

Varma on Vampires

by John DeMont

Vampires and the supernatural are two subjects which have captured people's imaginations for centuries. Of late there seems to be a resurgence in interest to the public, helped along by the umpteen remakes of Dracula and Nosferatu movies as well as the success of the Dracula Broadway plays and the popularity of trashy schlock novels such as Salem's Lot. One person viewing this resurgence with mixed feelings is Dalhousie's Dr. Sir Devandra Varma who must shudder when he sees the present state of the literary tradition begun years ago by the Stokers, Shelliess and Radcliffes.

Dr. Varma is generally thought to be the world's leading expert on Gothic romances, the extremely popular romantic thrillers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries which were as widely read as the James Bond and Harold Robbins books of today.

"They were read at night by maids and apprentices, in the sombre glow of tallow candles", says Dr. Varma, "Now, television is your entertainment; then, these novels were cultivated as a secret vice."

Not content only to interpret

and study these period works, Dr. Varma prefers to, as he puts it, "go directly to the source of the flame", wandering the earth in search of the factual origins of these novels and engaging in "literary archeology to unearth any lost gems of the genre."

Thus far his literary detective work has uncovered or rather resurrected countless volumes of lost Gothic volumes which he has caused to be published. They have been termed "a permanent contribution to the history of English literature" by the scholar Sir Herbert Read.

His latest discovery occurred last summer when he found the first treasure-filled repository of over 144 Gothic owned by Countess Francesca, the wife of Prince Ludwig Maximilian Starhemberg, the Australian ambassador to Britain from 1793 to 1810. Dr. Varma's discovery has, in his own words, "opened up new windows and updates the whole perspective in the history of the scholarship of Gothic Novels".

His work has taken him to many bizarre and strange places including Castle Dracula which is situated on a cliff 1,500 feet above the village of Hunedoara in the Carpathian Mountains and

which took over two hours to scale. The villagers there still kept garlic in their front windows and crossed themselves when they learned that Dr. Varma and his expedition intended to visit the Castle.

Dr. Varma says he remembers "the gloomy power" of the castle, and on the way down hearing disembodied footsteps behind him even though the rest of his party had preceded him down the mountain.

Needless to say he went down a good deal faster than when he had gone up.

"I'm told," he says with a gleam in his eye, "that when they opened his tomb there it was empty."

His work has made him a world renowned expert on the Vampire myth, of whose existence he says he has uncontestable proof. He is one of the governors of the Count Dracula society and has had occasion, on several instances, to act as an advisor for Hammer Films.

He is presently occupied with a third novel which he hopes will shed further light for its readers on the neglected terrain of literature to which he has devoted almost his entire career, academic and otherwise.



Chris Hartt/Dal Photo

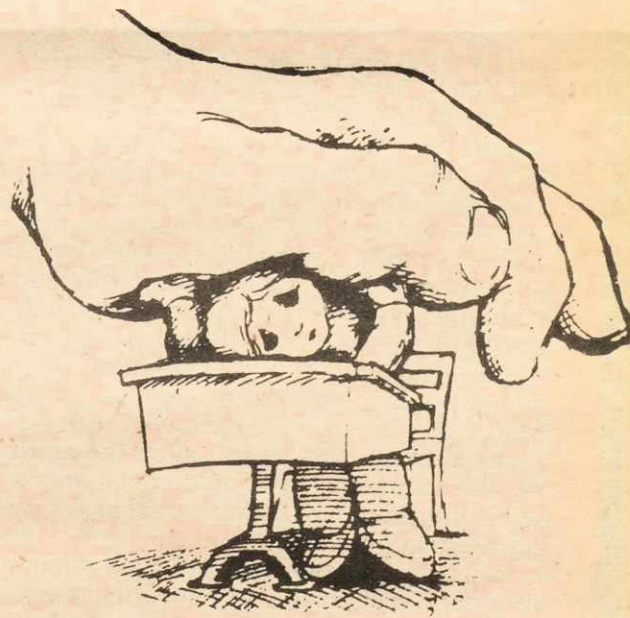
This past summer Dr. Varma, an expert on vampires and the supernatural, uncovered 144 Gothic novels which gave him new insights into the Gothic tradition.

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