



Who Was Dracula?: Bram Stoker's Trail of Blood

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An acclaimed historian sleuths out literature's most famous vampire, uncovering the source material – from folklore and history, to personas including Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman – behind Bram Stoker's bloody creation.

In more than a century of vampires in pop culture, only one lord of the night truly stands out: Dracula. Though the name may conjure up images of Bela Lugosi lurking about in a cape and white pancake makeup in the iconic 1931 film, the character of Dracula—a powerful, evil Transylvanian aristocrat who slaughters repressed Victorians on a trip to London—was created in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel of the same name, a work so popular it has spawned limitless reinventions in books and film.

But where did literature's undead icon come from? What sources inspired Stoker to craft a monster who would continue to haunt our dreams (and desires) for generations? Historian Jim Steinmeyer, who revealed the men behind the myths in *The Last Greatest Magician in the World*, explores a question that has long fascinated literary scholars and the reading public alike: Was there a real-life inspiration for Stoker's Count Dracula?

Hunting through archives and letters, literary and theatrical history, and the relationships and events that gave shape to Stoker's life, Steinmeyer reveals the people and stories behind the Transylvanian legend. In so doing, he shows how Stoker drew on material from the careers of literary contemporaries Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde; reviled personas such as Jack the Ripper and the infamous fifteenth-century prince Vlad Tepes, as well as little-known but significant figures, including Stoker's onetime boss, British stage star Henry Irving, and Theodore Roosevelt's uncle, Robert Roosevelt (thought to be a model for Van Helsing).

Along the way, Steinmeyer depicts Stoker's life in Dublin and London, his development as a writer, involvement with London's vibrant theater scene, and creation of one of horror's greatest masterpieces. Combining historical detective work with literary research, Steinmeyer's eagle eye provides an enthralling tour through Victorian culture and the extraordinary literary monster it produced.

Who Was Dracula?: Bram Stoker's Trail of Blood Details

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From Reader Review Who Was Dracula?: Bram Stoker's Trail of Blood for online ebook

Michelle Leah Olson says

Our Review, but LITERAL ADDICTION's Pack Alpha - Michelle L. Olson:

*ARC provided by the Publisher in exchange for an honest review

Jim Steinmeyer's Who Was Dracula is a delightful pastiche of research & knowledge intertwined with captivating literary allocution.

The fact behind the fiction reveals the complicated social web among the Victorian elite at the time of the novel - both famous and infamous - and shows that the brilliance behind the novel is the fact that there was no brilliance behind the novel.

I loved the factual story woven by Steinmeyer, & truly felt that both my book addict/paranormal junkie side, as well as my inner nerd were properly titillated.

Reading the book immediately made me go back & skim the Classic again, do a ton of Google searches to get more caught up with the primary players mentioned throughout the book, and rewatch the 1931 Bela Lugosi production of the film, all of which reminded me why the delicate simplicity of the horror from that time is still king.

Steinmeyer's tale can be summed up best by the brilliant last line of the book - "A truly great nightmare is once experienced, never forgotten. It is summoned again when we simply close our eyes. It needs nothing but imagination. It is never very far away."

LITERAL ADDICTION gives Who Was Dracula 5 Skulls. I was thrilled!

Bob Gard says

It details the sources and inspiration that Bram Stoker used to write his most famous book. And in that, it does a fairly good job. Even though the author goes off on some pretty wide tangents, it does provide a fascinating backstage look into the theatrical world of late Victorian and Edwardian times. The genesis for Dracula, I feel, is from the tails Stoker's Mother told him as a child. Stoker was given to hero worship, and his life was filled with intense friendships with charismatic men who were major influences, including Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, and most importantly, his relationship with Henry Irving, the 19th-century star actor. As a drama critic, Stoker raved about his (Irving's) performances before going to work as his business manager. Dracula was born in the theater. But one must not forget the influence of Dr. John Polidori's seminal 1818 short story, "The Vampyre." Highly interesting read. If you are a Dracula fan at all, give this one some time.

Jaclyn Hogan says

I love the Victorians. I'm not ashamed of it. They're such a delightfully contradictory mix of prudishness and melodrama, straight-laced and bloodthirsty. And few topics embody this contradiction more thoroughly than Dracula.

We live in an age of vampires. They are a symbol that always manages to pack a punch. With the Twilight Saga completed, many might say the vampire is on the wane, having been replaced with the zombie. But zombies, with their taste for flesh instead of blood bound by a lifeless body are really just vampires that can't be bothered to make an effort. And vampires get better lines.

Dracula, perhaps the most famous bit of gothic horror ever written, has been mused about for decades, if not longer. Where did Bram Stoker, otherwise mild mannered theater manager, get the idea that made his name and haunts us even today? As I understand it, authors get extremely tired of being asked where they get their ideas. Because (and it's obvious if you think about it) they get them from everywhere. They synthesize their experiences down to a sticky idea soup, and refine and reshape until something interesting emerges from it, ala The Creature from the Black Lagoon. But while it may be an ultimately futile exercise to find the genesis of Dracula in Bram Stoker's life, it sure as heck is entertaining.

Stoker, as acting manager of the Lyceum Theater, came in contact with many of the biggest names of his day. He was actor Henry Irving's right hand man. Irving is a fascinating character in his own right, despite being nearly forgotten today. Besides Irving, Stoker was well acquainted with Oscar Wilde, as Wilde had once courted Stoker's wife Florence. Stoker also maintained a fan's correspondence with poet Walt Whitman, and Steinmeyer surmises that all of this famous men found their way into Stoker's evil Count.

"Who Was Dracula?" is only one of many interesting questions Steinmeyer asks in his entertaining history. Others, like "was Stoker aware of how sexually charged his novel was?" and "did Bram Stoker meet Jack the Ripper?" are others. While none of them may ever be answered fully, pondering them is as delicious and strange as a shot of blood, straight from the neck.

Nick says

Parts of this book were excellent, and parts were merely frustrating. The parts of the book which detailed the lives of Bram Stoker and his circle of friends and acquaintances were excellent. His life in the theater field, and the reasons why his version of a Dracula play was only staged once, these were outstanding insights into the theatrical world. His relationship with one of the great British actors of the day, along with the nuts and bolts of running a theater company were also great stuff. Even his relationship to Oscar Wilde over the years, odd as it was, proved very interesting.

The parts of the book which wandered off into seemingly random speculations were what bothered me. An example was a digression about whether Stoker was seriously ill in a way that caused his mental processes to deteriorate at the time he wrote "Lair of the White Worm." Granted "Lair" was mostly a dreadful book, but even the author abandons this odd line of reasoning partway through, concluding that it was just Stoker at his worst. This leaves the reader to wonder why this "stub" of speculation was even included.

Other such things get left in, including speculations on the sources for the physical and mental details of Dracula's character in the book. Stoker wrote "Dracula" over a period of several years, putting far more of his time and energy into it than he did any of his other prose works. It seems perfectly reasonable that it was better written, and that he might have blended a variety of sources over time. Instead, the author's speculations wander afield just when things get interesting.

The last part of the book includes a fascinating history of the stage and movie versions of Dracula which

explained some of the weird bits of timing in their production, and how a lawsuit by Stoker's widow almost cost the world Murnau's film *Nosferatu*.

So, for those interested in the history of vampire literature, in the history of 19th century theater, or the lives of Bram Stoker and his circle, this is an excellent book. If the author had left out the speculations, I would have easily given it a fourth star.

Doug Jennings says

Written well with entertaining stories of the fascinating life, connections, influences and legacy of Dracula author and creator Bram Stoker. I was fascinated and impressed with the rich literary historical context surrounding one of the most famous (but often not actually read) horror novels of all time. The cast of characters woven in and out of this literary "Who is it?" is stellar: Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Jack the Ripper, George Bernard Shaw, first-knighted-actor Henry Irving and even a small cameo by Vincent Price. Stoker was an Irish-born, influential theater manager for London-based actor Henry Irving during the Victorian Golden Age of theater which also shared time-space with the budding horror genre of literature. All of these elements were well-researched and mined to produce an excellent read.

Megan Gilchrist says

Although I found the chapter divisions a bit choppy, I enjoyed the book. I found it especially interesting to read about all of the connections between Stoker and his contemporaries (Shaw, Boucicault, Whitman, Wilde, etc.). Worth a read if you're interested in 19th Century literature or the development of the horror genre.

Tanner Hayden says

A very interesting insight into the life and people of Stoker's Earthly existence. It gets off to a masterful start, calling me back to the delicious Victorian era, but eventually stutters some as the author comes across as he's attempting to fit an idea of Oscar Wilde into his book that really didn't seem to affect the writing of *Dracula* much at all. None the less, a very solid book I enjoyed a good deal.

Dann says

An interesting read, but in the end, somewhat unconvincing. Steinmeyer gives some good examples of why some of the people close to Stoker could have influenced his most famous character, but in the end, it's a great deal of speculation. Stoker didn't leave behind many notes or anything for us to draw conclusions from, so there's not much that can be done other than speculate. There are some interesting facts in here, but it wasn't the insightful look I was hoping for.

Shellie (Layers of Thought) says

Original review posted at Layers of Thought.

*A historical telling of how Bram Stoker's 100 year old cultural icon – Dracula - was created and became the character that holds awe even today. This book goes into some of the significant happenings going on around the creation of the novel **Dracula**.*

Description:

Vampire fascination is not going to go away. We can see that in the popularity of books and cinema that include vampires. Interest in the novel **Dracula**, even a 100 years beyond its publication, proves this well. In the non-fiction book **Who Was Dracula?** author Jim Steinmeyer attempts to enlighten and dispel some long held ideas about who the character was, who Stoker based his character on, how the novel was created, and some intriguing historical details surrounding Stoker at the time.

It appears that Steinmeyer wants readers to believe that Dracula was not entirely based upon Bram Stoker's boss Henry Irving (many Dracula scholars believe it was). In fact the character is influenced by some famous individuals and events that Stoker came across in his life. These include Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Jack the Ripper and many more.

Less surprisingly, Steinmeyer believes that the mythology we have built around vampires is based upon what Bram Stoker created. He also states that Dracula became a powerful mystical figure a long time ago – indeed he says that Dracula was a revered pop cultural icon 100 years ago. So Vampire love is not new.

Thoughts:

This was not an all-encompassing read for me; I felt compelled and intrigued in some parts but a bit lost in others. Generally, I find non-fiction historical books a bit hard to read, but I gave this a go because I loved the novel **Dracula** and feel that the character Stoker created is an exceptional and memorable one. So naturally I was curious as to what influenced Bram Stoker when he was writing this popular novel.

There are a lot of meaty historical details around a variety of characters and Bram Stoker's connection to them, as the author attempts to support his theories. This pulled me in and kept me reading, but at times I felt like I was reading more about Henry Irving (Bram Stoker's boss and a popular actor and theater owner) than I was about the novel **Dracula** or Stoker himself.

I did enjoy the book and in the end would say that **Who Was Dracula?** is for anyone who is interested in the elements that create a character such as Dracula; anyone interested in the historical situations that surrounded Bram Stoker and influenced him; and those interested in the reasons why it is still so popular 100-plus years after its publication. 3 stars for this intriguing historical book.

*A note to readers: if you are planning on reading this book you may want to read a few other things first – including **Dracula**, **The Picture of Dorian Grey**, **Leaves of Grass** and the **Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**. It does contain some spoilers for these classics. Alternatively, be prepared to skip a bit here and there so you can still enjoy these great books to the full.

Joy (joyous reads) says

Bram Stoker's Dracula has been retold, re-made, translated, and molded into the literary great that it is now; whether ~~Stoker~~ we like it or not, the book sacrificed bits and bits of its soul with every interpretation. From

the campy B movies of the past and the less than stellar acting of every actor picked for the characters of the book, through the years, the novel has lost some gleam of brilliance with every film adaptations.

Twenty pages in to this book, I've started to question why I was reading something that was based on a literature that I've not read. I have seen countless interpretations in every forms but have never actually read the original work. I may have endeavoured at the time when the infamous Gary Oldman film was released but that was years ago. Sadly, I never did finish the book.

Interestingly enough, there was something in the introduction of this book that caught my eye. That no one really knows Bram Stoker's Dracula but Bram Stoker himself. We know the beginning, the blood sucking, Mina, Transylvania, the steak through the heart and finally, the end. I'll be the first to admit that I'm one of those people. I know the mechanics; I know the gist. But I don't know the meat and potatoes of the book. The point that I'm making, I supposed, is that the general public - even those who hasn't read it - would probably know what it's about.

For a reader like me, the biggest tragedy of reading Steinmeyer's book is that I'm not a reader of classic literature - which is the crux of my problem with his book. I was way out of my league. I know the literary greats and have heard of their work but that's as far as I can go. Because of this, I really couldn't appreciate Stoker's influences. One thing's for certain though; the writers of our generation would be envious of Stoker's inspirations. They were walking, talking literary greats: Whitman, Irving, Shelley, Wilde. At the time, they were actually alive.

It's really interesting how Dracula came to life as parts of Stoker's life was revealed. From his fascination with the stage and an almost fanatic obsession with Irving, the coined term, art imitating life couldn't be truer. This book was more of a biography of a writer's life and how the legend came about. Steinmeyer educates while exposing Dracula as I've never seen him before. If you're a fan of this classic, and wouldn't mind reading something outside of the fiction box you reside in, Steinmeyer's book is not to be missed.

Ronald Roseborough says

Who was Dracula? Well apparently he was much more than just his creator, Bram Stoker. At best, Stoker was for the most part, a mediocre writer, gaining very little acknowledgement from critics in his time. He was, however, an excellent manager for one of the Victorian era's major stage actors, Henry Irving. Stoker dedicated his life to helping Irving, who has almost vanished into history, achieve fame on the English stage. In turn, Stoker borrowed freely from Irving's character to help characterize Dracula. Bram also drew from other personalities of the time, with whom he was well acquainted, notably Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, and perhaps even Jack the Ripper. The book notes in detail Stoker's interactions with these personalities. It attempts to detail what characteristics Bram borrowed either consciously or unconsciously, to invest in his character, Dracula. It would take Stoker seven years to meld his thoughts with some of the characteristics of these persons, thus giving birth to Dracula. Although Dracula appears in only 60 or so pages of his 400 page opus, Stoker created a character that would take on a life of its own. This book much like its subject, Dracula, is at times lusty and full of life, while at other times it can descend into the dryness and dust of history. Book provided for review by the well read folks at Tarcher/Penguin.

Yasmin says

For the majority of this book I actually would have rated it higher, however, with the addition of Oscar

Wilde, my opinion changed drastically. I'm not going to say I'm a know it all about Oscar Wilde, because I don't, but I was puzzled by things stated in the book. I decided to look in the back for references used for his information. From all the biographies and scholarly books written and including the collection of Oscar Wilde letters only three books were used, well only two as Fanny Moyle's book is mostly about Constance Wilde. Richard Ellmann's biography is actually highly suspect for it's gross inaccuracies and the other was Neil McKenna's book, which is fine I'm sure but not everything there is 100% fool proof. My biggest objection was not only were the chapters about Oscar Wilde in the book not given full credit but the idea that Dracula sated on blood would resemble Oscar Wilde in any way. There have been descriptions used to describe Wilde in the late 1890s as looking distinctly repulsive, however, photographs from this period argue against this. I am aware that the photos are in black and white, but there is nothing in his visage that is in the least grotesque or even overweight for his height and size. I have read Dracula twice and I can't find as much sensationalism of sensuality as others have made out and apart from a shared gothic genre I don't believe any story written influenced Bram Stoker's work. While Wilde's trials were scandalous for the period and was in the media every day for the length of both trials I thought it was unnecessary to reproduce even a fraction of the trials themselves. Indeed from what I have gathered from other books the relationship to the two literary figures had was almost nonexistent. When the reception of Dracula has been mentioned elsewhere the reviews were generally negative of the book, the author here failed to reproduce both kinds of critique for the book. It seems that the addition of Oscar Wilde didn't serve any purpose to further the question of whom was behind the character of Dracula or add to it any shape or form. If Stoker had been a thorough researcher (it is not clear by this book if he was or not) then the character of Dracula would have been drawn largely from the folklore of Europe. The examples cited of how Oscar Wilde's life from the 1890s influenced Dracula is fanciful at best. It was rather disappointing that this book was not as well thought up as it could have been. Bela Lugosi who transformed the role and made sure, not consciously, that the story of Dracula continued down the ages was brushed over and curiously Francis Ford Coppola's film was not even mentioned, even though critics have claimed that his interpretation has been the closest to the actual book. In this book we are also no closer to knowing the woman of Florence Stoker, nee Balcombe, how she felt about the book and how she managed to live with the author of Dracula. Nor do we really see how this odd book did creep under censorship restrictions.

Steven says

Not as good a bio as the author did for Charles Fort, but it could be the seeming padding of this book. The gist of it really ought to be a great article or short-form novella, but it got filled out to standard book length with a lot of seemingly irrelevant side matter. (Honestly, I know Oscar Wilde nearly married the woman who became Stoker's wife, but did his history & trial and info thereabouts really need to fill two chapters in a book ostensibly about Stoker & the origins of his DRACULA novel?)

Engagingly written and well enough done to finish, but frustrating for its meandering off course and off topic. It was like a college course lecture by a well-liked professor whose attention to his topic wavered but eventually returned.

Chris says

How much you enjoy or read of this book depends on how much you have read Dracula.

If you have only read Dracula once, you will get much out of this book.

If you have read Dracula more than once, but have read nothing about Stoker or the his London, you will get something out of this book.

If you have read Dracula more than once and know history, you will get nothing out of this book.

If you have read Dracula more than once, read Belford, Florseacu and others, you will get absolutely nothing out of this book and wondered how what is basically Cliffnotes gets a hardcover book deal while cursing the fact that you brought in hardcover and then feeling guilty because it really isn't the author's fault that other people are stupid, but honestly he is really saying things you already know and hopefully this will go quickly at paperbackswap and you can find something good.

Crossposted at Booklikes.

Jeanine says

I'm not going to rate this book. I was excited to get an autographed copy since I'm fascinated with Bram Stoker and Dracula. Unfortunately I couldn't get through it. The author went on and on about Henry Irving (I don't care about him outside his connection with Stoker) and Oscar Wilde. The book was just not what I was hoping it would be. I gave up.
