

Something in the Blood: The Untold Story of Bram Stoker, the Man Who Wrote Dracula
David J. Skal

Murray Leeder, University of Calgary

New York: Liveright, 2016

ISBN: 1631490109, £21.25

I seriously doubt if I am the only person of my generation to be introduced to Horror Studies by a chance encounter with David J. Skal's *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (1993). Indeed, my youthful research into the genre was facilitated by Skal's work, also including *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Screen* (1990) *Dark Carnival: The Secret World of Tod Browning, Hollywood's Master of the Macabre* (1995), and *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* (1996). Yet there was always an unrealized project hovering in the background: an extensive biography of Bram Stoker. And now, it has arrived at last.

Something in the Blood is not the first biography of Stoker (and indeed, the previous biographies are subjects of discussion within it), but is clearly the definitive one. And it is not interested only in the fact of Stoker's life but of the cultures that it occupied, from the plague-ravaged Ireland of his birth to prewar London of his last years. Exhaustively researched if vaguely overstuffed, *Something in the Blood* is structured generally chronologically around Stoker's life, with the final chapter covering his post-death reputation, but frequently breaks away from Stoker himself to interrogate aspects of the circles in which he occupied. Skal does much to fill in not only Stoker's own life but the literary and dramatic worlds in which he operated, and it is certainly fascinating to learn fresh details of Stoker's associations with Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Henry Irving and other notables, yet there is sometime a sense of focus wanting. The most dramatic example is how the chapter "Undead Oscar" is given over entirely to the post-mortem exploits of Stoker's acquaintance Oscar Wilde – it is fascinating and provocative in its own way (especially in uncovering the strange career of Wilde-obsessed American writer George Viereck), but goes for many pages without ever mentioning Stoker. Wilde also presents one angle into a subject that obviously interests Skal: Victorian male

homosexuality. Skal marshals impressive evidence to suggest that Stoker was a latent or secret homosexual; the case is compelling but still sadly lacking in the “smoking gun” one would hope for. At times, Skal playfully imagines the evidence that a biographer would love to find. The most egregious case might be when he imagines Wilde secretly dropping a queer-coded green carnation in Stoker’s pocket at the theatrical debut of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, to “be discovered later. As he undressed” (328). There is more than enough interesting research on display here to resort to such speculation.

It is no surprise that the book foregrounds *Dracula*; all of the opening chapters, covering Stoker’s ancestry and sickly childhood in Ireland etc., contain regular references to *Dracula*. The rest of Stoker’s literary career is given comparatively little discussion, with certain of his novels – like *The Snake’s Pass* (1890), *The Shoulder of Shasta* (1885) or *Lady Athlyne* (1908) – being covered in little more than a paragraph. This focus is inevitably, perhaps, yet in one intriguing passage Skal flirts with the notion that *Dracula* held little personal interest for Stoker (and indeed, the book suggests that he treated writing as little more than a professional venture) (377). The persistent notion that *Dracula* is a work of personal revelation, a perhaps unconscious confession as to impulses of all kinds, is so ingrained in scholarship that to claim he saw it as little more than a money maker seems almost heretical; I would like to have heard more of it.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter for horror scholars is the last one, “The Curse of *Dracula*,” which deals with Stoker’s legacy in the century-plus since his death. I somewhat dreaded coming to it, expecting a brief survey of *Dracula* adaptations and the like – perhaps of interest to the uninitiated but of little value otherwise. Instead, Skal has unearthed some fascinating permutations of Stoker’s legacy, from the previous autobiographies (one by Stoker’s great-nephew Daniel Farson, a gay broadcaster who drew his relatives’ ire for selling family heirlooms to pay bar bills (560-5)) to an aborted Stoker biopic project to a bizarre unmade adaptation of *Dracula* by Ken Russell (573-4). The Stoker adaptation Russell did make, *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988), is acknowledged only in an image, and the farther afield Stoker adaptations – like *Shadow Builder* (1998) – go unacknowledged, as, curiously, do the works of descendant Dacre Stoker – but the book cannot cover everything.

On the subject of images, this is an area where *Something in the Blood* is especially strong, with sixteen pages of colour pages and another 80 black and white images. They

contribute immeasurably to keeping the book readable and engaging, even when bogged down by the nuances of Victorian theatre culture, the Stoker family's finances and other narrow topics.

The phrase "labour of love" applies to *Something in the Blood*, as well as "magnum opus"; at the end, one feels as if one has gotten to know Skal as much as Stoker.