

Book Review: **M. J. Trow. *A Brief History of Vampires.***

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From the works of Anne Rice and Stephen King to films on vampires and the walking dead, the appeal of vampirism has become a cultural phenomenon in the United States, especially to young people. In the modern era where the typical American family is broken and where marriages can last a few days to weeks, troubled maturing young people find little comfort in a society that represents separation. In contrast, vampires, as the living undead, provide stability and lasting relationships, because they live forever and thus their love is consequentially eternal. *A Brief History of Vampires* is an inspiring book that attempts to explain this resurgent phenomenon as M.J. Trow links fictional Gothic beings to actual people.

M. J. Trow presents a brief but strong overview of the recent resurgence of vampires and zombies in twenty-first century literature and media by examining a number of recent films and television series such as the *Twilight* (2008-2012) and the *True Blood* (2008-2014) sagas. The book brings together an impressive description of reasons why modern Americans cannot satiate their fear and love of vampires, with a particular focus on modern cinema and the biography of the Romanian Vlad III from the Draculesti clan, better known as Vlad the Impaler (Vlad Tepes). Trow introduces how literature has a profound influence on people and how actual lives are depicted best by linking real vampiric people with literary undead beings. With this, Trow's premise of "Dracula was real" and "Dracula was there" (p. xii) bespeaks of the need to interpret and consider both fictional and realistic representations of vampires. Indeed, we cannot truly know the fictional Dracula if we do not understand the real Dracul.

While this book is a must for people interested in vampires as a twenty-first century cultural phenomenon, it should also gain the attention of scholars on contemporary Gothic or vampirism. The book is comprised of sixteen chapters organized and separated into two parts: celluloid versions of vampires to explain the current vampiric craze and the life of Vlad Tepes. The first half provides observations of the vampire craze in contemporary U.S. and very briefly details different folklore vampires and other cinematic undead from various parts of the world; yet the second half weighs too heavily on the detailed life of Vlad Tepes. Part 1, the section on cinematic effects, discusses vampires in the twenty-first century and their influence on cultural development, on teenagers (chap.1), on "Twilight Moms," and on vampire cinema (chap. 2). The following

chapters describe Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (chap. 3), the impacts of Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (chap. 4), Eastern folklore influences (chap. 5), and vampires in European folk traditions (chap.6).

From observing the influence of literature to the impact of vampiric visual mediums, the book's emphasis begins to shift to Vlad Tepes and how his actual lifestyle turned him into a prototypical figure that later writers used for vampiric Counts. Part 2 expands on this mutual effect of bloodthirsty people and literary characters by detailing chapters on the Draculesti clan: the rise of Vlad Dracul, the *voivod* prince (chap. 7), historical sources on Dracul's reign (chaps. 8 and 9), historical background and the childhood and life of Vlad Tepes (chaps. 10-13), accounts of Vlad Tepes's death and resting place (chap. 4), and the reception of Vlad Tepes and modern vampiric practices (chaps. 15 and 16). The end of Part 2 expands on vampires as cataclysms for a transnational frame by situating a number of recent films, television shows, and cinematic representations such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Metropolis* (1927) with other world-wide vampire traditions in order to show how people's belief in horror and romance persists today.

Trow reads troubled youths and middle-aged mothers together and argues that both parties develop a sense of lack and thus search for completeness: teenagers feel loss because they live in a broken-up world and middle-aged mothers have life crises because their bodies are deteriorating. Vampires offer everlasting love, youth and completeness - qualities that many teenagers desire. In addition, few young people feel safe and complete living in fast-paced societies where cars and computer brands lose their value within a year. As a result, these youths become outcasts of societies, as portrayed in the media. Trow proposes that the murderous crimes of isolated and misunderstood adolescences are committed out of frustration or for attention. In other words, if murder translates into some level of control, then it follows that vampires who grow increasingly strong through murder embody a sense of limitless power; they derive a sense of self and reassurance from other people's loss of capability.

Aging mothers likewise find reassurance in vampires. In societies that value youth, aging can be an unforgiving and sometimes terrible thing. Many people in Hollywood, for example, have cosmetic surgery to retain a youthful appearance. Therefore, Trow believes that middle-aged mothers find their heroes in ageless vampires: beings that recapture and immortalize youth. For lost young adults and conflicted middle-aged women, vampirism offers consolation and self-confidence because it provides a type of community based on each individual, even though it is an exclusive community built on the practice of blood sucking.

Whether it is teenagers lusting after power or moms trying to regain youth, Trow details this mix of attraction in the combination of the real and fictional vampire. He provides, for example, the case of vampire Edward Cullen from Stephenie Meyer's vampire saga, *Twilight*, as his starting point. Trow perceives that fans have a difficult time of separating their love of Edward Cullen, the moody vampire, and their love of the alluring Robert Pattison (4). In other words, by stating that their craze for Edward Cullen is the craze for Robert Pattison and vice versa, Trow explicitly highlights the connection between the fictional vampire and the real person. Which vampire fans favor - real or imagined - matters little, for what is more important are the values and fantasies vampires fulfill.

Part 2 covers the life of Vlad Tepes and the crimes he committed in Romania. Trow thoroughly describes the life and death of the Draculesti clan, even detailing how they were dressed for burial as inspirations for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Vlad Tepes was a ruthless ruler who was exiled for twelve years and who returned to his country as if from the dead. He was equally known for his infamous ways of torture: he would attack and impale people at night and drive stakes into corpses. Despite people's fear of the Impaler, Trow writes that the forever-ness of the vampire continues to exist in the twenty-first century where people have the "Dracula Syndrome" because they are attracted to powerful beings. Modern day Tepes is just the unsatisfied, brutal man who deals with the world with his own personality and temperament.

Trow's foremost contribution to the increasing scholarship on vampires and on the supernatural, specifically on Stoker studies, is his insistence on matters of vampiric people in relation to literary art and cinema. He argues in the introductory chapter that we cannot fully understand vampires and their effects if we do not consider Vlad Tepes, the living vampire, because merely utilizing a fictitious reading disregards 300 years of the belief in true vampires that was written down as folklore after the death of Vlad III. We can better understand the resurgent craze for vampirism by looking at the literary alongside realistic representations of vampires. Indeed, if fans are unable to separate their love of Edward and Robert, then as Trow notes, it is impossible for us to separate Dracula and Dracul. He writes,

Very few people accept the real link between the Count of fiction and the real Vlad Tepes. The only connection, they will tell you, is that Bram Stoker rather liked the name and that there are no contemporary references to the Impaler as a vampire . . . The Saxons, who may not have believed in the undead anyway, branded him a homicidal tyrant; the Russians were impressed by his power; his native Romanians believed him a hero. There was no place for a revenant in any of that. And I believe that the intriguing parallels between the man of fiction and the man of substance - the undead and the living - cannot be merely coincidental. (329)

Trow effectively demonstrates the linkage between reality and literary portrayals and helps us see the intricate effects that literature has on its readers and how life is depicted best in representative arts. Despite the fact that Trow's argument about the effects of Vlad Tepes's reception establishes a broad overview of vampires, it falls slightly short with his substantial focus on the Draculesti clan. However, the wide compass of *A Brief History of Vampires* admirably showcases Trow's effective demonstration of the constitutive elements that connect people with vampiric actions and vampiric literature and cinema. Even though the book seems unequally proportioned, we cannot help but agree with Trow's defense that vampires have been and will always be a part of us: their timeless wings constantly offer us fear and comfort in their forever-ness.

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