

Boy Horror Beats Girl Vampires

BY FRANCESCA SUSANNA

In Diana Lee's first novel, *A Taste for Blood*, vampires are only human, not unlike any decent, hardworking, middle- to upper-middle-class American who is charitable, polite, and invests wisely. They are about as scary as a shadow and as dangerous as a riled up cat.

Lee's story is set in late-Victorian Edinburgh where the vampire femmes say things like, "If you need a friend to talk to, please feel free to visit me."

And the vampire butches give long, holier-than-thou lectures on the evils of child labor and underpaying workers. Only the insane vampires ever actually kill anyone, and one or two would be vegans if they could; their compromise is to suck only the blood of wild animals, and only when they absolutely must.

Often minority groups fighting negative stereotypes over-compensate and refuse to create negative characters in their own group. The predatory lesbian is one such stereotype that occurs too often in movies and literature. But let's face it, vampires are supposed to be predatory, no matter their gender or orientation. They are out for blood — all the old legends agree. Furthermore, some lesbians really are predatory and scary — because lesbians are people and some people are that way. The old stereotypes are not going to be razed by a bunch of paper-doll characters devoid of flaws and foibles.

The story revolves around the young, beautiful, and spirited Carissa, the pampered daughter of wealthy Scottish landowners. She falls in love with her neighbor Ryan, Lord Wolf, a passing butch vampire, and they commence a torrid, graphically described affair. The sex scenes abound, and it's a good thing too, because little else is exciting. Carissa is also the direct descendent of Ryan's first lover, Brynn, who lived in the 1100s. In their quiet moments, Ryan recounts to Carissa the tales of her fore-mothers, many of them, including

A Taste for Blood

Diana Lee
Alice Street Editions /
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Shadows of the Night: Queer Tales of the Uncanny and Unusual

Greg Herren, Editor
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Carissa's grandmother whom she remembers, old lovers of Ryan's. This is the creepiest element of the whole book.

There is a vampire queen in Edinburgh who is Ryan's bitter rival, and the token evil vampire, Blake, who turned Ryan into a vampire some eight hundred years earlier. He seems to be the only bad vampire in all of Scotland, but he is also insane. Lee's vampires are not unlike spoiled Americans looking for ways to give back to the community. There are no vampires here, just good people who have taken the Atkins diet a few steps too far.

A Taste for Blood is really an excuse for some butch-femme action in pseudo-Victorian outfits: Ryan likes Carissa not to wear bloomers, as Lee calls them. Had Lee done even a little research she would have learned that Victorian women wore drawers with open crotches so that they could use the bathroom.

Unfortunately, the quality of this book is typical of the state of lesbian writing in general. It's as if publishers — an imprint of the Haworth Press in this case — think gay women are so desperate for lesbian writing that we will read anything, and that we are stupid enough to mistake early 21st century mores and sensibilities for Victorian ones. It is embarrassing and insulting. To be effectively transported to Victorian Britain, we must look to Sarah Waters of *Tipping the Velvet* fame, and hope that one day she will write a vampire novel.

There is good queer horror out there, and *Shadows of the*

Night, an anthology of short pieces, offers more hope in that genre. Even the worst of the stories collected here is pretty good. The one or two stranger-in-the-storm tales where the beautiful woman looking for shelter turns out to be a ghost are just as well skipped over, but most of the rest are chilling and frightening. The stories range from simple to funny to nerve-racking.

There is a well-done vampire tale, *Waiting for the Vampire* by William J. Mann, with vampires that are truly frightening. An old man tells a young friend that he was bitten some 90 years earlier in czarist Russia by a vampire, a handsome, seductive count who was friends with his parents. The old man tells his friend, Ogden, that when he dies, he will rise again after three nights with a hunger for blood. Ogden refuses to believe the old man's tale, but it preys on his mind as do the attentions of a charming Polish immigrant named Stanley, not to mention Ogden's own repressed homosexuality, perhaps the most frightening aspect since the story takes place in 1958.

The Mask by David McConnell begins with a young man killed in a freak accident as he sunbathes with his lover. Nothing much happens as the lover moves around in a daze for a week or so trying to make sense of it, yet the reader grows increasingly nervous about the fate of the two young men. When something does happen, the reader realizes that he has been in a state of fear, along with the young man, the whole time.

So, mark the sexy bits in *A Taste for Blood* and hope for the best, but for something deliciously chilling, *Shadows of the Night* will go farther to satisfy. ▼

Francesca Susanna is occasionally horrified in Burlington.

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