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BOOK REVIEW: Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska.

***Girls In Contemporary Vampire Fiction*. Cham, Switzerland:**

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Meticulously researched and logically organised, *Girls in Contemporary Vampire Fiction* by Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska (2021) is a comprehensive tool for any researcher who wishes to delve deeper into the young adult paranormal narratives which have gained tremendous popularity in recent decades. With a focused analysis on two contemporary vampire series and their respective spin-offs, this volume brings valuable and topical research in several fields of study, including contemporary Gothic, but is perhaps better read through the lens of gender studies, as it provides a cohesive, complex and compelling discussion on the factors which shape the gender identity of teenage heroines, as well as on how this reflects on the young contemporary female readers of vampire fiction.

The vampire – one of the most powerful tropes in Gothic literature – was meant to symbolise absolute otherness and horror. It was also meant to symbolise the social, moral and sexual transgression which Gothic literature feeds upon. The vampire was, essentially, meant to represent a cautionary tale and an alien enemy to be vanquished. Yet, somehow and at some point in the last century, the image of the vampire shifted drastically, making the contemporary vampire one of the most frequent objects of desire in popular books (and movies).

While Fred Botting (1999) lamented this metaphoric death of the Gothic, which he argued came with the new romantic image of the vampire promoted mainly in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 portrayal of Dracula (p.178), and Alexandra Warwick (2007) bemoaned in her famous article the idea of the confessing vampire from Anne Rice's novels, other critics have recently attempted to make sense of this new direction in Gothic studies, as well as of this new image of the vampire. In her discussion related to why and how contemporary vampires have learned to "sparkle" (Spooner, 2017, p.83), Catherine Spooner concludes that the second half

of the twentieth century was a time for monsters to have a voice and be endowed with a keen awareness of their own interior lives, while in the first decades of the twenty-first, the narrative seems to have moved one step further, as readers now witness the monster's desire for assimilation into the mainstream (pp. 84-85). This assimilating or assimilated vampire Spooner describes may have little to do with traditional Gothic fiction, but, nonetheless, this image is pervasive in contemporary fantasy and paranormal literature, especially in that dedicated to a young adult female readership. And this is precisely why Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's volume intends to take it seriously.

From the very first pages of the introduction, Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska states that the clear aim of her work is, on the one hand, to analyse how gender identity is constructed for female protagonists within the context of vampire novels and, on the other hand, to piece together an image of what these messages about girlhood might say to the contemporary teenage girls who read these novels. Hers is a volume analysing stories "for and about girls" (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2021, p.12) and shifting between critical frameworks (Gothic and gender studies, as well as sociology) in order to draw pertinent conclusions about gender identity construction in narratives where vampires live in the same society, and, more importantly, go to the same schools as human teenage girls. For this purpose, the author chooses to focus her research on two popular contemporary young adult series and their respective spin-offs: *House of Night* and *House of Night: Other World*, written by P.C. and Kristin Cast, and *Vampire Academy* and *Bloodlines*, written by Richelle Mead.

In Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's new work, the vampire and the vampiric world constitute a mirror which reflects the main aspects of gender identity construction for young girls in contemporary society, reflecting fears, hopes and issues such as body-shaming, eating disorders, sexual agency and consent, rebellion against the norms of society, academic achievements or social standing and peer pressure. By choosing to focus her analysis mainly on young heroines who are either vampire, part vampire or very closely immersed in the vampire world, she wishes to break with the tradition of the helpless human heroine and the strong, "good" vampire protector. With their mix of human and supernatural traits, the female protagonists of the series Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska analyses offer "the promise" (p. 12) of a more complex interaction with the world, thus better expressing the complexities real life teenage readers are faced with. Sydney Sage's evolution in *Bloodlines* would be a short, but good example of the dynamics of gender identity construction the author investigates throughout the volume. As a human alchemist (i.e. a person in charge with concealing vampire existence from the general public), one of Sydney's most prominent traits at the beginning of the series is an

obsession with being thin. But this obsession and the nascent eating disorder Sydney exhibits do not come, as one might expect, from being surrounded by “perfect and slender” vampire bodies which have taken up “the roles of photoshopped models of glossy magazines”, but from her own father, who constantly holds her up to unattainable standards (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2021, pp. 43-46). It is also interesting to note that Jill, the young vampire Sydney is supposed to care for and conceal, is similarly afflicted by body image issues, feeling lanky and unfeminine (rather than tall and perfectly slender as she is viewed by Sydney) when compared to all the human female bodies at her new high school.

Creating a unitary discussion on interdisciplinary topics and contemporary tropes which have been approached mostly in passing in recent years, the volume has five main chapters, each with a distinct area of inquiry into the two novel series which make up the main corpus of analysis. The introduction and the conclusion anchor and give a unifying overview of the argument, while the main chapters flow logically from one to the next and are very well punctuated by comprehensive conclusions which synthesize the major points of the respective section. Although the five main chapters are presented individually, they could be further subdivided thematically into questions of body (Chapter 2), love (Chapters 3, 4, 5) and school (Chapter 6).

After providing both the social and critical context in the *Introduction*, the volume follows with the first main chapter, *Writing (on) Girls' Bodies: Vampires and Embodied Girlhood*, which deals exclusively with the notion of embodied gender identity against the background of high school culture. The issues of body image, physical attractiveness or the need “to have a makeover” are brought up and analysed in turn, while the notion of shame as pertaining specifically to the female body is discussed throughout.

The second main chapter, *A Love so Strong that It Aches: (Re-) Writing Vampire Romance*, starts a complex discussion about the role of romance and the positioning of girls' identity with regards to their own sexuality as well as in negotiation with their (mostly male) love interests, as is illustrated by the discussion of Zoey Redbird's simultaneous romantic and sexual attraction to multiple male partners in *House of Night* (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2021, p.80). In both novel series, the messages about romance remain split, and moments of rebellion or empowerment co-exist with instances of “conventional and heteronormative romantic gender roles and unions” (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2021, p. 112).

The third main chapter, *Pangs of Pleasure, Pangs of Guilt: Girls, Sexuality and Desire*, picks up the discussion and expands the analysis on romance with forays into sexual agency or sexual awakenings, peer pressure or slut-shaming. Virginity is generally portrayed as a non-

transformative act for the young heroines of both series, but each vampiric universe introduces its own specific elements of dealing with young female sexuality: while the fledglings in *House of Night* appear to symbolise sexual freedom and emancipation, the characters in the *Vampire Academy/Bloodlines* series focus more on biological aspects of sexuality such as contraception (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2021, pp.158-160).

Save Your Butt from Getting Raped: Girls, Vampires, Violence rounds up the topic of romance on a rather disheartening but necessary note. Introducing notions of consent, violence and rape is perhaps a nod to the previous volume on *Hospitality, Rape and Consent in Vampire Popular Culture*, which Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska co-edited with David Baker and Stephanie Green, and which deals, like this chapter, with the “often abused female body” (Baker et al., 2017, p. 7). In both series, rape is understood not only as sexual violence and violation, but also as the non-consensual taking of blood by (often male) full vampires, for example. The presence of this section is crucial not only because it adds to the analysis of gender identity construction in the novels, but also because it explores a problem their readership faces in real life, namely growing up a girl in a society rife with rape culture.

The last main chapter before the conclusion, *Biting into Books: Supernatural Schoolgirls and Academic Performance*, is another example of excellent research, bringing to the fore an important and under-emphasised aspect of teenage reality: academic learning as identity construction. After touching upon subjects like the heroines’ engagement in the educational system or the link between popularity and academic excellence, the author emphasises the diversity of the heroines in this regard, the frequent breaking of gender norms when it comes to STEM education and the fact that school and learning are portrayed as paving the way to adulthood for young girls (Stasiewicz-Bieńkoska, 2021, p. 249). After all, Rose (the half-vampire protagonist of *Vampire Academy*) muddles through the “boring subjects”, but excels at and enjoys the physical training classes which will perfect her guardian skills.

Without dwelling on over-discussed tropes of female gender identity, Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkoska manages to create in this research volume a well-rounded portrayal of young female gender construction in contemporary vampire fiction. Perhaps this discussion would have been enriched by the inclusion of other similarly themed stand-alone novels or trilogies, but ultimately, the decision of focusing on mainly two lengthier vampire series is an inspired one, as it allows the author to analyse the evolution of character gender identity over a longer period of time. Moreover, this type of series encourages readers to form a more intimate connection with the characters, an important point given Stasiewicz-Bieńkoska’s desire to also

take into consideration the real-life teenage girls who read vampire fiction and whose own gender identity is influenced by these books.

In the end, *Girls in Contemporary Vampire Fiction* represents a well-thought-of and meticulously researched interdisciplinary study on a topic which is both poignant and pertinent in today's society.

Referances

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