seen how the characters handle the situation. Perhaps they've even thought about what they'd do in the same position. If modern kids' films can help the next generation grow into resilient, self-aware, inclusive adults, I say keep them coming."



DEATH AS A TRANSITION: HOW MEXICAN CULTURES VIEW THE END OF LIFE

In Aztec, Mayan and other indigenous cultures there is a belief that souls continue to exist after death in the Land of the Dead, called Mictlan by the Aztecs and Xibalba by the Mayans. In these cultures, therefore, death is not something to be feared - it is only a transition and there is a view that the living and the dead co-exist to some degree.

The festival of Día de Los Muertos evolved from a tradition that celebrated the return of souls for one day from the underworld.

Later, when Latin America was Catholicized, this tradition was tied to the calendar of the 2 November Christian All Souls Day. Today, between 31 October and 2 November, believers welcome back the souls of their dearly departed with special flowers, including marigolds, and

altars laden with their favourite foods and pictures. In Southern Mexico, sugar canes also decorate the altars (known as "ofrendas," in Spanish). In some communities, people decorate graves and sit out all night with their deceased loved ones.

It is the traditional Mesoamerican idea of the "three deaths" that provides the foundation for these beliefs. The "first

death" is the physical one, the death of the body. The "second death" is more of a natural one: the moment the body is laid to rest in the earth and returned into nature's cycle.

The "third death" provides the focus in the film *Coco* and is the most definitive: the moment the last memory of you fades. The festival of Día de Muertos helps to delay that final death.



An ofrenda altar during Día de Los Muertos