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# "You Know There's No 'It' Right? 'It' Was Just Us"

## Magic as a Tool for Audience Empathy in *Yellowjackets*

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Articles

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In Showtime's *Yellowjackets* (2021-present), 'magic' (referred to by the characters as "It") has an overwhelming presence. Supernatural visions, clairvoyance, and occult iconography are laden throughout each episode. However, the audience is often left uncertain if magic is, in fact, 'real' or conjured in the imagination of the show's characters. *Yellowjackets* follows a women's high-school soccer team (named the Yellowjackets) who survive a plane crash deep in the North American wilderness. The show explores the team's struggle for survival and the present adult lives of those who survived. In this article, we draw from Caroline Bainbridge's understanding of television as a psychical object to investigate the role of magic in *Yellowjackets*' exploration of grief and trauma. We provide a close textual reading and an analysis of online fan discourse to explore the ambiguity of magic and its capacity to generate meaning. We argue that it is

precisely through the ambiguity surrounding the 'realness' of magic that *Yellowjackets* can effectively explore grief, trauma, and empathy. Ultimately, we contend that the ambiguity of magic in *Yellowjackets* helps viewers empathise with the trauma and grief experienced by the characters.

## The Ambiguity of Magic in *Yellowjackets*

Magic has often been seen by scholars as an effective artistic tool to explore trauma and grief narratives (Bowers). As Maggie Ann Bowers puts it, magic helps create a space where the "unrepresentable can be expressed" (77). Scholarship surrounding the literary genre of magical realism offers a particularly useful exploration of exactly *how* magic can be an effective avenue to explore such themes (Arva; Abdulla and Abu). Beatrice Chanady defines magical realism as the amalgamation of realist and supernatural/magical elements. In her understanding of this genre, both realism and magic are "equally autonomous and coherent" (18). In a similar vein, Wendy Faris observes that the narratives of magical realism "merge two different realms", and as a result the reader may "experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events" (101). Indeed, it is the merging of these two worlds that allows for the symbolic exploration of trauma narratives. In the case of *Yellowjackets*, these elements of magical realism certainly come into play. As we will explore throughout this article, the tension between realism and the supernatural is precisely what allows *Yellowjackets* to "say what cannot be said" (Mrack 3).

The idea of magic is a constant presence throughout both seasons of *Yellowjackets*. However, the *realness* of this magic is always ambiguous and up for debate. Much like *The X-Files* (1993-2002), the textual features of *Yellowjackets* can allow for both 'sceptic' and 'believer' readings of the show that are not expressly affirmed or denied (Goode). Magic is first hinted at in the opening sequence of the pilot episode when an unnamed character (referred to affectionately by fans as "pit girl") is chased into a crude spike trap. The sequence is laden with occult imagery—there are mysterious eye symbols carved into the trees and the other girls are wearing ritualistic masks made from animal skin and antlers. As the show progresses, the other characters start to openly speculate about the supernatural magic of the wilderness. One of the central characters, Lottie Mathews, starts having 'visions' that seemingly align with the strange occurrences of the forest. As she starts to surrender to the call of the wilderness her *magic* appears to grow stronger. In the season one finale, "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi" (S1E9), a bear threatens the Yellowjacket's camp. Lottie steps forward to face the bear armed with only a small knife. Through seemingly accepting the call of the wilderness, the bear lies down and submits to her without a fight. For many of the other characters, this affirms Lottie's magic powers, and they anoint her the "Antler Queen". Of course, these instances of 'magic' can just as easily be explained as coincidence. Lottie is shown to have an established history of mental illness and magic is never clearly shown—it is just alluded to an entity that has an invisible presence.

The uncertain allusion of magic has a divisive effect on the girls in *Yellowjackets*. The survivors organise themselves into pseudo-factions depending on their belief in the supernatural powers of the wilderness. Characters in the wider group including Shauna, Natalie, Taissa, and Misty are quick to reveal their scepticism toward Lottie and the existence of magic. To begin with, this group tension is relatively minor—the sceptics find the believers silly and dismiss Lottie as simply being "crazy". However, group tension becomes more significant as it starts to influence the decision-making of the whole group. After another group member, Javi, goes missing, Travis (Javi's older brother) and Natalie spend hours each day searching for him in the freezing cold.

This search is resource-consuming and dangerous because the pair could easily get lost or succumb to frostbite. Natalie quickly realises the search is futile, as it is extremely unlikely that Javi could have survived on his own. In the episode "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" (S2E1) she is on the verge of convincing Travis to give up when Lottie mentions that she had a vision about Javi and is certain that he is alive, inspiring Travis to continue the search. Frustrated, Natalie confronts Lottie:

**Natalie:** What the fuck was that!? Javi is... Look giving him false hope is just going to make things worse.

**Lottie:** There's no such thing as false hope. There is just hope.

**Natalie:** Did you read that in a fucking fortune cookie?

**Lottie:** What do you want from me Nat? I said what I felt.

**Natalie:** I want you to say less, Lottie, a lot fucking less!

As situations like this become more common, relations between the believer and sceptic factions in *Yellowjackets* become more fractured. It quickly becomes clear that magic and its ambiguity in the show is a divisive source of conflict.

The impact that magic has on the characters in *Yellowjackets* is seemingly mirrored in fan communities—particularly the r/Yellowjackets subreddit. As outlined by Victor Costello and Barbara Moore, online fandoms have the capacity to transform the private act of viewing into a communal activity that significantly enhances one's emotional involvement with a text (124). Meaningful exchanges in online discussions empowers fans to "organise en masse as resisters and shapers of commercial television narratives" (Costello and Moore 124). On the r/Yellowjackets subreddit debate about 'magic' and whether the supernatural is a real force is a central theme, one poll that received over 800 responses asked users whether there were "supernatural/dark powers lurking, or no? Is it just mass hysteria with the perfect storm of events" (Reddit). There was nearly a complete split in the vote, with 401 users agreeing that there is an ancient, evil magic impacting on the characters and 460 indicating that there is no magic in the show.

The lack of consensus in the fandom has led to countless disagreements within posts as users enthusiastically debate the legitimacy of magic. As seen in Figure 1, users on the subreddit can select a 'flair' (a tag of text that appears under usernames to give additional context to a post or perspective) to denote their allegiance to "Team Rational" or "Team Supernatural". Users adopt these flairs to place their opinions and arguments into a particular context of thinking. Intense arguments erupt as a result of the ambiguity surrounding magic, with fans speculating using clues from the text. Will Brooker has suggested that debates can be a source of pleasure in fan communities and are what allows them to "thrive" (113). In the case of r/Yellowjackets, the debate about magic is a form of productive conflict that is very much part of the *fun* of watching the show (Brooker). It encourages fans to sleuth for specific textual evidence that both supports their position and shapes their interpretation of the *Yellowjackets* narrative (Costello & Moore 124). Forum identity is heavily connected to the implied supernatural elements of *Yellowjackets*, and this uncertainty results in factional splits much like the groupings displayed on the show itself.

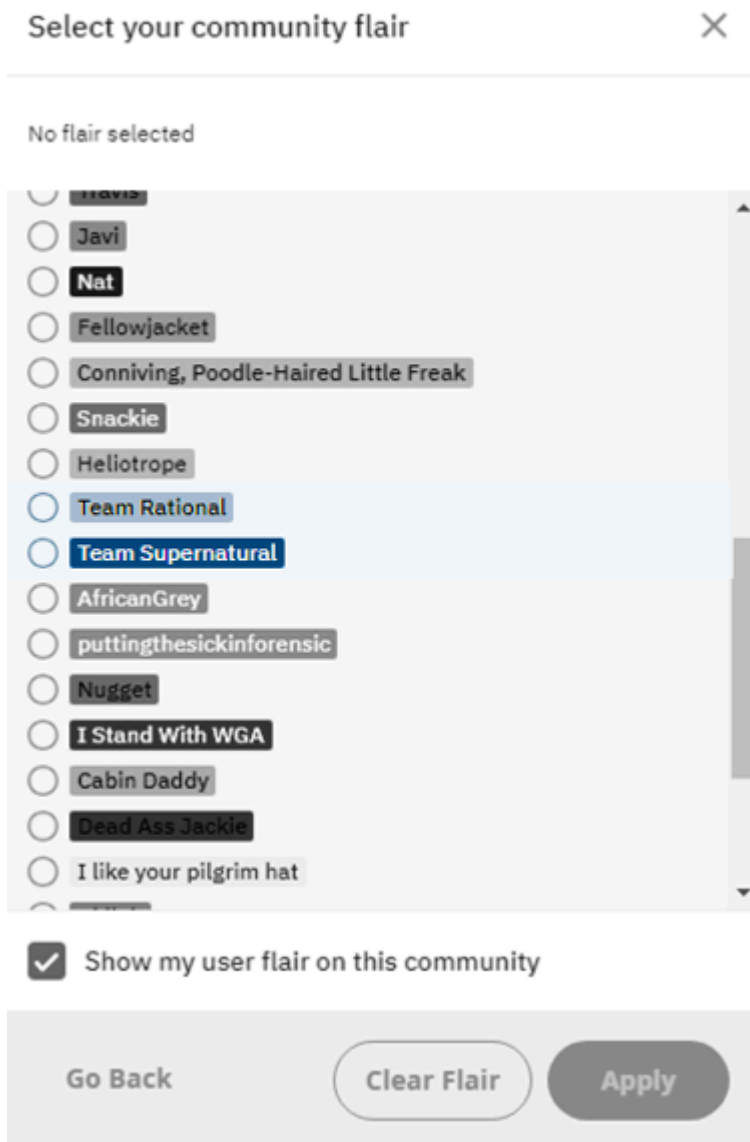


Fig. 1: Available Flairs on r/Yellowjackets subreddit (2023).

How the users of r/Yellowjackets interrogate and draw their conclusions about the authenticity of magic in *Yellowjackets* impacts on their perceptions of the show's paratextual discourse (Gray). As the show is ambiguous in its messaging to do with the supernatural, users have many different wells of meaning to draw from. These include specific characters they trust (like Lottie and Nat), the communication tools of the text (shots, audio, lighting, *mise-en-scène*, etc.) and the show's creators. Some users trust the legitimacy of Lottie as a true clairvoyant who "consistently has visions of the future" (Reddit). Others rely more on what the audience has been *told* about the characters, particularly regarding Lottie's schizophrenia. One user questions whether they are "the only one who didn't really pick up on occult?" and continued that they had read "everything more as Lotti [sic] slipping into whatever mental illness she has and pulling others into her delusions when nothing supernatural is actually happening. More cult than occult" (Reddit).

Many fans on the subreddit implicitly trust the writers' paratextual discussions about the show. Series creators Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson frequently comment on and confirm previously ambiguous elements of the show (Chaney). Actors like Christina Ricci (who plays an older Misty on the show) have also debunked audience theories (Weiss). One user argues they "trust" the writers on questions of ambiguity. Statements like "writers have confirmed" become

commonplace in these debates, with users citing writers' comments as to why much of the supernatural is merely a figment of the characters' imagination. Other posters are sceptical of writer discourses, preferring to trust the texts themselves rather than rely on creators who either may not know the answer or who benefit from ambiguity. Whatever and whoever fans believe influences their perception of the show and who to trust, users look to varied show elements as the locus of meaning and truth regarding magic, and whom they choose to believe changes their perspectives and impacts on their engagement with the show and the characters.

## 'Who the fuck is Lottie Mathews?' Magic, Meaning and Empathy

*Yellowjackets'* textual exploration of grief and trauma is so often mediated through the idea of magic. As *Yellowjackets* progresses, the girls find themselves in increasingly hopeless situations. Characters die, freezing weather confines them to a cabin, and their food supply becomes almost completely exhausted. The girls are often forced into impossible situations where they must choose between cannibalism and starvation. These declining conditions are what lead many of the 'believer' characters (Van, Mari, and Travis) to their intense faith in Lottie as a human conduit upon which the wilderness has bestowed magic powers. Magic offers *some* meaning to the brutality and hopelessness of their situation. As things get worse for the girls in season two, 'sceptic' characters slowly start to accept the idea of magic. Nat starts receiving blessings from Lottie, Taissa begins attending Lottie's prayer circle, and Shauna allows prayer during the birth of her child. When faced with dire situations, 'magic' offers the characters a way to confront their violent actions and absolve themselves of responsibility for horrible decisions. For example, in the season two episode "It Chooses" (S2E8) the *Yellowjackets* decide that they must resort to killing and eating one of their teammates in order to survive. The group agrees that, through the magic red queen ritual designed by Lottie, the wilderness will decide who is to be 'sacrificed'. In this instance, the idea of magic is used by the girls as a psychological tool to distance themselves from the trauma and grief that are inherent to their situation.

Throughout *Yellowjackets* the characters in the present timeline are shown to still suffer from the intense trauma and guilt of their time in the wilderness. For example, Natalie is in and out of rehab programs and Taissa suffers dissociative sleep-walking episodes. Most notable in this regard is the character of adult Lottie. In the opening montage of "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" (S2E1) we see the range of psychological treatments that Lottie has gone through since returning from the wilderness. For the first few episodes of season two, it appears as though adult Lottie has managed to heal and move on from the past. She has set up a 'commune' that is seemingly having a positive influence on the lives of new characters like Lisa and (to an extent) former *Yellowjackets* like Nat and Misty. However, soon after her old *Yellowjackets* teammates re-enter her life, we see Lottie become increasingly unstable. She is frequently shown to be having intrusive thoughts and violent visions about her time in the wilderness. In this sense, Lottie's reunification with the other *Yellowjackets* is a trigger for her repressed grief and trauma. As season two progresses, there are several scenes of Lottie receiving therapy from an unnamed psychiatrist. While these sessions start off relatively innocuous, they gradually become more sinister as Lottie opens up about her time in the wilderness, and finally her feeling of "It" returning:

**Therapist:** Lottie, when does self-repression ever serve us? It could be that this reunion strikes a primal chord with you because in the past when you were with those other

women you were free. You were your truest, most authentic self. What is standing in the way of you embracing that again?

**Lottie:** We hurt each other. People died.

**Therapist:** Tell me, is there anything of value in this life that doesn't come with risk? Or loss? Or consequence?

**Lottie:** Are you saying what I think you're saying?

At this moment the therapist transforms into the antler queen, dressed in a white ceremonial robe that is adorned with bones and symbols of the wilderness and it is revealed that Lottie has been hallucinating the entire session. The scene concludes with the therapist (in the form of the antler queen) telling Lottie: "You tell me, does a hunt that has no violence feed anyone?" From this moment, adult Lottie embraces the magic of the wilderness again. It is the only way she can find meaning in and confront the trauma and grief that she still holds from her time in the wilderness. This ultimately leads to Lottie convincing Shauna, Van, Misty, and Taissa to believe in the supernatural magic of the wilderness again and perform the deadly Red Queen hunting ritual as adults. Giving in to magic allows the characters a chance to escape the trauma and grief and give meaning to their violent actions in the wilderness. In this sense 'magic' in *Yellowjackets* is somewhat of a psychological sleight of hand for characters to artificially separate themselves from their past.

Caroline Bainbridge has emphasised how the immersive environments created by a television program allow audiences to work through themes in very personal ways. According to Bainbridge, complex story worlds can be critical tools to help viewers work through complicated issues. In essence, audiences may "internalise drama as an object of the mind but also put it to work in their everyday life" (300). She argues that we should

begin to understand how a television show can become a psychical object, available for use in terms of unconscious interrogation of one's sense of selfhood and one's immersion in a complex ideological environment. (300)

Understanding long-form television as this type of object allows us to recognise a similar potential within *Yellowjackets*. Leaving magic as an ambiguous feature allows audiences to empathise and engage with the characters' uncertainty; just as they are left to wonder about the state of reality and magic, so too are the fans on forums. One user explores how the characters' uncertainty creates discussion and debate within a group of people 'trapped' together:

what I really like is the way the potential for paranormal is implied in the girls' situation by these odd coincidences, adding to the group psychosis and shared trauma... they're scared shitless at the drop of a pin out there, and questioning everything they see (or don't see), which adds to the anxiety. (Reddit)

Much like the characters on the show, the fans have become a group trying to make sense of 'odd coincidences' and are 'questioning' everything they can see (on the show) and everything they 'don't' see (writer and cast interviews). This ambiguity has led some fans to connect more closely with the character of Lottie, who seems to truly believe her visions are real, with some even "defending" her decisions and perspectives throughout the show (Reddit). Others are also impacted upon by the possibility of magic in the show, but rather react like Shauna and Nat—

there is magic it might not be helpful. One user identifies a kind of meta-experience fans are having thanks to the possibility of magic in the show:

when [the writers] were asked if the show believes in the supernatural they kind of paused and started talking about the concept of believing in the supernatural, without saying if it definitely exists within the realm of the show. Which is kind of meta, as we're all discussing whether we believe in the supernatural existing within the show or not. (Reddit)

As outlined by Mittell, Andrejevic, and Bainbridge, participation in TV fan communities allows for fundamentally different engagements with a text. In the case of r/Yellowjackets, it "significantly enhances" fans' emotional involvement with the show (Costello and Moore) and brings new textual experiences to the fore. It is only through fan debate and community participation that fans can experience this 'meta-narrative' of magic. In this context, magic in *Yellowjackets* operates as a tool to connect audiences with the experiences of their characters. The consequences of unknown supernaturality and magical elements cause strife throughout fan communities much like in the community of the cabin in the show. Fans are shown how characters might ostracise, argue, deflect, and rationalise when their reality is questioned, much like the Yellowjackets themselves. Magic, therefore, is effective at encouraging empathy and understanding of perspectives and beliefs in televisual texts.

Supernatural horror has often been understood in relation to trauma and grief. According to Becky Millar and Johnny Lee, it is particularly suited to represent these feelings because the disruption of the supernatural "mirror the core experience of disruption that accompanies bereavement" (171). Moreover, magic and the supernatural offer ways in which the experience of grief can "be contained and regulated and in doing so, may offer psychological benefits to the bereaved" (171). In the case of *Yellowjackets*, such connections are very much amplified by the 'meta-experience' facilitated by the show's fan community. For some, these discussions on magic as reality or fiction are useful to help grieve the perceived loss of quality of the show across season two. Many expressed anger, sadness, dissolution, and disconnection with the show as a whole. Some took this as an opportunity to walk away claiming the "magic" of the show had been lost for them, and that they had "never seen such a dramatic drop in quality in a tv show ... I think I'm done" (Reddit). One user turned to wishing for the occult and for magic, citing that "at this point, I'm quite content with this going full supernatural, since it could bring back Laura or Nat which would be impossible otherwise" (Reddit).

Magic and supernatural are something that users, much like the characters of the show, have started to wish for as an escape from their experience. In a way, the discussions around the ambiguity of magic offers a sense of control. Sometimes audiences take pleasure in rationalising and making sense of a show for fun. In the case of *Yellowjackets*, though, we argue that audiences are using the uncertainty of magic to cope with a decline and navigate community and trauma. Some users explain that magic is not real as a way to demonstrate the show *is* still salvageable, others hope magic is real because that will *make* it salvageable. Much like the characters in *Yellowjackets*, some audience members are experiencing and working through a kind of 'grief' using the discussion of magic as a space to work through these ideas.

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