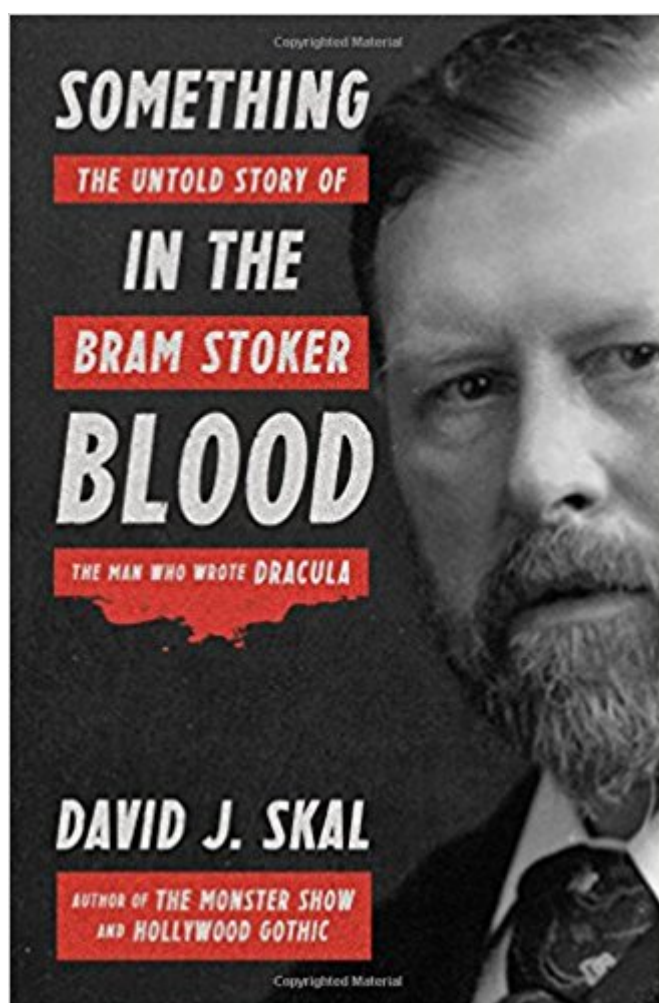


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Something In The Blood: The Untold Story Of Bram Stoker, The Man Who Wrote Dracula



Synopsis

A groundbreaking biography reveals the haunted origins of the man who created *Dracula* and traces the psychosexual contours of late Victorian society. First published in 1897, *Dracula* has had a long and multifaceted afterlife—one rivaling even its immortal creation; yet Bram Stoker has remained a hovering specter in this pervasive mythology. In *Something in the Blood*, David J. Skal exhumes the inner world and strange genius of the writer who birthed an undying cultural icon, painting an astonishing portrait of the age in which Stoker was born—a time when death was no metaphor but a constant threat easily imagined as a character existing in flesh and blood. Just as in his celebrated histories *The Monster Show* and *Hollywood Gothic*, Skal draws on a wealth of newly discovered documents with "the skills of a fine detective" (New York Times Book Review) to challenge much of our accepted wisdom about *Dracula*, Stoker, and the late Victorian age. Staging Stoker's life against a grisly tableau of the myriad anxieties plaguing the Victorian fin de siècle, Skal investigates Stoker's "transgendered imagination," unearthing Stoker's unpublished, sexually ambiguous poetry and his passionate youthful correspondence with Walt Whitman—printed in full here for the very first time. Born into a middle-class Protestant family in Dublin in "Black 47"—the year the potato famine swept the country—Stoker was inexplicably paralyzed as a boy, and his early years unfold alongside a parade of Victorian medical mysteries and horrors: cholera and typhus, frantic bloodletting, mesmeric quack cures, and the gnawing obsession with "bad blood" that colors *Dracula*. While destined to become best known for his legendary undead count, Bram Stoker would become a prolific writer, critic, and theater producer, rubbing shoulders with Henry Irving, Hall Caine, and Lady Jane Wilde and her salon set—including her fated-to-be-infamous son Oscar. In this probing psychological and cultural portrait of the man who brought us one of the most memorable monsters in history, Skal reveals a lifetime spent wrestling with the greatest questions of an era—a time riddled by disease, competing attitudes toward sex and gender, and unprecedented scientific innovation accompanied by rising paranoia and crises of faith. Stoker's battle resulted in a resilient modern folktale that continues to shock and enthrall; perhaps the most frightening thing about *Dracula*, Skal writes, "is the strong probability that it meant far less to Bram Stoker than it has come to mean to us." 16 pages of color and 80 black-and-white illustrations

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Customer Reviews

“Sharply written, well-researched (with judicious use of recent discoveries), attentive to detail, and entertaining to read. Skál is the finest, most balanced biography of Bram Stoker yet written.” - Sir Christopher Frayling, author of *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula and Nightmare: The Birth of Horror*

David J. Skal is a leading American cultural historian and critic of horror films and Gothic literature. The author of *The Monster Show* and *Hollywood Gothic*, he lives in Glendale, California.

I just finished reading all 580 pages, not counting the notes, bibliography, index and acknowledgements, which add another hundred pages to its brick-like heft, David J. Skal's massive book *SOMETHING IN THE BLOOD: THE UNTOLD STORY OF BRAM STOKER, THE MAN WHO WROTE DRACULA*. Absolutely fascinating. I'd read the Ludlam bio of Stoker half a century ago, but recalled little of it, and it was vetted by Stoker's son, who, as so often in "Authorized biographies," excised all the interesting bits. Thus, it was news to me that Stoker died of the effects of "Tertiary Syphilis." (Which his wife did not have. So acquired elsewhere from someone else, and never passed on to Florence.) Skal includes lots of rather tangential-at-best material, mini-bios of various folks who connected with *DRACULA* at one point or another, folks like George Sylvester Viereck and Hester Dowden. Following the lengthy chapter on the actual writing of *DRACULA*, is a chapter mostly, though not wholly, devoted to the downfall and death of Oscar Wilde, which could be wholly cut. Some readers, I imagine, would grow impatient with the numerous nearly-irrelevant lengthy

digressions, but Skal writes so well, his research is so impeccable, and the tales are so juicy, that I found all of those tangents fascinating, and would not part with any of them. The final chapter is entirely devoted to the history of DRACULA in the 20th Century, after Stoker's death. (Stoker died just five days after the Titanic sank.) This chapter is in essence, a condensed version of Skal's earlier book, HOLLYWOOD GOTHIC: THE TANGLED WEB OF DRACULA FROM NOVEL TO STAGE TO SCREEN, though many of its tales include newly-discovered information, and tales not told in HOLLYWOOD GOTHIC are included. His account of the fall of Horace Liveright is far more detailed (And jaw-dropping) than his accounts of the end results of Liveright's hubris in HOLLYWOOD GOTHIC and in THE MONSTER SHOW. (One wonders how Liveright would feel about his unflattering portrait in a book published by his still-active imprint. This is a Liveright Book.) It's almost as much a biography of Oscar Wilde as it is of Stoker. Their connection (Though not what you would call friendship) runs deeper than just their mutual romantic relationships with Florence Stoker, Bram's formidable wife. To me, that's a bonus. Skal also speculates, on not-inconsequential evidence, that Stoker may have been bisexual or at least sexually ambivalent. He does not uncover any proof that Stoker ever had a male lover (Though if he did, novelist Hall Caine, DRACULA's dedicatee, is a likely candidate), but that Stoker was at least what we now call "Bi-Curious" is pretty firmly established. Along with his loving relationship with Caine, there are his well-established worshipful adoration of Sir Henry Irving (Who does not come off well in the book) and of the adamantly omni-sexual Walt Whitman. And then there's his progressively more misogynistic female characters in his later, post-DRACULA novels. Two minor omissions surprised me (Since Skal seems reluctant to omit anything at all): though Hall Caine and his literary legacy is much discussed, Skal never mentions that Alfred Hitchcock filmed one of Caine's novels, THE MANXMAN, as a silent back in the late 20s. And though he mentions Stoker's Great-Grand-Nephew Dacre Stoker in the acknowledgements, and discusses many of the sequels and variations DRACULA has undergone in the century since Stoker died, Skal never mentions Dacre Stoker's "Authorized" (By Dacre, I must assume) sequel to DRACULA, titled DRACULA, THE UNDEAD, published 6 years ago. (On DRACULA, THE UNDEAD's back cover, Dacre is called "Bram Stoker's direct descendant." Hello? How does that work? I am not my Great-Grand-Uncle's "Descendant.") There's also a goof in a footnote when Skal mentions the roles of Rosalind, Orlando and Jacques in "TWELFTH NIGHT," when those are all characters from AS YOU LIKE IT. But that's just a typo slip neither he nor his editors caught, in a huge book, easily fixed for the next edition. So, if DRACULA, Bram Stoker, Oscar Wilde, gothic literature and/or late-Victorian London West End Theater fascinates you as much as it does me, I highly recommend this lovely and lavish book, perfect for

the vampire-o-phile on your Christmas list.

A couple of years ago, I came across the correspondence between Bram Stoker and Walt Whitman in Stoker's biography of Henry Irving and realized at once that Stoker was (without question) a gay man. I wondered at the time if any biographer had dealt with this aspect of Stoker's life. Well, here it is! A beautifully rendered study of Stoker and his repressive Victorian Era, with fascinating insights into both the surprisingly open (in some regards) and (necessarily) subterranean world of the Gay Culture of his time. The author of this book creates a rich portrait of the theatre, the literature and the larger-than-life individuals that informed Stoker's work; and you will no doubt (as I did) find many titles you'll want to add to your list of books and authors to explore. Anyone who thinks that Anne Rice was the first novelist to link vampirism with homosexuality may be surprised to learn that Stoker was (in fact) the Gay Uncle of every contemporary gay vampire, including Rice's Louis and Lestat. This is a truly fascinating book that should interest any fan of Stoker's masterwork, DRACULA.

Bram Stoker devoted most of his life to the career of the stage-actor Henry Irving, as previous Stoker biographies have made clear (especially Barbara Belford's "Bram Stoker and the Man who was Dracula"). This, along with Stoker's circumspect nature, presents a conundrum for biographers. That said, David Skal makes his task harder for himself in "Something in the Blood" by willfully getting lost not only in the details of the lives of people associated with Stoker, but by going off on tangents that make the book feel deliberately padded. The padding is fascinating, don't get me wrong, and Skal writes well, but there is just too much collateral material about things like the White Chapel murders, assorted art collectors, and Oscar Wilde (especially Oscar Wilde!) that gives one the impression that, when Skal found the details of Stoker's life unyielding to scrutiny, he chose to throw in fifty pages of stuff related to people who knew someone who knew Stoker, rather than to admit defeat (or at least stalemate) to a man who has thwarted many scholars even from beyond the grave. Even Stoker aficionados admit that his prose was sometimes turgid and nearly unreadable without significant editing, and while he knew quite a few lively characters (like Mark Twain and Walt Whitman) he suffered by comparison to his circle of friends and acquaintances. If this book is any indication, maybe it's time to admit that most of what's been written about Stoker thus far will more than suffice. Another annoying detail is the way Skal teases too much from the homosocial mores of the 19th century in order to make the story of Stoker in vogue with the current identity politics craze. Stoker knew homosexuals and respected several gay artists, but Skal teases

out very murky conclusions more owing to the fact that he knows it sells to have some new salacious angle on an old figure, rather than because the written record bears out his suppositions. That said, if you're coming to the subject cold- if you're not familiar with the aforementioned Belford book or any of the works produced by Radu Florescu and Raymond McNally (or the works produced by the Stoker and Irving heirs)- you might learn something from this overlong (but still somehow superficial) book. The copious illustrations and photos are easy on the eye, but also confirm the nagging suspicion I had while reading that, despite the amount of text on the page, this new book being treated as revelatory (by reviewers who are smart enough to know better) is really a glorified coffee table prop. A bit disappointing after all the build up, but not totally without merit.

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