

On Vampire Fiction And The Strange Synergies Within

By synergies, I mean the odd coincidence of similarities among different writers of vampire fiction. I think that the only difference was expressed in the strange name Anne Rice picked for her quintessential vampire "Lestat", and Chelsea Yarbro's "St. Germain". But apart from those I have been frequently amazed at the sameness of both names and situations.

It is not unusual for the vampire to be thematically paired with a fair damsel and a jealous lover. The eternal triangle must be preserved. But after a while the sameness of it all has been compared with the thousands of romance novels of years past where boy meets girl or girl meets boy, there is some resistance to their joining in marital bliss, and then they overcome the difficulty together and live happily ever after.

But in a vampire romance we are presented with something of a dramatic dilemma. One of the basic elements is handicapped by the fact of his/her undeadness, ulterior motivations, or just plain moral corruption. The pairing is doomed to fail from the outset, and we are dragged along for the ride as eyewitnesses to the inevitable stake through the heart or the lover's sudden abandonment or sacrifice to the overriding thirst of the monster. But there was a sameness to the plots that was formulaic.

Apart from that there were also the serious horror writers, Brian Lumley (Necroscope); and Fred Saberhagen, who penned the classic "Holmes/Dracula File" and the "Dracula" series that made the undead count into a cult hero and inspired me to write vampires as heroes. There was also a delightful series of children's books like "Bunnacula", and "The Celery Stalks At Midnight", about a family cat and his adventures with a tiny lupus with red eyes, a sharp overbite and a black mark on his back resembling a cape. I was especially charmed by the idea that the rabbit would sneak up on unsuspecting carrots and drain them dry during the night. So cute. But I digress.

Many writers of different stripes tend to brand their vampires with elegant names: Louis, Lucien, Marcus, Michael, Victor, Carmilla, Amelia, and from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer", Angel, Drusilla and Spike. "Vlad" is a frequent favorite, and we have all at one time or another toyed with "Dracula" in one way or another.

What really annoys me is the fact that when I was writing my own vampire short stories twenty years ago, I picked names for my characters which I thought no one else thought of using. I used Antonia, and Lucien, and Michael, and Victor, and Julian, then Arden and Gabriel, and established my vampires as aliens from another planet.

The Heirs of The Dragon's Blood series was based on my original series "Blood Songs", which was comprised of short stories I wrote for a fanzine. When I undertook the project, I wanted to tell my stories whole cloth as original pieces, with no ties to any other vampire series, stories or novels. I wanted to be original, and I wanted to break out of the mold of telling moldy vampire stories, with the usual endings and the usual formulaic devices ad nauseum.

I wanted to introduce new concepts, like more realistic ideas about what vampires did and why they did it, what factors made them that way, all couched in rational science and without the religious overtones. Little did I realize at the time that other writers were thinking about the same thing.

There was a long series of films, all beginning to show Dracula or other vampires as humorous or foils for humorous plots, as heroes, and even as maligned victims of public sentiment. Films like "Old Dracula" (David Niven) "Once Bitten" and "My Best Friend is A Vampire", "Transylvania 6-5000", and even the badly directed "Love At First Bite" (George Hamilton) and another badly directed film "Dead and Loving It" (Leslie Nielsen), whose vampires were both villainous and heroic. Talk about grey.

At the time I took them all as a phase that Hollywood would soon grow out of. And it did, with Eddie Murphy's stellar performance in "Vampire In Brooklyn" and Wesley Snipes in "Blade" I, II, and III. I give some credit to Francis Ford Coppola's "Dracula", though I did not like the costume designs, and the music gave me a headache, sounding more like fingernails across a blackboard. There were several other films at that time which did redeem the vampire's image and which would take me too long to list and discuss; and that is perhaps a topic for a separate blog.

BOOM. Suddenly, I was up against television. I shelved an old writing project called "Blood Will Out" which was a vampire detective story, because "Forever Knight" appeared on the scene. Then there came "Moonlight" and "Blood Ties", and those basically sealed the coffin closed and put it in the ground forever. I kid you not.

I developed a vampire private detective who enlists the aid of a priest to help him put the bad guys away, partly for revenge against the one who turned him against his will, and partly out of a need to rehabilitate himself. Sounds familiar? I wrote the first few chapters in 1980, inspired by the resurgence of interest in vampire fiction after Frank

Langella starred in another Dracula film. I was then sidelined by time and real life, which made writing a hobby for a while.

"Stargate: Atlantis" introduced alien vampires called "the Wraith". The first one I saw was a tall, thin creature with long white hair, grey eyes and wore a black leather duster, just like my Xosan fullblood Lucien. He had long pearly fingernails (I wrote them that way for years) and the only difference between the wraith and my own Xosan were that they sucked the life force directly from the heart, and mine still bit and sucked faithfully from the neck, arm, or other parts.

The Wraith were vicious by nature, whereas mine seem gentle but there is a ravenous predator always lurking beneath a veneer of charm and self-discipline. Over time I saw that the Wraith were up against some monstrous obstacles to their existence, among which are their overarching indifference for the plight of their victims, and their constant feuding among themselves for dominance. The problem was that I wrote about that, too, so many years ago.

I felt that I was robbed of the right to be original. Someone wrote these screenplays based on short stories or "treatments" by other writers. If I had written a screenplay instead of short stories, would that have made a difference? No, I don't think so.

Then along came "Underworld", and I was up against lycans (werewolves) and vampires as dueling predators, with names like Lucien and Victor, and Marcus wrapped up all tidy in his coffin in the cellar. That Lucien was a lycanthrope made no difference; I felt that I was robbed of the right to be original.

Even if I liked the film and all that it represented, I did not like the fact that Kate Beckinsale was playing the essential Antonia, but from a different angle. Selene was Antonia, right down to her independent streak and sense of fair play, but I introduced Antonia as a lone hunter on a secret mission which would be revealed through the course of my stories, which were written from 1988 to 1995.

She is the focus point for my first novel in the series, *Destiny's Forge*, cobbled together from chapters stories I had already written. Yet, the fact that her sire was named Victor, and she meets a fullblood Xosan named Lucien, now somehow plays out as merely part of the jumble of derivative vampire fiction coming out only in the last couple of years.

Now I am up against "Twilight" and "The Vampire Diaries" (I owned the full set of these books until I sold them on eBay). Each new set of stories is touted by publicists as "new" and "breaking out of the mold", and there are thousands of fans everywhere clamoring for the books. But do they notice anything but the sucking and the necking? Nooooo!

But for a serious writer such as myself, who labored long to be original, there is nothing original left to try anymore. Will vampire fans read MY books? Only time will tell. Maybe all they want IS formula, but I don't know for certain. All I can do is continue to write in my own idiom and hope that nobody else steals all my ideas. Now I am watching "True Blood" and so far the vampires are behaving like the classic model. It may be a refreshing change after all.

Update: as of today I have eliminated the series concept and concentrated on treating the novels as stand alone books centered around a common theme.