

PREFACE

VAMPIRES! WHY VAMPIRES, you ask? As you will see, once you join me on this strange journey, vampires have always been a metaphor for our fears and concerns, or, as the author Nina Auerbach wrote, “Every age embraces the vampire it needs.”

Vampires have been used as a metaphor by everyone from Voltaire to Karl Marx. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, for example, spoke to the late 19th century’s fears of disease and immigration. So what fears and concerns does our current obsession with vampires reveal? What do the popular vampires on television and in novels say about us?

I started this four-year obsession as a meditation on mortality as my husband lay dying of cancer, but I later wandered away from that initial idea onto very different pathways. Besides mortality and immortality, I’ve been looking at issues of power, sensuality, identity, spirituality, and the environment. And believe it or not, our current crop of vampires has a lot to say about all these issues.

Some of you will pick up this book because you have always been fascinated by vampires; perhaps secretly as a teenager you wanted to be one; perhaps you still do. Others of you will pick up this book because you are curious how a person well-known in both the news media and contemporary Pagan circles, someone

with a reasonably intellectual reputation, could be writing on such a frivolous and crazy subject. Hopefully you will be surprised.

Over the last several years I have given a shortened version of these ideas as a sermon in a number of churches. A longer version has been published as an essay, and I have given many talks and presentations. You want the basic idea? The short version goes like this:

Vampires are us. We are as guilt ridden and conflicted over our poisoned relationship to the planet and our continued need for fossil fuels as any of the morally struggling and conflicted vampires we see on television or read about in novels are conflicted over their need for blood.

Most of our current vampires *are* conflicted, and this notion of the struggling-to-be-moral, conflicted vampire really got traction in the late 1960s, at the moment we first saw pictures of the Earth from space and realized our vulnerability and moral complicity.

The first part of this book is the essay that fleshes out these ideas. The second part takes a look at all the books I read during my four-year obsession. They belong to almost every literary genre—from detective fiction to romance, from science fiction to graphic novels, coming-of-age novels, alternate history, and much more. But most people are unaware of this because elite culture disparages genre fiction altogether, so the typical response when I say I've read more than 270 vampire novels is "There *are* 270 vampire novels?" There are actually thousands. So I admit to making an attack on elite literary culture here. I include a summary of almost all the books I came across in four years, and a listing of the best dozen or so, if you want to dip in. I confess that although I do

name a number of classics, many novels are more recent, written at the time of our current attraction to vampires.

Lastly, I had a great deal of fun writing this, and reading all these books, even those I wanted to throw across the room! Perhaps I am more accommodating than most, but there were only about 20 out of the 270-plus that I found had absolutely no redeeming value. So, even if you disagree with my thesis, have fun with all this. I did.



PART ONE

Mirror, Mirror



In 1966, Stewart Brand, who went on to publish *The Whole Earth Catalog*, and later founded the Well—arguably the first online community gathering place—the Global Business Network, and other organizations, took an acid trip. You may wonder what Brand’s acid trip has to do with vampires and with the question, why do vampires have such traction in our culture now? But just hold on.

Brand gives this account in a 1976 book, *The Sixties*. He was twenty-eight years old and sitting on a rooftop in San Francisco looking out at the horizon. And he remembered something he had heard in a lecture by the architect and futurist Buckminster Fuller, “that people perceived the Earth as flat and infinite, and that was the root of all their misbehavior.” Looking at the horizon from the rooftop, and being stoned out of his head, Brand could suddenly see that the Earth was curved. He could think it and feel it.

He suddenly thought that if there was a photograph of the Earth from space, no one would see the planet in the same way. So he printed up several hundred buttons and posters. He thought hard about what phrase to use and finally chose this: “Why haven’t we seen a photograph of the whole Earth yet?” It was at the beginning of the Apollo program. He sent the buttons to NASA officials,

to members of Congress, to UN and American diplomats, to Soviet scientists, and to people like Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller.

In fact, there were already a couple of photographs of the whole Earth from space, although not very good ones. They were photographs from satellites, and in black and white. It would take a good color photograph to have real impact. It would take another two years and Apollo 8 before a NASA photographer would give us that picture, now so famous and often called Earthrise. And it would take a few more years until the “blue marble” picture of the Earth was published, becoming perhaps the most reproduced photograph in the world. After he saw the Earthrise picture in 1968, Brand would say that the image showed the Earth as “an island, surrounded by a lot of inhospitable space. And it’s so graphic, this little blue, white, green and brown jewel-like icon amongst a quite featureless black vacuum.” So, hold that image of the Earth in the back of your mind as we go on a very strange journey. It starts with death.

MORTALITY

TO BE HONEST, I had never been very interested in vampires. I had read Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, and perhaps *The Vampire Lestat*, and, being a friend of Whitley Strieber, I had read *The Hunger* and loved that most sensual 1983 film with Susan Sarandon, David Bowie, and Catherine Deneuve. But the subject of vampires didn't particularly interest me.

In May of 2009, in a New York airport, right before taking a plane to a conference in Florida, I wanted to pick up a trashy novel, so I bought the first Twilight Saga novel in the airport and I read the second one on the plane ride home. It probably would have ended right there. But ten days after I returned from that conference in May, my world turned upside down. My husband, and life partner of thirty-five years, was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer. And he was the healthiest man I knew.

It is often said that Anne Rice began her huge saga, the Vampire Chronicles, because she was dealing with the death of her young daughter. I, too, started obsessing on vampire novels because I was thinking about mortality. My husband, who was dying of cancer, was someone who wanted to live forever. He had fought death every moment of his life.

I remember our first date in 1975. It was right out of an old Woody Allen movie. We sat in a Chinese restaurant, and all we

talked about was death. Death was not something I had thought about much in my life, but my mother, a smoker for many years, had died horribly of lung cancer in 1970. The cancer went into her brain and her liver. The doctors lied to her and did not tell her she had cancer, which was typical of those times. She was sixty-one and was having the first truly happy relationship of her life, the first fulfilling sexual experience. Her death took place five years before I met my husband, but her illness and death were still open wounds in my life. As an only child of divorce, then in my early twenties, I had to shoulder that burden pretty much alone.

For John, death was the most important fact of his life. Both his parents were killed when two planes collided over Baltimore in the late 1950s. He was sixteen and he had three younger siblings, one of them only four years old. In an instant, his entire life dramatically changed.

He thought about death constantly, and it forever negatively colored his life. He always wondered if death wasn't perhaps the most horrifying and painful event a human being could possibly experience. Perhaps his parents were caught for eternity in that last painful moment of the plane's explosion and fire.

There's a famous Woody Allen line: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work . . . I want to achieve it through not dying." That's what John wanted. Although to be truthful, he probably wanted both types of immortality. He wanted to live at least two hundred years, and he read everything he could about anti-aging research to help that possibility along.

Death even affected his views on having children. Perhaps having a child was a selfish act, since death was inevitably the result.

As an only child, I had simple fears about children: I was merely afraid I would break the kid somehow, and I also had a deep secret fear that if I had a child, I would become a Stepford wife, a total conformist. I was convinced that it was easy to be a rebellious spirit by oneself, but with the responsibility of kids, and my own need to please others, which was always hidden beneath the surface of my outward strength and confidence, I just *knew* I would cave into society's demands and restrictions.

My husband was an experimental psychologist by training and was making his living as a science journalist who focused on evolution, computers, and quantum physics. And one day John came across the many-worlds hypothesis of quantum physics, and it blew him away. To oversimplify: Every time an atom splits, perhaps there is a parallel world that comes into existence. So perhaps there are parallel worlds where his parents didn't die; perhaps there are several where they are still in the plane; perhaps there are hundreds, maybe even infinite possibilities. And if that's true, then how can you possibly know what death or life is about? So, if you love children and think you would be a good parent, why not go for it? And so we did.

John and I had each read about a thousand science fiction novels before we met. We both believed that science fiction opened vistas; it allowed so many different ways to imagine life, work, and love. At the time we met, we each believed we would travel to the stars together. That seems such a crazy idea today, but it didn't seem bizarre in the 1970s as we watched spaceships land on the moon. When we saw the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, we looked at the moon base depicted in the film and thought, *Oh, how awful,*

how corporate, but we will do it better. John worried so much about the abuse of science and the militarization of space that he never created a career that might have taken him toward the space effort. But he looked at the stars with his five telescopes and we talked about all the wild things that might be possible: colonies in space and cryogenically preserving our bodies. A lot of the ideas were way out there, but there was never a boring moment in thirty-five years.

John definitely had the “high tech” view of death. As I said, he read every article on aging research he could get his hands on, and he took more than a dozen vitamins, anti-oxidants, and supplements. He was a runner who was in perfect health. He never smoked, was fit, and, unlike me, never did any drugs in his youth. He ate salads, yogurt, wheat germ, and fruit, and some occasional meat, mostly chicken. He drank a glass of red wine for resveratrol. And he was cautious. His best friend died in a rafting accident in Chile; John would never take such risks. He thought he would live a long time, given scientific and medical advances. His attitude was definitely “rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

And then he got the kind of stomach cancer that usually attacks people in Asian countries who eat spicy foods. He had only two weeks of symptoms before he was diagnosed, and after nine months of chemotherapy and radiation, he died. In the end I think he felt cheated and betrayed by all those supplements he took.

There was a definite tension between John and me over our views on death, a tension I didn't really understand until after he died. I, at the same moment he was fighting death, had more of an Earth-centered Pagan perspective that went something like this: We are all part of the life cycle. Like a seed, we are born, we sprout,

we grow, we mature, and later we decay, making room for future generations, who, like seedlings, are reborn through us. This is all part of nature's dance. To everything there is a season, as the old psalm goes, and that should be enough.

As for the persistence of consciousness, deep down I thought, *How can we know?* Perhaps we simply return to the elements. We become earth, air, fire, and water. In fact, I remember reading a book on the *I Ching* by the feminist author Barbara Walker in which she argued that the ancient meaning of the four elements was that each was a way the ancients went to their death: we were left for carrion in the air, we were buried in the earth, we were burnt on the pyre, and we were buried at sea. That seemed just about right.

So there was a continuing, mostly unexpressed tension between my own Pagan world view that accepted death as natural and the high tech, futurist views of my late husband who fought death with every breath. But neither of us was totally wedded to a single vision. And way down deep there was a part of me that also wanted to live forever.

We talked about the possibilities of life extension. We wondered about genetic manipulation. At the same time, I traveled through the world of earth-based spirituality with people who honored the crone and talked about death as a natural part of life.

What I now realize is that the tensions about death that existed between my husband, John, and me, are the very same tensions that exist in some of the most interesting vampire novels. Vampires of myth and literature embody a complicated split. They have near immortality and yet are tragically frozen in time. They cannot grow

and change like the seasons or, in most descriptions, birth new life, and yet they have increased strength, agility, heightened senses, and often the wisdom that can come with extreme age, although it's often mixed with a cynical, jaundiced view of life. Rosalie, who desperately wants a child and bemoans her frozen state in the *Twilight Saga*, is asking the same questions posed in books like *Tuck Everlasting* or Olaf Stapledon's famous science fiction novel *Last and First Men*. Stapledon published this novel in 1930, and it describes the far-flung future of humanity over two billion years and almost twenty different human species. But several of them play with the issue of longevity. One species lives for nearly two hundred years, and far into the future, a fifth species of humankind lives for thousands of years and essentially achieves immortality. No species, however, avoids tragedy or the sorrows that are part of almost all human lives.

This tension over death is part of who we are. Human beings want to be part of nature, but at the same time we have a deep and passionate urge to persist, to live forever, to cheat death, to push the edge of the envelope, to be more. *Further*, as the old hippie slogan went.

Vampires let us play with death and mortality. They let us ponder what it would mean to live a truly long life. How would that change one's view of everything in society? Playing with the idea of a long life allows us to ask questions we usually bury, except in science fiction. What does one value more and what does one value less with a long human life? Would we become bored? Would we become more or less compassionate? Does the vampire's long life allow a different vision of the world? Would having a long life allow

us to see the world differently, imagine social structures differently, and have a longer view? Would it increase or decrease reverence for the planet? Is the vampire's frozen "life" sterile, as Rosalie opines in *Twilight*? Does life mean something only when it is part of a larger cycle of birth, growth, decay, death, and the birth of new life? Is there a beauty that comes only from the cycles of which we are a part? Or is the heroic struggle imagined by every superhero a worthy one—a symbol of our striving to break through our human and planetary limitations?

When we look at mortality and immortality through the eyes of teens and young adults, there is something else going on. Our culture does not do death well. Western culture still has few good rites of passage for death compared to indigenous cultures, with the possible exception of a good Irish wake. I am reminded of a 1990 young adult vampire novel called *The Silver Kiss* by Annette Curtis Klause. The vampire aspect is almost an afterthought in this book, although the vampire is a typical lonely outsider, beautiful and ethereal. The protagonist, Zoe, is an only child whose mother is in and out of the hospital with cancer. As a result, her father has become increasingly remote. Wanting to "protect" their daughter, the parents allow Zoe at the hospital for only brief moments, and no one speaks about death: the elephant in the living room. When Zoe meets Simon, a three-hundred-year-old vampire, there is, to be sure, one ecstatic kiss, but what really takes place is a bonding between two lonely individuals who can talk about pain, loss, and the death of loved ones. At the end of the book, Zoe has her first real talk with each of her parents about the reality of death.

The vampire leaves by the end of the novel; her mother dies; Zoe moves to San Francisco and goes on with her life. The mother is not saved by turning her into a vampire; there is no passionate sexual union; Zoe and Simon don't end up in each other's lives except in their dreams. But the story is clearly a vehicle to discuss topics so often denied. And the vampire, the symbol of the outsider, becomes a way for Zoe to finally come inside.

Many of us saw countless Disney films as children. Think of how often the mother dies in those films (*Bambi*, *The Fox and the Hound*, *Finding Nemo*), or the father (*The Lion King*), or both parents (*Tarzan*). Given how often we encountered death in fairy tales and films as children, why do so many parents clam up about death during the teenage years and during adolescence, which is often the time when death becomes real for their children? Are the huge number of paranormal and vampire young adult novels, in small part, a way for teens to have those discussions about death and the meaning of existence that are not taking place at home?

So my own vampire journey started with the issue of mortality. And a year and a half after I began that journey, at the end of 2010, I began my own battle with cancer, which continues, although so far I feel in good health. But I realized very quickly that death and even the wish for immortality did not explain the millions of readers, movie viewers, and television watchers who were devouring vampire stories. Or the billions of dollars that Hollywood and the television industry were spending each year to serve these stories up for a willing and paying audience. I also realized my own fascination, even love of vampires, was about more than a desire to live forever. Truth be told, I wanted to *be* one. And I was not alone.

Of course, everyone said to me, “Isn’t the whole vampire obsession really about sex?” And if you read some of the more popular vampire romances, you might come away with that idea. But as I began to read about the vampire fantasies of others, I realized that while romance and sensuality were abundant, sex, as most people think about it, as intercourse, was not nearly as prevalent as you might think.

There *are* dreadful vampire romances with repetitive and formulaic sex scenes, and really bad writing, with phrases like “he filled me” over and over until you want to barf. And the heroines in these books are gorgeous, flawless beings, women with thin waists and large bosoms. The men are dark and mysterious, and always, always, there are perfect orgasms every time, aided by telepathic communication. We should be so lucky! But most of the vampire fantasies experienced by women and men are very different.

In Martin V. Riccardo’s fascinating book *Liquid Dreams of Vampires* (1997), he spent six years collecting the dreams and fantasies of men and women who found themselves obsessed by and attracted to vampires. Most of the men and women said they not only were attracted to vampires, they wanted to *be* one, or they fantasized that they *were* vampires. Some of them wished for immortality; some expressed a fear of death and aging. Many identified with the vampire as rebel and alien, the lonely outsider. Some expressed a love of the vampire’s strength, their lack of ties to the world, their lack of commitment—the sense of power and lack of limitations. Sex was definitely secondary.

Katherine Ramsland, the biographer of Anne Rice, writes in *Piercing the Darkness: Undercover with Vampires in America Today*

(1998) that when she was young she was fascinated by *Dracula*. “I wanted to feel what he felt when he went after his prey. I went to bed each night with my arms crossed over my chest in the hope that I would waken as a vampire. I told people I was 403 years old. Without knowing how to articulate it, I sensed there was some visceral quality in the vampire’s experience that would enhance life and make me feel as if I were part of something much larger than myself.”

Some people in Riccardo’s book do talk about love and sensuality, but very few of the fantasies mention sexual intercourse or penetration. The eroticism more often involves biting and sharing blood. And while there are plenty of people who will give you a Freudian analysis of this, how these people are “fixated in the oral stage,” anyone who has cut their finger as a child and licked it knows there is a certain comfort in connecting with that juice of life.

In many novels, vampires can’t have normal sexual intercourse. In Stoker’s time you would not have put a sex scene in a novel, but if you think of the vampire novels by Anne Rice and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, written in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when explicit sex was common in literature, there is no intercourse. Unlike many of the current vampire romance novels, the novels by Rice and Yarbro emphasize—like the fantasies Riccardo obtained in his interviews—a sharing of blood, and a feeling of total ecstatic union, which Riccardo says, “implies feelings of connection, intimacy, sensuality, and arousal without any direct connection to sexual intercourse.” In other words, he says, the vampire is a sensual rather than a purely sexual creature.

In 1976, I had a totally ecstatic experience for three days. Shere Hite had just come out with her book *The Hite Report*. It was not an academic study and critics called it unscientific. But women like me loved it. What she did was interview hundreds, perhaps more than a thousand women, whom she did not identify. Hite claimed that some 70 percent of the women she surveyed did not achieve orgasm through penetration, although most experienced orgasm easily through masturbation, and desperately wanted more foreplay in their relationships. When I read that book at the age of thirty, I was high for three days; I felt “normal” for only the second time since my teenage years. The first time, several years earlier, was during intimate discussions with a group of women in a consciousness-raising group—an experience shared by thousands of women in the feminist movement. For many of us it was more deeply life-changing than any therapy.

You could argue that the vampire is clearly speaking up for a more female-centered form of lovemaking and sensuality. But it's not sex as we tend to think of it in popular culture. Riccardo even argues—although this goes way too far—that when we see novels where women are taken by force by vampires, it is done with such elegance and style, they don't think of it as rape.

But I am going to argue that just as rape is only superficially about sex, and really about power, so, underneath much of the romance and sexuality that we see in vampire fiction and films is a deeper exploration of power and its abuses. And power is something that we all tussle with. And it's something most of us want more of.