

Werewolves, Wolves and the Gothic

Robert McKay and John Miller (editors)

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Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017.

ISBN: 9781786831026, 304pp. £85.

Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? In this exciting edited collection, Robert McKay and John Miller present a broad range of essays that draw upon the emergent field of EcoGothic in that they consider the hold which the lupine continues to exercise, tooth and claw, over the Gothic imagination. As this collection demonstrates, far from being merely a nightmare confined to childhood fairytales, the werewolf, perhaps like no other figure from the Gothic canon persistently re-emerges through the stories we tell about ourselves to mount a challenge to our concept of the human and how we endeavour to distinguish the wolfish outsider from the beast within: "The werewolf is the figure of the human who is too much body", they write, in their Introduction, "subject to the irrational pull of the moon, and outside the benefactions of religious and social privilege" (p.5) And yet, unlike the vampire, the less hirsute darling of the gothic, the (were)wolf is subject to the laws of nature: a wilderness at once threatening and vulnerable as concerns about climate change and wolf conservation demonstrate: "whilst wolves and werewolves evoke a sense of the primal, they might also be taken as paradigmatic of the crises of modernity" (p.2) The essays build upon a long-held fascination with the lycanthropic that they trace back to Sabine Baring-Gould's 1865 study of the werewolf and rather than serving to quarantine our anxieties concerning wolves to a distant pre-agricultural past, these essays illustrate the fears, curiosity and fascination that these creatures have evoked across a range of media: literature, television, postcards, cartoons, and film, spanning from the late Victorian period to the present day.

The book is divided into two sections: the first, ‘Social Anxieties’ deals with representations of werewolves as a prism through which to examine fears of sexuality, masculinity, femininity, adolescence and race as the body of the wolf and the act of transformation can be read as a conduit for fears of other(ed) monstrous bodies. Hannah Priest’s chapter explores how the post-nineteenth-century cinematic representation of the werewolf rewrites earlier narratives in which female evil is the cause of infection so now the werewolf transformation is effected by a contagious bite from another male who ‘sires’ them. Meanwhile, Jazmina Cininas explains the appearance of the werewolf as an outlet for social panic and anxieties surrounding the suffragette and The New Woman, through late Victorian and Edwardian stories, cartoons, and ephemeral postcards. Meanwhile, Michelle Nichole Boyer’s chapter departs from an examination of gender to explore the racial and racist associations bound up with the wolf and examines how in films, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Last of the Dogmen* (1995), as well as in television series, *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-present), *True Blood* (2008-14), and *The Originals* (2013-present), the werewolf is aligned to the colonisation of peoples of North America and their “postcolonial vanishings” (p.65). Boyer notes the problematic associations of savagery that reduce indigenous populations to “nothing more than supernatural beasts used for entertainment value” (p.85). In a similar vein, Roman Bartosch and Celestine Caruso use Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series to argue that the association between the novels’ werewolf Jacob and the Native American population channels its racism through biophobia as the wolf, unlike the ethereal vampire, is too much body. Their use of the term, *ubernatural* to depict “the excess of the bodily, the lively, and the transformative nature of becoming” (p.89) is sure to become an invaluable addition to the lexicon used to explore the material abject. The section concludes with Batia Boe Stolar’s consideration of the werewolf film trilogy, *Ginger Snaps* (2000, 2004, 2004), which chimes with the previous chapter in aligning the bodily transformation of “becoming wolf” with the adolescent experience, and yet the film, as Stolar argues, can be owned from a distinctly rebellious female perspective as akin to “becoming woman”.

The second section of the book is concerned with ‘Species Trouble’ and chapters here “more directly and explicitly consider werewolf narratives whose social horizons reach ‘beyond’ the human to trouble the very distinction between human and all other animals” (p.11) Here there is much more focus on wolves, werewolves, and their relationship to the human. To this end, these latter chapters seek to destabilise notions of Darwinism and

taxonomies that prioritise the human experience over that of the beast. Kaja Franck discusses examples of werewolf lore in Stoker's *Dracula* and this chapter offers a useful genealogy of the connection between wolves and the gothic (that until this point in the book has not been made explicit). Franck contextualises the threat of the wolf in the novel with reference to contemporaneous travel writings to make the connection between animality and the outsider to the imperial West: the 'children of the night' always haunting the borders, but never far from the door. Continuing the politicised reading of the animal, John Miller's chapter notes how the symbolism inherent in representations of wolves and werewolves in the short stories of Saki challenges ideas of civilization, class and sexuality in Edwardian England, whilst Robert McKay's subsequent chapter examines the wolfish nature of man as "the effects of capitalism that suppresses humanity's communal spirit" destabilises the hierarchy between species as depicted in Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris* (1933) (p.184). Margot Young's chapter discovers ecophilia in Angela Carter's werewolf tales. She resists a psychoanalytical reading of the wolf as anthropomorphic symbol of libidinous sexuality but instead argues that the werewolf can be seen as a symbol of nostalgic fantasies of wilderness and freedom lost to agriculturalism. In a similarly idealistic vein, Bill Hughes looks at the werewolf romance in Maggie Stiefvater's *Shiver* (2009) as "Stiefvater evokes the powerful allure of losing one's human identity and becoming immersed in the 'natural' world (bearing in mind the complexities of this term)" (p.228) and the chapter illustrates how the series breaks down antinomies between human and animal, male and female, adult and teenager. Matthew Lerberg's final chapter, appropriately capitalising upon the book's instilment of a new-found sympathy for the wolf, analyses meta-fictional representations of werewolves in recent television series *Grimm* (2011-2017) and *Fables* (2002-15), as the Big Bad Wolf appears in each case to remind audiences that cultural tales are always subject to revision.

The collection aptly illustrates the ongoing ambiguity surrounding the wolf and our inability to fully comprehend and reconcile the creature as living being with its cultural status and notoriety. These essays too draw upon the elusiveness, the paradoxes, and the enigmatic allure of *Canis lupus*. For this reason, the study seems exuberantly kaleidoscopic in its reading of wolves and their more fantastic and supernatural renderings, in portraying a figure that is both preternaturally intelligent whilst unintelligible to human reason, a monster under threat of extinction, potentially representative of a crisis of masculinity and also used to depict monstrous femininity, rapaciously heterosexual and a poignant metaphor for

queerness. Occasionally, because of this, some of the chapters do not quite seem in dialogue with each other and one chapter may be dismissive of the very qualities of the wolf that another author espouses, rather like Little Red, dissecting the wolf's anatomy, piece by piece, not yet cognisant of the whole, as she encounters him in her grandmother's bed: (eyes, ears, teeth).

Perhaps, reassuringly, whilst these essays offer to enlighten attitudes towards the wolf as the ultimate villain of the storybook kingdom, they refrain from overturning the enigma of this creature that continues, quite rightly, to stalk our cultural nightmares with fantasies of the wolfish wild.