

Rising from the crypt, ‘Powers of Darkness’ surrounds ‘Dracula’ with mystery

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March 17, 2017 01:49 PM

“Powers of Darkness”

“Powers of Darkness” recently hit bookstores, a fascinating take on Irish author [Bram Stoker’s](#) 1897 gothic horror novel “[Dracula](#).” Turns out it’s a major literary discovery that brings with it a convoluted back story (Overlook Press, \$30, 320 pages).

The tale of this “lost version” of “Dracula” began in 1900, when Icelandic journalist Valdimar Ásmundsson made a project of translating “Dracula” from English into his native language. The Icelandic edition was titled “Makt Myrkranna” (“Powers of Darkness”), whose existence was unknown outside of Iceland for nearly a century. It wasn’t until 1986 that “Dracula” scholars came across the book and were shocked to find the preface had been written by Stoker himself (more about that later). They translated the preface into English but stopped there, assuming the novel was a condensation of Stoker’s original.

In 2014, another “Dracula” scholar, Hans Corneel de Roos – intrigued by an anomaly in Stoker’s preface – translated the entire text, which was a first. He was astounded to discover that Ásmundsson had not merely translated the novel into Icelandic but had dramatically changed Stoker’s classic work, adding characters, simplifying the plot and making it more erotic.

[“Powers of Darkness”](#) has an introduction and detailed annotations by de Roos, and a foreword by Dacre Stoker, great-grandnephew of Bram Stoker and author of “Dracula: The Un-Dead.” “Dracula” scholar John Edgar Browning contributes the afterword. Vintage photos and illustrations (including one of Count Dracula’s castle) further enrich the book.

We caught up with de Ross (sic!) in his home city of Munich, Germany, via email. He is the author of “The Ultimate Dracula” and winner of the Research Award from the Transylvanian Society of Dracula.

Q: How did all this happen?

A: I had read the English translation of Stoker’s preface, and I was writing an article about his repeated claim that the events reported in his novel really took place. But some things seemed confusing. So I decided to look for the original Icelandic text of the preface to see if I could find out more.

I (tracked it down) and also discovered the rest of the Icelandic text (of the novel). It had been published in a newspaper before it appeared as a book, and it did not match the English text of “Dracula” at all.

Q: Why would Ásmundsson translate “Dracula” into Icelandic in the first place?

A: He wanted to attract more readers to his newspaper, Fjallkonan, with a good suspense story, and the most modern stories back then came from London. Arthur Conan Doyle was a very popular writer in Iceland, and his books are mentioned in “Makt Myrkranna.”

Q: What are some of the differences between the two?

A: In the Icelandic version, Count Dracula has political ambitions. He and diplomats from various countries are conspiring to overthrow all European democratic institutions. Secondly, we find many new characters who do not appear in “Dracula.” Lucy Westenra has an uncle, for example. Dr. John Seward meets a mysterious Countess Varkony. There are two (new) police detectives.

Then there are the encounters between Jonathon Harker and a blond vampire woman. They meet several times, and Harker cannot get enough of her, although he tries to resist. That is very different from “Dracula,” (in which) Harker is thrilled by three vampire “sisters” only once, and then is disgusted by them.

Q: How shocked were you to discover a different story from the one Stoker wrote?

A: My translation was a big surprise, and I was thrilled, because all the “Dracula” scholars I knew had always believed that “Makt Myrkranna” was only an abridged translation of “Dracula” but basically the same story. It turned out that it had a new plot, new characters and even a new style.

Q: Any speculation of why Ásmundsson would veer so far off course?

A: He wasn’t a novelist, so maybe Stoker wanted to secretly launch a spicier version of “Dracula” that would not have been accepted in Victorian England.

Q: Are you suggesting Ásmundsson translated an unknown version of “Dracula” written by Bram Stoker?

A: I rather believe “Makt Myrkranna” may contain plot points that were included in an earlier draft of “Dracula.” The (conjecture) is that Stoker had been working on an alternative plot, or that he provided an earlier draft of “Dracula” to Ásmundsson, or that he had a more sexy narrative in a drawer. The intriguing point is, some ideas that are described in Stoker’s early notes for the novel – but that were not published in “Dracula” – can be found in the Icelandic version.

Q: For example?

A: In Stoker’s notes, Count Dracula has a deaf-mute housekeeper, but in “Dracula” he lives alone. In “Makt Myrkranna,” Jonathon Harker’s meals are cooked by a deaf and mute old woman. Dr. John Seward’s asylum is placed in the east of London, just like in the notes. Count Dracula makes courtesy visits to Lucy’s sickbed and appears at dinner parties. Of course, this all could be coincidence, but there are (a half-dozen) such amazing parallels.

Q: Which story is “better”?

A: Personally, I like the Icelandic story more. It is more to the point and less sentimental. It has some amazing scenes in which Count Dracula leads a horde of apelike followers during a sacrificial ceremony.

Q: In Hollywood’s filmography of Stoker’s vampire thriller, which is your favorite?

A: The first time I got interested in the “Dracula” story was when I saw (Francis Ford Coppola’s) [“Bram Stoker’s Dracula”](#) (1992, starring Gary Oldman). Another favorite is [“The Fearless Vampire”](#)

Killers,” directed by Roman Polanski (1967). Another very funny parody is “Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat” (1989).

I’ve seen a lot more, of course, (including) the (eight-title) Hammer Films series (starring Christopher Lee), “Nosferatu” (1922) and the Bela Lugosi “Dracula.” I binge-watched the complete “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” series.

After my translation was released, an Icelandic filmmaker announced that he wants to produce a TV series based on “Makt Myrkranna.” That would be exciting to see the novel come to life.

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