

# Ladies and Gentlemen -- The Terrifying and Award-Winning Traveling Vampire Show!

By Stine Fletcher

**Laymon, Richard. *The Traveling Vampire Show*. New York: Leisure, 2001. 391p.**

Mix a touch of the Stephen King film *Stand By Me*, some of Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, a dash of *Cujo* and generous amounts of Richard Laymon's genius and you'll get one heck of a show—and a very terrifying novel. Few horror novels have given this reviewer the creeps, and none have actually disturbed me, until now. Upon finishing *The Traveling Vampire Show*, I had to lie still and calm my nerves and my stomach. Only the superstitious close presence of my pet cat kept me from sleeping with the light on.

The story is the first-person reminiscence of Dwight and takes place on a single day in the summer of his 16th year (he was born just prior to Eisenhower's presidency, for those needing a calendar estimate). He and his friends Slim (female) and Rusty come across flyers that appear mysteriously that morning for The Traveling Vampire Show, which features the "Gorgeous! Beguiling! Lethal!" vampire Valeria, who will feed upon volunteers from the audience. The show is for that one night only, and the novel centers on the threesome's attempts, at Rusty's instigation, to see the setup and show itself. Along the way, they're assisted by Lee, Dwight's attractive young sister-in-law, and pestered by Bitsy, Rusty's nagging younger sister who has a crush on Dwight.

Adults other than Lee are physically present only briefly outside of the actual Vampire Show. They are constant, frustrating reminders of the troubles teenagers can get into by simply following their curiosity (and man what they have to go through to have a beer!). Not only do adults help to create suspense in the novel by the very fact that the three main characters must constantly defy them, they are also responsible for most of the horror instigated in the town, and adults run the Traveling Vampire Show.

Any horrors perpetrated by controlling adults seem to be symptoms of the greater evil present in the novel's nonhuman character, Janks Field. In true Stephen King fashion, Laymon gives the reader details portraying the evil inherent in the very place the human characters inhabit, and Janks Field is the epicenter of these horrors. It's a barren, flat area of ground which becomes relentlessly hot and dangerous in the summer. At the time of the novel, it's littered with sharp pieces of glass, jagged rocks and inhabited snake holes. Its terror is legendary for the novel's threesome. The field is the burial ground for the victims of a serial killer, a former resident of the town. It's also the scene of a violent riot following a boxing match, as well as a breeding ground for bullying humans and feral animals (the cur that attacks the three teens early in the novel is as scary as King's rabid pooch). The field is also home to a myriad of other unknown evils.

Upon investigating other crimes, the police find bodies from unknown and unrelated murders, and shallow holes suddenly appear for no apparent reason. Dwight, Slim and Rusty have most of their horrific encounters in the locale in and around Janks Field, including an escapade with a bully whom Slim disables during archery practice, a meeting with the aforementioned evil dog, an encounter with kidnapping twins in a black Cadillac, and the discovery of the terrible knowledge about Rusty's home life. Indeed, Janks Field will embed itself in the memory of readers, alongside Salem's Lot and Derry, Maine.

As with Janks Field, not all of the horror in Laymon's work is simply laid out on the surface. The truly disturbing aspects of the novel are those that lie deeper within the psyches of the human characters. These are made more disturbing by Laymon's ability to enable the reader to suspend disbelief when faced with this inundation of horrific events, especially toward the end of the novel when the teens get to Janks Field to see the show.

Dwight is a rather conscientious teen compared to his peers. He is truly in love with Slim, and despite his young libido, he manages to never take advantage of her or her feelings. As the novel progresses, the reader begins to feel that Dwight and his family may be the only decent folk in the town. Slim's former home life is a nightmare instigated by her now absent father, and by the end of novel, Rusty's home life is equally suspect. But all the evil the reader is exposed to is filtered through Dwight: Adults are frightening only when they interfere with Dwight's safe, immediate world. Even Rusty doesn't seem suspect unless he threatens Dwight's relationship with Slim.

Slim is a fascinating young girl, one that both boys are happy to have around, as she wields arrows and a knife, with which she dispatches a bully and other evil denizens of the area. By the novel's end, Slim's body count is at least three, and she has injured several more people. This is fine with Dwight, and so it is well in the mind of the reader. Primed by Dwight's acceptance of Slim's actions, the reader is ready for Laymon's inundation of terror and horror in the novel's final climax.

*The Traveling Vampire Show* is the culmination of all of the horrors of the novel. The teenagers, Lee, various unsavory locals, and those who run the Show all meet in Janks Field in a gory and deadly battle. In these final scenes, Laymon is relentless in his terror. We see the depths to which the local audience volunteers, including Rusty, will sink. We learn the lengths to which Stryker, the Show's owner, will go to keep his carnival in business and awash with blood. And lastly, we learn the final fate of Rusty and the other volunteers at the hands of the real vampire. After this large dose of such horrific knowledge, Dwight leaves the reader to ponder a number of questions which are just as frightening as the known facts:

What happened to Slim's father?

Why is Rusty so sexually experienced?

Who are Stryker and his crew, and where are they now?

What happened to Bitsy before and after the Show?

And why do bodies and holes appear in the days after the crowds clear away?

*The Traveling Vampire Show* is not laced with bogeymen that leave the reader jumpy, peeking in closets and under the bed. But reading it, I was, simply, terrified. I have no reservations in stating that I believe that as the winner of the year 2000 Stoker Award for novel, *The Traveling Vampire Show* has more than earned its merit. In fact, future nominees will have a difficult time upstaging this production, for Laymon tests the tolerance level of the fan of horror fiction more so than Stephen King, Peter Straub, Poppy Z. Brite, or Simon Clark.

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POSTSCRIPT: Laymon passed away prior to the Stoker Awards official ceremony. Many of his works have previously been published only in Great Britain because, according to Laymon, U.S. publishers did not pay well for horror fiction. It is the fervent hope of horror fans that Dorchester or other U.S. publishers will re-release those U.K. titles on our shores so we may remain sufficiently scared and clinging to our house pets for protection. This reviewer looks forward to reading other Laymon novels with fear and trepidation (*TVS* was my first Laymon read). Do I have the mettle for it or am I merely an ersatz horror fan? Watch this web site dear reader, and we shall see.

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