

A Werewolf Novel With Bite: Review of David Holland's *Murcheaton: The Wolf's Tale*

by James David Reyome

David Holland. *Murcheaton: The Wolf's Tale*. New York: Tor, 2000. 376p.

As werewolves go, Larry Talbot (*The Wolf Man*) and David Kessler (the protagonist of *An American Werewolf in London*) have more in common than their lycanthropic affliction: they also probably inspire more sympathy than most characters in horror cinema. And it's a reasonable feeling, I think—here are two fellows who, through no fault of their own, become hideous monsters on the advent of a full moon, proceed to go out and slaughter helpless innocents, then wake up the next morning dripping in gore, and, here's the kicker, are utterly helpless to stop themselves, short of ending their own lives or having someone else do it for them. The latter of these two life ending options, as we all probably know, happens in both cases (mind you, if you didn't already know this I'm sorry I blew it for you, but then you really must get out to the video rental store more often...).

The innocent stalking the innocent is a familiar plot device that seems to work particularly well in werewolf stories. But what about when the stalker is not so innocent? Edgar Lenoir, Duke of Darnley and the protagonist of David Holland's first novel, *Murcheaton: The Wolf's Tale*, is not exactly a sympathetic character. He is a member of the British aristocracy and is more than a bit arrogant, as people with inherited power tend to be. He is also a werewolf and is almost joyous in his declaration of that fact: "I am a werewolf. There it is....God, I must be mad, but to see it there, spelled out. It's so exhilarating and insanely wonderful."

Indeed! His subsequent dissections of each night and what he experiences when he goes through the change are equally enthusiastic, and even tantalizing; all too soon he accepts his state as such a wholly natural process that he becomes convinced that the "primal beast" is the true essence of life, and as he writes he seems to do his best to convince the reader that the life of the werewolf is a terribly attractive one. There's no unpleasantness—things like the slaughter, blood, death, and the hideous leftovers—only the hunt, a freedom of passion and license to satisfy the most bestial of cravings. No, the unpleasantness comes on the return to human form. There's lots of room for moral interpretation here if you're so inclined; make your own decisions as you read. But especially take note of Darnley's torrid account of a chance meeting with a Bishop at a society gala in which their conversation turns to the topic of class struggle and Darwinism and how Darnley equates this to his own situation.

Not too surprisingly, Darnley sees himself as the fittest, bound to survive at the expense of his luckless prey. Here the novel touches upon themes developed in Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. But as his passion waxes, his arguments wane, and it all concludes

when the cleric delivers the line, "A man who believes as you do invariably finds the proof of his arguments within himself. You see the worst in your own soul, and...you apply the same standard to others. But don't do it, my boy...."

Of course, Darnley is infuriated that anyone, especially a cleric several rungs beneath himself on the social ladder, dares to philosophically intercede on behalf of what he sees as his cattle.

In short, Holland makes being a werewolf fun. The narrative is a frame tale, told by Darnley's longtime rival and friend Charles Meredith, as he reads Lenoir's diary to the youngest Duke of Darnley. The voice is Victorian, of course, and has a very authentic feel; the author has obviously done his homework. It's interesting to follow Darnley's perversion through his journals: his grimly detailed (yow! and nicely done) stalking and attack during a hunting trip in the forests of the Carpathians; his subsequent "sickness" and apparent recovery; and his return to Murcheston, his conveniently remote estate, which makes for a better than average base of operations for his incipient moonlight excursions. We see him first attacking and eating small animals, then a beloved old dray horse (quite a mess to clean up, that), and eventually, larger prey, if you know what I mean.

However, Darnley is different in that from the beginning he actually takes the time to research lycanthropy, and his journal's intimate description of this research is almost as fascinating as his own story. The detail is terrific, particularly in the various quoted narratives (an Arabian werewolf whose transformation is put on display; the story of a village exclusively populated by the creatures; an unfortunate monk who lives his own wonderfully perverted werewolf tale). They amount to tales within tales within a tale.

Though Darnley is obviously the meat of the story, if you'll pardon the expression, the rest of the characters lend the spice: Meredith, who though apparently somewhat lacking in fortitude does possess something Darnley dearly wants—his wife Elizabeth; Liam Grey, a young lad of low birth but great promise who becomes Darnley's servant, then his student, then ... well, let's stop there; then there is Draney's loyal retainer Old Grey, Darnley's nearest neighbor and Liam's father; and Mrs. Wattles, the massive, mysterious woman who owns the unusual London bookstore where Darnley's greatest research takes place, and who feeds him his werewolf lore. Holland's depiction of her is nearly photographic in its quality. I doubt I'll ever walk the aisles of a used book store again without looking over my shoulder for her. The book would not work nearly as well without her presence.

It's hard to find any fault with this novel. The characterizations are excellent, the Victorian dialogue is flawless, and the action flows wonderfully; and the complete seduction of Darnley to the dominant primal side of his being is utterly gripping. Once he concludes that he is a wolf to the core, it's no great leap for him to decide that stalking Elizabeth and making her what he has become is perfectly acceptable, and this sets up the climactic scenes of the book. I won't totally spoil it for you, but imagine if you will two people sitting in a darkened room, weapons at their sides, waiting for the other to

change.... It's been done before in this genre, as in John Carpenter's *The Thing*, but Holland carries it off with aplomb. However, the climax does expose the only weakness in the story: a somewhat weak finish after a rousing buildup, with the necessary destruction of Darnley being almost anticlimactic and abrupt. It's a bit of a comedown after such a terrific tale, and I was left feeling just a bit disappointed. Still, this is but a minor complaint. If you enjoy a good werewolf tale, or if you're just looking for an interesting change of pace, *Murcheston* truly has teeth. Given half a chance it'll devour you.

Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume II (Summer 2001)