Book Review: Dracula

Devon Trevarrow Flaherty / October 12, 2023
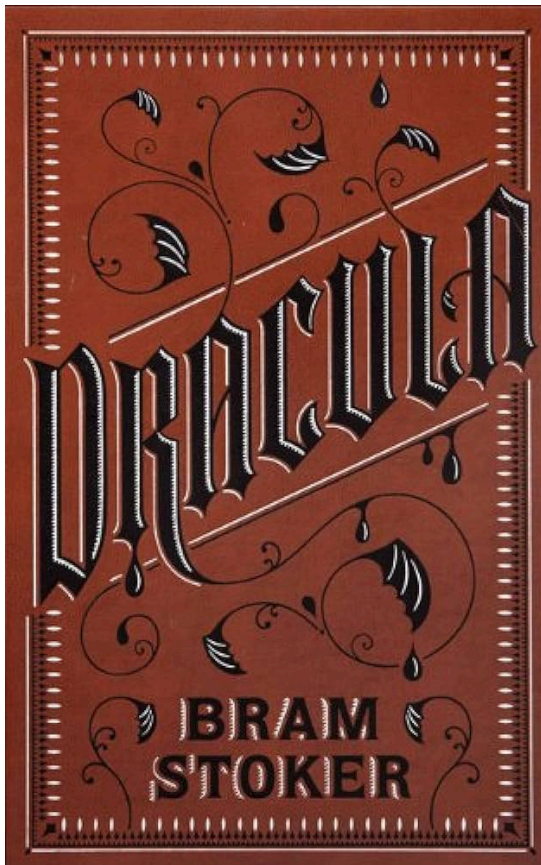
It took me a year to read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. I started it last October and got really bored and then the season passed. This year, I finished it, but not without some pushing. *Dracula* is a classic of Gothic horror, an original in many senses and the bulwark of the vampire genre. I thought I knew what to expect, and though some things regarding vampire tradition have changed since the original, I was surprised to find much of what I have absorbed from culture about vampires to be right there in *Dracula*. There were really good parts full of tension and surprise. There were way more times when I had to remind myself that the original readers of *Dracula* didn't have the internet, social media, movies, TV, or much to do of an evening around the fire. Keeping them on the edge of their seat through long-winded, repetitive speeches was a thing. Not so much for me, now.

Dracula is essentially about a group of Victorian elite in and around London. When we begin, two couples are engaged and one of the men is on his way to Transylvania to do some paperwork for his firm with a man who is looking to relocate to London. It ends up being a raw deal, as the man in question is the vampire, Count Dracula. Of course, the guy doesn't know this—doesn't suspect that there is anything in the world like it. And the original readers would have been creeped out as they waited for the details of this strange man to unfurl slowly and terrifyingly. An epistolary novel, we also hear from the man's finance back in England as her story unfolds with her best friend. Eventually, everyone is in England and at least nine characters write letters, reports, notes, etc. that

weave together the stories of the two women, Dracula, an insane asylum patient, and five men who literally all play the hero as their reality and their very souls are threatened by an insidious menace they are only beginning to understand.

So, here's what happened. As I said, I started reading *Dracula* last year, for Halloween. I actually hate vampire stories, but I have tolerated a few for keeping-up-with-the-Joneses reasons, specifically where there is not so much gore or slasher-iness or pure evil. I figured that *Dracula*, since it was pretty old, would not be too descriptive or freaky. I was right about this, though there is quite a bit implied and two scenes that had me actually queasy (though that was not till this year). When I got bored and put the book down, I wasn't sure if I would ever finish it. Then, as this Halloween approached and it popped up again on my TBR, I had the brilliant idea of *listening* to the book! I am also not a fan of audiobooks except in very specific circumstances, but I thought this might be the only way to endure the Victorian wordiness: to trap myself on the carpool drive twice a day. And it worked. I was sick of the audiobook in the latter half of the middle, for sure, but it was easy just to turn it on and suck it up. There is some picking up of the pace now and again, but many thanks to Mike Bennett for his reading of the unabridged and complete *Dracula*. I know he wasn't looking forward to reading all Van Helsing's speeches (letters) and I was seriously annoyed by them, but now we are through!

Full disclosure: I have some PTSD surrounding blood which has strangely gotten worse as I've gotten older. It's one of the reasons I don't normally do vampires or slasher horror. Though the original *Dracula* didn't detail a ton of blood, there is one disturbing and bloody scene which also involved suffocation—which is one of my biggest phobias—and also a repeat scene involving Victorian-era blood transfusions. These were too much for me. Thankfully, I wasn't watching them on a screen so they won't necessarily sit in my visual recall for decades, but I was profoundly uncomfortable during them in a way I wasn't for anything in, for example, the Twilight saga.

Okay, so my issues with *Dracula* ended up not being all about scares or longwindedness. Trigger warning: most of these characters are entitled, patronizing douche bags but they are written as honorable, noble heroes. Some of this is definitely because of the time period. And yet other authors managed to write literature from this time period in which I didn't feel livid having to listen to men pontificate and gloat and strut around pitying women for their frailty and lower-functioning brains. In order to survive the second half of the book, I had to break out my hearty, posh, Victorian guffaw and use it whenever I was getting overwhelmed by, well, usually Van Helsing. The characters couldn't *be* more patronizing and, at many times, utterly unintelligent. They never learn from anything, but darned if the poor women didn't get a) sent to bed, repeatedly b) patted on the head and thanked for their work which was *surprisingly* good, and c) told that their smart brains were almost like a man's. As for any other plebe that encountered the main, "honorable," gentleman characters? They were flayed with insincere smiles and treated like children (speaking of children, they were only referred to as "it"s), and then laughed about later. ("What?? He called a new, cold storage facility a new, fancypants factory?! Hahahahahah!") Foreigners? If Van Helsing referred to Dracula as having a "child brain" one. more. time. I was going to throw the book that wasn't in my hand across the car. *Dracula* is, quite frankly, antifeminist to the extreme, and I can't help but wonder if that's not part of what Stoker was exploring? Though I also wonder if my wondering that is just wishful thinking.

On the other hand, the story is really imaginative. And it was ahead of its time with innuendo, though Stoker apparently felt limited to the word "voluptuous" to express women's sexuality. And we're talking small steps, here, often in the wrong direction. Was the story as imaginative as it seems? Vampires were a thing of myth, especially in Eastern Europe, long, long before *Dracula*. There's a *Time* article that claims Stoker said *Dracula* was factual, some names changed, but then was forced to remove a lot and change the ending for the general populace. Still, so they say, he said it was true. Whether or not this is accurate, Stoker didn't get the character of Dracula from Vlad the Impaler or a dream, from what I can tell, so maybe was just retelling some history and myth and experiences of his friends. The supposed first vampire story published—Dr. John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (originally credited to Lord Byron and began from a kernel of an idea from Byron during the famous ghost story competition which [Mary Shelley](#) won hands-down)–preceded *Dracula* by nearly a century. Through the 1800s, vampire stories were *en vogue* to an extent, and *Carmilla* (a teen girl vampire!) added some of what looked like originality to me in Stoker's version (including the "sexiness"). *Then* along came *Dracula*, which whether totally original or not, is the big show when it comes to vampire stories. From there, there is like *everything*.

So *Dracula* was slow. There were *way* too many words, *way* too much conversation, and suspense just stretched on and on and on until I almost didn't even care anymore. I wonder what vampire fans think of this old book when they read it, nowadays. Reviews remain quite high, though people do complain about the same things I did, now and again. Mostly they complain about the pacing. There are abridged versions available, which would help with that and also with cutting down on the repetitiveness. But even an abridged version can't do away with the insanely stupid decisions that are made on a regular basis by the characters, decisions made with very strange reasons, and decisions made ignoring the reality of the day before (like classic horror-movie let's go hide in the basement or split up kind of decisions).

In the end, I had come to hate most of the characters, which may have been in part due to the tedium of the writing and in part due to their Victorian stuffiness. These characters felt horrible in a way Austen's or Dickens' characters never do. They are *insufferable*. Yet I wanted to know what happened (and was surprised, because I wouldn't have guessed that based on what I've seen of the modern Dracula traditions, though it sorta sounds like the ending was not what Stoker had originally wrote and changed it *Little Shop of Horrors*-style (director's cut of that being a far better *story*)). I mean, there's no love lost between me and vampire stories, as it is, but I do like a lot of the Victorian classics and fair amount of the Gothic ones. I will definitely not be re-reading *Dracula* and I can't say I really recommend it unless you *are* into vampires and are curious about the origin of Dracula, Van Helsing, Mina, Renfield, Jonathan Harker, etc. Or are reading your way through either vampire classics or horror classics. In that case, I would probably point you to an abridged edition. Unless you are hard core…

Quotes

"…and now is the chance that we may live and learn" (ch21).

"I suppose that nature works on such a hopeful basis that we believe against ourselves that things will be as they ought to be, not as we should know that they will be" (ch25).

Movies and Shows

Which I will not be watching, for blood and vampire reasons. I can handle *Hotel Transylvania*, which I like.

- *Dracula* (1931, with Bela Lugosi)
- *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992, updated by Francis Ford Coppola)
- *Nosferatu* (1922, super old and supposedly terrifying)
- *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000, mockumentary about making of Dracula movie gone wrong)
- *Dracula* (2020, mellower and more classical)
- *Dracula* (1979, cinematic?)
- *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966, continuing a series with a Dracula reincarnation)
- *Nosferatu: Phantom of the Night* (1979, Werner Herzog)
- *Renfield* (2023, comedy horror with Nicholas Cage)
- *The Last Voyage of the Demeter* is out at the theaters, right now.
- *Van Helsing*, (2016-2021 TV series based on one character)

Literature through Time

Vampire classics and the best of modern books.

- "The Vampyre," John Polidori
- *The Dead Woman in Love*, Theophile Gautier
- James Malcolm Rymer's Varney the Vampyre
- *Dracula*, Bram Stoker
- *Carmilla*, Joseph Sheridan le Fanu
- *I Am Legend*, Richard Matheson
- *Salem's Lot*, Stephen King
- *Interview with the Vampire*, Anne Rice
- *The Vampire Huntress*, L. A. Banks
- *Fevre Dream*, George R. R. Martin
- Twilight saga, Stephenie Meyers
- The Vampire Diaries series, L. J. Smith
- *Anno Dracula*, Kim Newman
- *Fledgling*, Octavia Butler
- *NOS4A2*, Joe Hill
- *Certain Dark Things*, Silvia Moreno-Garcia
- *The Deathless Girls*, Kiran Millwood Hargrave