

Review

Girls in Contemporary Vampire Fiction. **Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska.** **Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.**

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In this monograph, Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska recounts the rise of YA vampire fiction, paying particular attention to the female readership and the consequent disparagement of these novels. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska deliberately focuses on literary works (though TV's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997-2001] and *The Vampire Diaries* [1991-1992] are acknowledged, along with the *Twilight* films [2008-2012]), and on novel series rather than standalone books. She further focuses on heroines who are vampires or similarly paranormal creatures, rather than the more usual narrative of male vampires with human female lovers. The four series she has selected are *The House of Night* (2007-2014) and *House of Night: Other World* (2017-2020) by P. C. and Kristen Cast, and Rachel Mead's *Vampire Academy* (2007-2010) and its spin-off, *Bloodlines* (2011-2015), which she considers in

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extensive detail. *Girls in Contemporary Vampire Fiction* sets out to analyse the representation of girls in these vampire novels, and argues that these novels may be seen as conservative but can also depict female agency and have subversive potential.

Following an Introduction setting out the book's themes, Chapter Two focuses on girls' bodies, particularly in regard to the association of appearance with women's sense of self. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska singles out the significance of the tattooed body, which features in both the Casts' and Mead's series. Tattoos mark rites of passage into a fully vampiric community and Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska shows the interconnection between this practice and female agency. She then considers the aesthetics of the contemporary vampire, where an unearthly beauty has largely superseded monstrous ugliness. Most significantly, vampires are immune to "the ultimate 'threats' of the Western bodily ideal: ageing, disability and 'fatness'" (34). According to Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, the aged and disabled female body is excluded from the *House of Night* books; Mead, in contrast, shows more positive aspects of ageing and some sensitivity to issues of mental health, while avoiding physical disability. Physical beauty in general is valorised and associated with moral worth in the Casts' novels. The heroines are universally slim, slimness being closely associated with the conventional image of the vampire. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska shows Mead to be more critical of this bodily ideal and more aware of the harm it does.

Likewise, with the embellishment of the body through style, Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska finds an uncomfortable conformism in the *House of Night* books. Style is inevitably associated with consumerism, and the association of vampirism with capitalist accumulation is well-established in vampire studies, particularly because of Karl Marx's frequent use of vampire imagery to dramatise the exploitation of labour power (see Baldick; McNally). Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska details how the *House of Night* books promote a post-feminist idea of female agency being realised through luxury commodities. This is much less apparent in Mead's novels, where "girls' bodies in action" takes preference over the "glamorised female vampire body" (56). Yet the heroines do get to participate in the culture of feminine beauty too, in a reconciliation that Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska identifies as third-wave feminism. She also pays attention to the makeover, a narrative device that thrives in texts for a female audience from 'Cinderella' through reality TV to 'chick lit'. In vampire narratives, she argues, this motif can be empowering.

Chapter Three turns to paranormal romance. This new genre has allowed transgressive sexualities to be represented but frequently shows conventional attitudes towards girlhood (the *Twilight* series is perhaps an obvious example). However, in the novels Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska looks at, she reveals more complicated patterns. The *House of Night* series allows young women some choice in terms of sexuality, with polyandry permitted in a matriarchal society. However, the Casts' own plots undermine this promise, and readers apparently often resist the challenge to heteronormativity (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska often draws on fan responses in online groups to support her arguments). The ideal of one true,

eternal, and often predestined love dominates many vampire fictions, undermining women's consent and agency. Both pairs of series challenge this notion, though ambivalently. Both sustain the ideal of "a monogamous romantic union" yet disrupt an asymmetrical "patriarchal romantic model" (92), since, in these stories, the female protagonists are themselves not mortal. They often have equal economic power to male characters too. These books likewise do not make marriage and parenthood central to the story in the way other YA vampire romances do.

In Chapter Four, Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska turns to how female desire is treated in the chosen texts, noting that YA fiction has become far more open about this topic in recent years. Virginity and sexual awakening are crucial themes. According to Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's argument, the Casts reveal the power relationship in sexual awakening, particularly between men and young women, as exemplified by the exploitative relationship between Zoey, the main character in *House of Night*, and a male teacher (the high school settings of these books is important). In the *Vampire Academy* series, Mead is more subtle and grants women more agency. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska cites Lydia Kokkola's claim that YA fiction polices sexuality and the loss of virginity often has punitive consequences therein. Yet, according to Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's readings, both the Casts and Mead show female characters being empowered through their sexual awakening. Despite this affirmation of female sexuality, there is still a reversion to that image of it as threatening when it is employed by predatory and manipulative women. This threat is accompanied by constant anxiety over sexual propriety and the fear of 'slut shaming'. The "defensive othering" (155) of slut shaming appears in all of the texts discussed and undermines their otherwise progressive depiction of women's sexuality.

In Chapter Five, Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska turns to the depiction of sexual violence against women, particularly young women. Fantastic narratives for women readers are prone to romanticising rape, inheriting long-established Gothic motifs. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska searches for moments of resistance to this trope. In this chapter, she examines other texts than those of the Casts and Mead (a welcome move), including Bella Forrest's *A Shade of Vampire* (2012-2020), E. M. Knight's *The Vampire Gift* (2016-2020), and Bianca Scardoni's *The Marked* (2015-2020). Issues of male control, symbolised by the vampire's instinctive blood lust, and the metaphor of penetration by fangs for rape are raised. In many YA vampire fictions, women save their lovers from their monstrosity and the violence they suffer is downplayed and forgiven. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska finds, however, that the Casts and Mead both resist this ideological tendency. Both series and their spinoffs place great importance on consent in sexual relationships. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska continues by examining the consequences of rape and how these novels give voice to survivors. She then explores the rape revenge narrative, with women avengers meting out justice. Rosalie's story in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series appears alongside those of the Casts and Mead. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska points to a significant contrast with other romance conventions where the male

lover rescues the hapless heroine. Yet there are still unsettled conflicts over women's agency and victim status in these books.

Many YA vampire stories take place in high school; Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's main texts, the *House of Night* and *Vampire Academy* series, are exemplary. The analysis of education itself in these situations has received little attention and Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's study in Chapter Six is valuable. She pays close attention to the actual curricula and processes of learning in the novels and to the gendered responses of young women to education. The *House of Night* series, where the young vampires go to a special school, depicts a progressive education system as an alternative to the human schools. Teaching is inspirational and the pupils have a rewarding experience. There is a feminist and humanist syllabus; STEM subjects, however, are conspicuously absent. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska points out that popular culture still widely persists in seeing STEM subjects as 'unfeminine' and may discourage young women from studying it: *House of Night* follows this trend. Yet, the *Vampire Academy* books and *Bloodlines* portray much more affirmative models of young female protagonists who are interested in, and excel at, the sciences. For example, Sydney Sage, the young Alchemist woman at the centre of the *Bloodlines* books, is a gifted scientist and a rationalist who is then confronted with the magic of the vampire world – a curious dialectic thus emerges. To me, this tension is one of the most interesting themes in these books. There is a suggestion of contemporary uncertainties over epistemology which Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska might have further drawn out.

Despite the progressive curriculum of the vampire school in *House of Night*, the students are often disengaged from education. Rose, in *Vampire Academy*, is similarly unenthusiastic but is committed to her professional development as a bodyguard to vampire royalty. Others of Mead's characters are dedicated to their education. This, says Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, is in distinctive contrast to the usual formula of educated male vampire and human lover who retreats into conventional roles (as in *Twilight*). In *House of Night*, male students are consistently portrayed as more academic than women, who are often embarrassed by any signs of studiousness. *House of Night* tends to reinforce gendered ideas of knowledge. The *Bloodlines* books are more radical in this respect.

YA fiction is proliferating, and it can have enormous ideological power over young female readers. It is important, however, as Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska notices, to recognise that readers are not passively shaped by texts but may reinterpret them and resist that power. Gothic and fantastic fiction can reveal much about gender dynamics and other issues in ways that realist texts may not. They may range from emancipatory narratives to deeply conservative and patriarchal ones. The series Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska discusses have exemplary feminist tendencies (though other strands may undermine these).

Girls in Contemporary Vampire Fiction is meticulously researched, showing a considerable acquaintance with relevant secondary material (though the author's own voice tends to get a little lost sometimes). It performs close readings of the chosen texts, where

other books of this kind are often more perfunctory. This critical approach is welcome, though the concentration on two sets of texts means that other works in the genre are mostly neglected, and this does give an incomplete picture. Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska's close reading is also more focused on content analysis than a study of the language and the formal literary devices at play, and I think there is an absence there. However, what the book sets out to do is done very well. Overall, *Girls in Contemporary Vampire Fiction* is an excellent addition to the growing criticism on YA Gothic literature.

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