

Leave the Bourgeois Vampire's Waltz and Join the Vampire Nation, Comrades!

by Stine Fletcher

Sipos, Thomas M. *Vampire Nation*. Philadelphia: Xlibris Corp. 1998.

Staab, Thomas. *Vampire's Waltz*. Crazy Wolf Publishing. 1999.

Even small publishing houses aren't immune from the contagion of vampire fiction that has spread through horror, science fiction and fantasy, and Xlibris and Crazy Wolf are no exceptions. The vampire narrative has firmly established its continuum of extremes. At one end we have Dracula—entrenched in his castle, embodying evil and, in recent incarnations, the Satanic. At the other end are the Count Saint Germain and Lestat, who inspire empathy, sympathy and other lovely fuzzy emotions.

Many authors wander along the continuum, using this variety to create depth in their vampire characters. Thomas M. Sipos and Thomas Staab both hearken back to the castle, drawing their vampires as absolute villains, capable only of evil. In both novels, these villains have taken control of one small portion of the globe. Non-vampires are the heroes in symbolic, archetypal conflicts between mortal good and blood-sucking evil. While their basic themes are the same, Sipos succeeds where Staab does not due to one main element: the more horrific nature of *Vampire Nation's* reality.

Set in the realm of fantasy, *Vampire's Waltz* has the requisite villain in the vampire sorceress Glynis, who has used her powers to imprison the island of Manhattan within a raging storm and has transformed the local population into shape-shifting vampires with her blood. The heroes are the last of an ancient species of immortals (Armondo), the last werewolf (John), and the last three mortals unchanged on the island—an unwed mother (Christine) who will bear the child prophesied as the world's savior from Glynis, a black man (Shawn), and an angry male teenager (Jesse). Had enough stereotypes? Staab is just getting started. Hiding from Glynis' minions in the public library, these characters must fight the sorceress—and their own inner demons. Jesse must overcome his bigoted upbringing in order to work as a team with Shawn, while Christine must come to love her unwanted, unborn child if the world is to be saved. Armondo, fraught with loneliness, must resist joining Glynis. John has a more personal vendetta as the last of the noble Guardians that have been protecting the human race against the vampires that enslaved and murdered his kind for centuries.

Do the heroes succeed? Stereotypically, yes. Jesse, after vandalizing a good portion of the library furniture, succumbs to the evil that has infected his father, namely Glynis' blood. Shawn fights valiantly and perishes all the same. Christine gives her life for her daughter whom John, like a good dog, er werewolf, will protect and raise. While these individuals

have saved the world, their story is largely worth ignoring. The overwhelming use of fantastic clichés (Christine's self-sacrifice is right out of the movie *The Seventh Sign*) is not the only irksome element of Staab 's writing.

The two critical climax scenes of the novel lack the much-needed divine touch of an editor. In Chapter 4, Armondo faces Glynis in her tower sanctum. She attempts to persuade him to end his centuries of loneliness by joining her forces and by joining his blood with hers in Christine's soon-to-be-born infant in order to create a truly immortal species of vampire. What should be a concerted and heart-breaking battle for Armondo's soul is instead a distracting menagerie of what seems to be several versions of parts of the chapter that were never proofed, never integrated into a continuous whole. The climax of the novel, the battle which deters Armageddon, suffers the same fate. This is more than a mere lack of proofreading; it's a great weakness on the part of Staab 's writing and evidence of a lack of editorial effort on the part of Crazy Wolf Publishing.

The layout of the book is also a sign of laxness on the part of Crazy Wolf. The margins are, oddly, only left justified. Flip, if you will dear reader, through various tomes on your bookshelf, and you will note they are all full justified. This odd right margin has quite a visual impact in a book only 10 by 15 centimeters in size. This forces line breaks $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of the way through lines throughout the text. For the reader's eye, such visually striking line breaks should denote important points in the text: changes in narrative voice, changes in the person speaking out loud, breaks or breakthroughs in a character's thoughts, or emphasis or poetic license with the language. Here, the breaks are a constant nuisance that distract the reader from the flow of the story.

Avoiding Staab 's mistakes, Sipos mainly adheres to reality, giving *Vampire Nation* depth and giving the subgenre of vampire fiction a worthy addition. Stating at the outset, "This is a work of satire inspired by history," Sipos implies that his vampires are symbols, but he does not create mere stereotypes of villains. His vampires are fleshed out by the fact that such individuals and the horrific communist realm they created were very real. The author's list of relevant nonfiction works on communist Romania initially made me consider him a possible Kim Newman wannabe. Nothing could be further from the truth. While the grand pageant of history provides the backdrop for both authors, Sipos' work can stand on its own.

Sipos throws the reader into his horrific reality from the very beginning, where on the author's dedication page he implies that his parents are immigrants who escaped Romania's Communist regime. What gives his vampires their terrible aspect is indeed the reality behind their very existence, what he calls a plague that we in the United States have been indoctrinated to fear—Communism. Unlike Staab, Sipos doesn't simply use character stereotypes to tell the story. Instead, he relies on the American popular notions of Communism that will be in the back of the minds of readers to help inspire their imagination and terror.

The hero is the mortal Henry Willoughby, an American screenwriter who has been sent on a business trip to Bucharest to begin work on his movie. His producer has decided it

should be filmed in Transylvania, despite the fact that the movie is about Salem witches. Production of the film quickly takes a back seat to the perils of survival in Bucharest, where Henry is beset by all the shortcomings we capitalists have come to associate with Communism: lack of food, lack of the conveniences of daily living (functioning phones and plumbing, etc.), and the lack of incentive and ambition in the populace, all induced by a mindless bureaucracy. Indeed, Romanian civilization seems to have broken down entirely in the face of the vampirism that spreads like a disease. Sipos plays on these unsavory elements to turn Henry's trip into a terrifying nightmare.

Henry's single ally is Anya, whose identity is never fully determined. She is a beautiful young secret agent who may or may not be Russian KGB and who may or may not be a vampire. Her goal is to assassinate Ceausescu, and the plot centers around her and Henry's efforts to reach the palace and then the doomed vampire/dictator's current residence. Along the way, Anya must protect Henry from the vampire contagion of the capitol's inhabitants, vampires who can feed only on tainted blood, which results in their hideous appearance. Surrounded by these monsters, our heroes make their way through the capitol, dodging Ceausescu's elite police force, which feeds on the only remaining vestiges of life—infants—to finally encounter the greatest monsters of all, Ceausescu, his wife Elena, and their hideous son.

Sipos goes into great detail in his depiction of Ceausescu's Romania and its vampire populace. The verity of these details gives his novel a depth lacking in Staab 's feeble epic. Instead of fantastic stereotypes, Sipos relies on historic events and realistic details (Yes the trees in Ceausescu's Bucharest really were painted green to simulate an unnatural vitality). He uses his vampires to bring out the horror of real events that mortals have perpetuated, rather than creating an uninspired fantasy-land where stereotypical characters fight stereotypical battles to predictable ends.

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