

**William Orem, *Miss Lucy*** (Arlington, VA: Gival Press, 2019)  
**Dacre Stoker and J. D. Barker, *Dracul*** (London: Transworld, 2018)

The eternally fascinating question of what inspired Bram Stoker to create the monstrous Dracula has provided grist to many a critical mill: was it his childhood sickness and isolation; his mother's tales of poverty-stricken Irish peasants suffering from cholera and famine; his intense relationship with Henry Irving; or a cocktail of all of these? Writers of fiction, too, have found themselves fascinated by the man behind the beast. Joseph O'Connor's *Shadowplay* (2019) won 'Best Novel of the Year' at the Irish Books Awards 2019, was shortlisted for the 2019 COSTA Novel Award, and widely reviewed; I would like to use my space here to look at two other recent fictional accounts of Stoker's life.

*Miss Lucy* by William Orem (2019), like *Shadowplay*, takes Stoker's time at the Lyceum Theatre in London as its starting point and makes clear that then, as now, there is enough horror in London for those with eyes to see it to inspire any number of imaginary beasts. In both *Shadowplay* and *Miss Lucy*, the glittering show of the theatre is revealed to be perilously propped up on exploitation: in the former, a toxic workplace draining Bram and others of their emotional strength; in the latter, taking advantage of the sweatshop labour of immigrants. Orem's late-nineteenth-century London is haunted by war veterans, immigrants, and social-climbing hypocrites, all passing through – no one is settled in this city, only stuck. Classic elements of the vampire myth are grounded here in gritty social realism. For example, the title character, Lucy, who is connected to the Lyceum via her work as a seamstress, sees her life as a premature burial; living and working for so long in poorly lit conditions has rendered her photosensitive, so much so that she grimaces when Bram brings her out for some air. The tentative beginnings of a love affair between Bram and Lucy are tenderly drawn, but the novel will not allow the reader to forget the imbalance of power inherent in the relationship.

The precarity of Bram's hold on 'respectability', his vulnerability to the whim of public opinion, is made clear – he may well lose his job, his house, and his wife if he creates any kind of scandal. However, the risks are even greater for Lucy – for her, a loss of face carries a real risk of starving to death. She tells Bram, '[s]ometimes I think I belong dead' (p. 106) – which echoes eerily alongside Bram's memories of his traumatic experience of serious childhood illness. *Miss Lucy* offers a thought-provoking glimpse of how his father's experience of his illness inflected the rest of Bram's life; having already begun to mourn his son, he then struggled to reconnect with him when Bram unexpectedly survived. This is a

satisfying work of Neo-Victorian fiction that feels quite timely, not least in a reminder from Bram, when recalling discussion by Lyceum glitterati of immigrants as plague-bringers, that the same had been said not so long ago of the Irish (p. 99).

Bram's childhood illness is also an important element of Dacre Stoker and J. D. Barker's 2018 novel *Dracul*. Presented to the reader as a prequel to *Dracula*, this fictionalised version of Stoker's life jumps between 'Now' (scenes written in the present tense), and extracts from Bram's journal that present the story of Ellen Crone, a mysterious and beautiful young woman accepted into the Stoker household just before Bram's birth. With each attack of illness, Ellen locks herself away with Bram until he has recovered – she then emerges looking haggard, disappearing for days at a time. During one serious spell, Bram seems likely to die until Ellen intervenes; on this occasion, he appears to be permanently cured, and this time when Ellen goes away, she does not return.

Since its first publication in 1897, *Dracula* has survived countless adaptations, and undoubtedly there will be more. It facilitates interpretation by *suggesting* horrors, leaving room for the reader to fill in the blanks – for example, what exactly is the vampiric Lucy Westenra doing to the children who call her the 'bloofer lady'?<sup>1</sup> *Dracul* to some extent tries to have its cake and eat it, by suggesting threats and then neutralising them. At several points in the narrative, Bram returns to his 'cure' by Ellen, describing it in his journal and in conversation with his siblings as an attack in which his beloved carer becomes somehow monstrous, bearing down on a small child unable to escape (p. 89). The adult Bram is possessed of some powers that appear to stem from his relationship with Ellen – a supernatural ability to heal, and a psychic link with Ellen – and he is troubled by what Ellen has done to him, and whether this has left him as something not quite human. It is disturbing and upsetting. However, towards the end, the narrative attempts to recast Ellen's actions as something more benign – and I am not particularly convinced that this works.

This family drama is given an extra nuance by the fact that it is written by a relative of Stoker. As great-grandnephew of Bram himself and manager of the Stoker estate, Dacre Stoker has a unique level of access to Stoker family papers, and with it a unique level of pressure to do justice to the writer's legacy. *Dracul* has been co-written with J. D. Barker, an internationally bestselling author whose previous novels have been optioned for film and television. *Dracul* strikes me as a novel written with one eye on its eventual conversion into a

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Leslie Ann Minot, 'Vamping the Children: The "Bloofer Lady", the "London Minotaur", and Child Victimization in Late-Nineteenth-Century England', in *Victorian Crime, Madness, and Sensation*, ed. by Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 207-18.

screenplay – indeed, the Internet Movie Database currently lists a project named *Dracul* as ‘in production’.<sup>2</sup> In a review of *The Glass Hotel* by Emily St John Mandel (2020), Claire Lowdon describes it in terms that could apply equally to *Dracul*, as ‘a plot- and concept-driven, highly visual novel that would work just as well on screen. That doesn’t mean it isn’t enjoyable – but you just might find yourself wondering why you’re reading it rather than watching it.’<sup>3</sup> *Dracul* has many elements that would translate well to the screen, particularly Ellen’s constantly changing eye colour, and mysterious cycle of ageing and rejuvenating; and the scenes of Bram fighting an unknown menace behind the locked door in a tower, with only a dwindling supply of white roses for protection. Whether an adaptation would handle the Bram/Ellen relationship sensitively, or exploit the queasy potential offered by this novel, must remain to be seen.

Like the endlessly inventive reincarnations of the vampire trope, it is fascinating to see how the same source material, Bram Stoker’s life and works, can inspire such different entertainments. Much excellent work has been done by contributors to this journal, among others, on the undead appeal of the vampire, and its ability to reinvent itself to suit the times in which we live. Whatever situation you find yourself in, there’s a vampire for that. With these books, it’s now clear that the Bram Stoker story is similarly malleable. While *Dracul* is full of visual bombast and box-office action, *Miss Lucy* is an altogether briefer, less showy, but very moving affair. Its characters are under threat from no supernatural force, but from the real violence of precarious socio-economic conditions.

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<sup>2</sup> See <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7343810/>> [accessed 19 August 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Claire Lowdon, ‘*The Glass Hotel* by Emily St John Mandel Review – The New Novel by the *Station Eleven* Author’, *The Sunday Times*, 2 August 2020 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-glass-hotel-by-emily-st-john-mandel-review-the-new-novel-by-the-station-eleven-author-2xbm706wg>> [accessed 17 September 2020].