

DESCENDANT FOREWORD

While I thoroughly relished reading *Dracula* when I was about twelve years old, the idea of vampires sucking blood by biting people in the carotid artery always struck me as absurd.

Remember the bruises that were left on your neck when you were given love-bites as a teenager? A vampire wouldn't leave two neat holes that you could discreetly cover up with a scarf. Your neck would be swollen and purple and you would hardly be able to speak.

Apart from that, you would probably bleed to death the very first time a vampire bit you. You wouldn't lie in bed for the next few days looking all pallid and weak and only getting up to open the window so that the vampire could flutter in and give you another nasty suck.

It was for this reason that I have very rarely written any vampire stories. No matter how far-fetched the evil demons in my stories may be, I always try to make them believable. If they're not believable, they're simply not scary – and, after all, the whole reason I write horror stories is to scare you.

Not only that, I don't like writing about the same old evils that everybody else writes about. The horror shelves are crammed with novels about vampires and werewolves and zombies, and while many of these have been very successful, and each of them has a strong core audience, there are so many other mythical creatures from many different cultures which are much more interesting – and much more frightening, too.

I have written about the Japanese Tengu demon, and the Native American monster Coyote, as well as the terrifying Korean demon Kwisin and Mictantecutli the Mexican spirit of death and resurrection.

It was while I was researching the legends surrounding gargoyles – those hideous stone figures that perch on top of cathedrals and churches – that I came across the original legends of the Romanian vampires, the *strigoi*.

What is both fascinating and very chilling about the *strigoi* is that there are many authenticated instances of them returning from the dead to drink the blood of innocent victims. The earliest recorded *strigoi* was a Croatian, Jure Grando, who died in 1656. He terrorised the villagers of his native Istria after he died, visiting their houses at night and attacking them. He was eventually caught in 1672 and beheaded.

Another early *strigoi* was Petar Blagojevich, a Serbian peasant who died in 1725. He visited his own house after his death and demanded that his son give him food. When his son refused, Blagojevich murdered him and drank his blood.

In 1969, after the death of an elderly man in the city of Căpățâneni, several of his relatives mysteriously died, most of them from severe blood loss. When the old man's coffin was opened, it was found that he had not decomposed at all, and that his eyes were open and his face was flushed red. His body was cremated to prevent him from killing any more of his family.

Then, in 1970, the city of Bucharest was shocked by a number of terrible bloody killings. Almost all of the victims were waitresses returning home after work, and almost all of the attacks took place at midnight during violent rainstorms. The Securitate eventually arrested a man called Ion Rimaru, whose teeth exactly matched the bite-marks found on the dead women's bodies. But Rimaru was difficult to question because he was so drowsy during daylight hours. He was only lucid at night, so he was interrogated after dark.

When he was sentenced to death, Rimaru went so berserk that it took the strength of several police officers to hold him down. It was later discovered that his father's fingerprints matched those of a serial killer who had been active in Bucharest in 1944, attacking and murdering waitresses in almost identical circumstances – at midnight, in rainstorms. His father died in a mysterious accident, and it was hinted that the Securitate might have arranged

this “accident” because they had found out that Rimaru Senior was in fact a *strigoi*, and had passed his bloodline on to his son.

After the execution of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989, he was not given a formal burial. Many Romanians were worried that he would return from the grave, so the revolutionary leader Gelu Voican strewed the Conducator’s apartment with braids of garlic to prevent him from coming back and taking revenge on those who had overthrown him.

As recently as Christmas, 2003, after a 76-year-old Romanian named Petre Toma died in the village of Marotinu de Sus, his niece said that her late uncle had visited her at night. Gheorghe Marinescu, a brother-in-law, led a group of relatives to dig up Petre Toma’s coffin, cut out his heart, and then burn his body. They mixed his ashes with water and every member of the family drank them – a sure defence against the reappearance of a *strigoi*.

Romania was just about to join the European Union at that time, and the government was anxious that the country should not appear to be backward and superstitious, so Marinescu and five other family members were prosecuted for tampering with Petre Toma’s grave. These days, though, many Romanian villagers still drive a wooden stake through the heart of a dead person to insure against their return as a *strigoi*.

Another preventative measure is for the body to be unearthed, then decapitated and buried face down.

According to folklore, you are at risk of becoming a *strigoi* after your death if you have red hair; or if you have led a depraved and sinful life; or if you have never married; or if you are the seventh-born child of the same sex in a family; or if you have died by suicide, or by execution, or from having been cursed by a witch.

In *Descendant*, *strigoi* are being used by the Germans during World War Two to terrorise the Allies and the Belgian resistance; and our hero is sent by the US Army to hunt them down.

The beginning of the novel is set in Antwerp, because this was the first European city I ever lived in, at the age of six (my father was stationed with the British Army there). I have very clear memories of what Antwerp was like in those days, and I have visited it several times since. Along with Poland, Belgium is one of those places where I feel very much at home.

You will find that *Descendant* is very different from any other vampire novel you have ever read, but I hope that you will find it realistic and emotional and meaningful, too. It means a lot to me personally, because I have discovered that even if we are not immortal, we never really die.

Graham Masterton

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