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# 'The Vampire' Review: Creatures Made for Haunting

Vampires have served as walking reproaches to colonialism, capitalism, sexism and anything else gnawing on the conscience of the zeitgeist. Daniel Akst reviews "The Vampire: A New History" by Nick Groom.

By Daniel Akst

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Things just get more and more complicated. Take vampires, for instance. As Margaret Atwood has observed: "You used to know where you stood with them—smelly, evil, undead—but now there are virtuous vampires and disreputable vampires, and sexy vampires and glittery vampires, and none of the old rules about them are true any more."

Striding boldly into this confusion comes "The Vampire: A New History," from the British scholar and critic Nick Groom. The timing is no accident. Leaving aside our current obsession with these restless figures of the shadows, the book's publication marks the imminent 200th anniversary of John William Polidori's landmark "The Vampyre: A Tale." This was the 1819 novella, at first misattributed to Byron, that lifted the lid off the crypt and eventually allowed the emergence of Bram Stoker's "Dracula," the recent "Twilight" books and movies, and all the bloodsuckers that have come in between.

Why vampires? What is it about these hemophiles that draws us to them as powerfully as they are drawn to us? Isn't it possible that, if we just ignored them, they might go away?

Not bloody likely. In truth, Mr. Groom shows, the world has been preoccupied with vampires for quite some time, and his book goes a long way toward answering the question of why. From the early 18th century, he reports, "the figure of the vampire has stalked through the western intellectual and cultural tradition—not merely as a supernatural agent of Gothic fictions, but rather as a powerful tool for making sense of the human predicament."

As bloodsucking barometers of human anxieties, vampires inevitably came to embody concerns about sex, politics, religion and economics—and it is their role in such matters across three centuries that most concerns Mr. Groom, whose 200-page treatise is more cultural history than comprehensive chronicle.

Exploring the parallels between vampirism and religion, for example, Mr. Groom argues that vampires represent an inversion of the Eucharist: "The ingestion of blood was a calculated perversion of the communion sacrament—turning blood into wine, rather than wine into blood." Vampires could be seen as rehearsing the bloodletting quackery of 19th-century medicine (they were "often depicted as hanging over their victims like bedside physicians") or embodying the theory of microbial infection. Vampire metaphors were "key devices with which Marx could describe and diagnose capitalism."

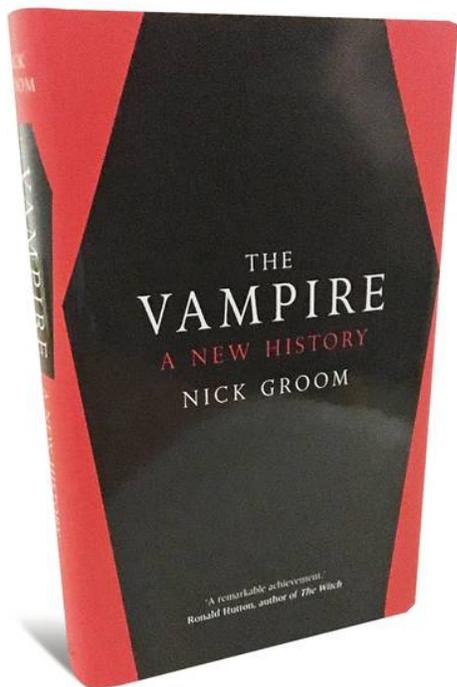


PHOTO: WSJ

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THE VAMPIRE: A NEW HISTORY

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By Nick Groom  
(Yale, 287 pages, \$25)



Jonathan Frid as vampire Barnabas Collins in ABC's "Dark Shadows." PHOTO: /ABC VIA GETTY IMAGES

Tales of blood-sucking demons date to biblical times at least, but the vampires we know and love arose from the mists of Eastern European folklore centuries ago, perhaps as a response to Hapsburg occupation, only to find themselves celebrities in the early 18th century.

The Enlightenment notwithstanding, for a while people actually believed that certain corpses arose from the dead and wandered among the living to suck their blood, often spreading the contagion of vampirism as they went. In the 1730s, vampires became something of a media sensation in Europe thanks to the investigations of scientists and physicians whose ambitions exceeded their skills and the rise of big-city newspapers that knew a good story when they saw

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one. Vampire imagery became commonplace. In 1733, a British political pamphleteer wrote an open letter to the prime minister portraying taxation revenue as a way to “indulge the Luxury, and gratify the Rapine of a fat-gutted *Vampire*.” And in 1750 Henry Fielding turned the charge of parasitism against literary critics, condemning these poor innocents as “Vampyres, being dead and damn’d,” who “with the Blood of living Bards are cramm’d.”

Mr. Groom appears to have marinated himself in the vast literature of his subject, and “The Vampire” is an impressively learned work. Who knew of the Slavonic gypsy belief that a pumpkin

kept after Christmas became a vampire? Given the role of Dracula in establishing the popular image of vampires, it’s surprising to learn that “most nineteenth-century vampires were female.”

It is clear from the author’s efforts that, for the most part, each generation of humans gets the vampires it deserves. Cultural critics have variously found vampires to be walking reproaches to colonialism, capitalism, sexism, technological hubris and anything else gnawing on the conscience of the zeitgeist. Mr. Groom is good at exploring all this, for the most part leaving to others (such as Paul Barber in his witty 1988 book “Vampires, Burial, and Death”) the scientific and folkloric aspects of vampirology.

At the risk of reinforcing Fielding’s stereotype about critics, let’s acknowledge that in learning, as in so much else, it’s possible to have too much of a good thing. At times, readers of “The Vampire” may feel themselves paddling hopelessly in a sea of trivia. How else to respond to the author’s bewildering assertion that “even the great Slavonic vampirologist Jan Perkowski was tempted to elucidate the case of Arnod Paole as a symbolic engagement with tenth-century Bogomilism”?

Mr. Groom also has a tendency to see vampires everywhere and so goes on about a variety of tenuously related creatures and episodes. An entire chapter on ghosts seems especially overreaching. And sometimes he lapses into academese: “Just as the vampire disturbs territorial borders, so it disrupts temporality.” He also mentions that “bodies are governed by discourses” even beyond the grave and recklessly drops “liminality” into the text even though the term is well-known to induce allergic symptoms in sensitive readers.

Today’s vampires, like today’s people, will seem domesticated compared with their reeking forebears, yet the modern hemophiles Ms. Atwood complains of are still helping us understand ourselves. All parties owe Mr. Groom thanks for helping to explain the meaning of vampires—which is only fair, since vampires have worked so hard, for so long, to explain the meaning of us.

*Mr. Akst is a visiting instructor at Bard College.*

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