

A Retrospective: Richard Lortz's Novels Get a Well Deserved Second Chance

By Tony Fonseca

Lortz, Richard. *Lovers Living, Lovers Dead*. New York: G. P. Putnam, 1977. 223p.

----. *Bereavements*. Sagaponack, New York: The Permanent Press, 1980. 215p.

**----. *Dracula's Children*. Sagaponack, New York: The Permanent Press, 1981. 202p.
(Originally published as *Children of the Night* in 1974 by Dell Publishing, New York).**

Richard Lortz died unexpectedly on November 5, 1980, at the age of sixty-three. He was a playwright and a painter, as well as a novelist, and his prose can be accurately described, as it is by the Second Chance Press, as a combination of "the lyricism and theatricality of Tennessee Williams and the surrealism of Max Ernst". What I first noticed about Lortz's prose when I was introduced to it in 2000 was how effortlessly and poetically it flowed, how he had a knack for producing a perfect series of sentences and images, as in this excerpt which closes out the tragic *Dracula's Children*:

Time, decay, neglect, indifference; lack of feeling and of love: these create a bomb as deadly as the atom, and indeed, ruins that are far more beautiful.

In Bedford-Stuyvesant, or on the fringes of Black or Spanish Harlem, block after block, sometimes mile after ragged mile of these hideous buildings, viewed from a distance, say on a clear and moonlit night, have all the ghastly, ghostly beauty of Berlin, or Dresden after the holocaust.

Certainly one could say that Lortz's prose is imagistic, reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez; it is as carefully crafted as that of Joyce Carol Oates, and as darkly lyrical as John Hawkes's *The Blood Oranges* or *Whistlejacket*. In terms of writers in the horror genre, I don't think it would be an overstatement to say that Lortz ranks with the best: Ramsey Campbell, Simon Clark, Charles S. Grant, and Poppy Z. Brite. But what makes Lortz special is his subject matter. To begin with, his main characters are more often than not Latino, usually Puerto Rican, which is rare in the genre. His monsters, if they can be called monsters, are not Other; rather they are transformed humans, irrevocably changed by great sadness, or by unyielding poverty and an all-encompassing sense of depression in both their own psyches and in their immediate surroundings, or simply by necessity.

Of his three horror texts, *Lovers Living, Lovers Dead*, which was one of the six books chosen recently for republication by Second Chance Press (in a process that "seeks out

contemporary books of exceptional quality deserving of wider audiences"), is the most typical of the genre, and therefore the most approachable by horror fans. Albeit a little known work, it is ranked as one of the top 40 horror novels of all time by the Horror Writers Association of America. It tells the story of a professor of Comparative Literature who is beginning to suspect that his wife, Christine, an ex-student some 20 years his junior, is harboring dark secrets about her past. To uncover these secrets, he teams up with Christine's psychologist, and the two use deception to find out about her mysterious past, which is personified by her even more mysterious father, whose ghost-like presence is felt throughout the novel.

In the climatic scene of *Lovers Living, Lovers Dead*, Michael (the professor / husband) raids his wife's secret hope chest, finding out that Christine's "wild stories" about her father's trips to Africa and the Far East, where he consorted with "witch doctors" and tribal chieftains, were not tales after all, but realities. He finds millions in Swiss bank accounts, pornographic pictures of his wife being incested as an infant (so that she could not be sacrificed as a virgin), and a huge dildo. As it turns out, Christine's father struck a deal with the devil as it were, one in which he delivered his daughter's soul in order to save her from becoming a human sacrifice. What struck me in *Lovers Living, Lovers Dead* is that Christine is never portrayed as monstrous; she is simply a human trapped in a situation not of her own making. Michael and the psychiatrist become the most monstrous characters in the novel, which ends in ruined lives and bloodshed because of their actions. Neither ever stops to consider that what he/she uncovers may destroy Christine and her two innocent children. *Lovers Living, Lovers Dead* is far and away one of the most unique and clever horror novels I have ever encountered, with its emphasis on characterization and atmosphere, rather than horrific imagery and shock. This is not to say that Lortz doesn't shock, but when he does create grotesque images, they are more poetic than horrific, as in the scene where thousands of butterflies invade the household and cover Christine like clothing.

More typical of Lortz's preoccupation with infinite sadness and the monstrosities which it produces is *Bereavements*, re-released as part of the WhiteWolf/Borealis horror line in 1995. The story is both original and fascinating: A wealthy New York widow, in attempting to come to terms with the death of her teenage son, searches for ways to cheat mortality. One is to advertise in the *Village Voice* for a replacement son, using the ad, "Mother who lost son, seeks son who lost mother." This ad attracts three very striking and disturbed characters who "court her favors," while she pursues another more grotesque form of grieving, that of keeping the body of her son, Jamie, preserved through cryogenics. These young men all have their own motives for responding to the ad, and it is the interplay of their desires against the widow's overwhelming need to escape her state of "bereavement" that moves the novel. The horror scenes are very subtle, again more poetic than horrific, although they are indeed darkly disturbing. And the glimpses inside the disturbed mind of Mrs. Evans, the widow, are astounding. Although *Bereavements* ends with a suicide, a murder, and borderline necrophilia, it is ultimately a story that explores the depths of grief and love, even their darker manifestations. It is about what happens to humans when, as Mrs. Evans describes it, are deprived of "ruthlessly—especially hope and joy."

Perhaps the best of Lortz's three horror novels, however, is *Dracula's Children*, which is more a character study narrative about impoverished Latino children in New York City than it is a tale of werewolves. The novel begins as standard horror fare: a young school

teacher is dropped off alone near Central Park one rainy night, at which time she spots a naked teenage boy in the park. Thinking him lost or hurt, she follows him into the park, and is there greeted by four other naked children who attack her like a pack of rabid and ravenous dogs, literally tearing her body limb from limb. The novel then follows the next day's police investigation, mainly concentrating on the neighborhood "characters" and their fascination with the gory details of the murder. Lortz then switches gears and devotes the middle of the novel to the stories of the children. Each is followed home after the night's killing, and we are made to realize that they became animals out of necessity. In other words, the emphasis here is on characterization and motivation, rather than a linear narrative plot line

What makes the novel special is that Lortz doesn't simply turn it into a metaphor for family and societal responsibility towards the young, more specifically the impoverished inner city Latino young. His descriptions of the animal states of the children make it clear that they actually have been transformed. Their eyes light up at night, they can tear into a victim's neck while pouncing through the air, they communicate without language.... Yet they are not monsters in the strictest sense, and they therefore vulnerable. True to Lortz's usual vision, and in essence, to the realities of the inner city, *Dracula's Children* ends the only way it can—tragically and sadly. The humans defeat the murderous werewolves. However, there is no joy in the victory, and the novel ends with what is perhaps the question that ultimately Lortz's three horror texts ask of the reader:

After the all-clear, the mayor of New York City stepped from his shiny black limousine to view, officially, what the dawn's hunting had wrought.

What had he expected -- Dracula's *children*? He was amazed.

...

These...*these!* are the *monsters*?!

NOTE: All three novels by Lortz plus *The Valdepenas* (non-horror) are available from The Permanent Press at its web site: <http://www.thepermanentpress.com/order.ihtml>

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