Michael Sims has written and edited a variety of books, including Dracula's Guest: A Connoisseur's Collection of Victorian Vampire Stories. *His work often explores the relationship between nature and culture, and has appeared in such varied publications as the* Washington Post, England's New Statesman, *and* American Anthropology. *In this article, Sims speculates about the physical and scientific reasons that underlie our myths about the dead.*

ALL THE DEAD ARE VAMPIRES

BY MICHAEL SIMS

A NATURAL-HISTORICAL LOOK AT OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH DEAD PEOPLE.

I remember the view from a grave. Cartoon stars spiraled in front of my eyes when I hit the damp soil at the bottom. Up there on the faraway earth, past six feet of square muddy wall, a man and a boy stared down at me—my brothers, Gary and David, both laughing. Until I slipped and fell into the grave, we had been setting up the graveside for a funeral. Gary, 11 years older than I, worked for a funeral home; more than once in our childhood, David and I rode with him to pick up a corpse. I remember coming in the back door of a funeral home around midnight—the glare of fluorescent lights on stainless-steel tables, the smell of antiseptic, and another odor underneath. Only once did I actually zip up a body bag over a dead man's nose. Once was enough.

Bettman, Corbis

These mostly forgotten memories returned after I was invited last year to edit an anthology of vampire stories.

"Vampire stories?" I repeated. Despite a secret fascination with werewolves—something strikes home for me about the need for anger management to keep you from going all beastly during a crisis—I had never really been a fan of vampires. I wasn't reading the *Twilight* books or watching *True Blood*. I never even read *Interview With the Vampire*—even though I dated a psychic vampire back in the early 90s—and my Tom Cruise allergy kept me from the movie.

The editor clarified: "*Victorian* vampire stories."

"Oh, I see." He knows I have a weakness for the atmosphere of Victorian genre fiction, from Raffles relieving the aristocracy of the burden of wealth to pissed-off ghosts chasing M.R. James's bumbling antiquarians. Who can resist an era in which first aid for any trouble begins with a shout of, "Brandy! For God's sake, bring her some brandy!"

So, wondering how I would find a new angle on vampire stories, I said yes. Anthologizing is a dusty sport, half antique hunting and half literary gossipfest, and I love it. I went home and prowled my shelves and realized how many of the Victorian-era stories I had already read. Why, here's that pasty-faced bastard Lord Ruthven, by Byron's doctor and hanger-on, John Polidori, and so obviously based upon Byron himself. Here is Théophile Gautier's crazy priest, in love with a vampire courtesan and wrestling with his naughty soul. And there were many stories I hadn't read before—gay vampires, child vampires, even an invisible vampire.

To understand how this modern mythology blossomed during the Romantic and Victorian century, I had to go to the allegedly true 18th-century accounts of vampirism. With or without clergy, the citizenry often performed frenzied exhumations because they feared that Aunt Helga was returning to prey upon her relatives.

As I read about the careful inspection of corpses for signs of vampirism, a curious thing happened. Slowly I began to *get* vampire stories: the horror of our aspiring consciousness finding itself trapped in a mortal body, the threatening presence of the already deceased, even the undead's gamble on a kind of credit—another's blood instead of their own—rather than acceptance of normal human fate.

Reading about these fictional bodies—bodies of victims and of monsters—reminded me of bodies I had known. I remembered my own encounters with death, from riding in a hearse with a corpse strapped to a gurney behind us to sitting beside a friend's father in the hospital as he sighed his last breath. I remembered my momentary horror and panic when I fell into the grave. It wasn't like falling off a ladder. This was a *grave.*

As I worked on the introduction to the anthology, I merged the two main topics I write about: natural history and Victorian literature. I tried to look at vampires from a scientific point of view. After all, where did we get this fear that, once the sun goes down, the ghoulish undead climb out of their coffins and come back for the rest of us? It didn't emerge out of thin air.

The vampire story as we know it was born in the early 19th century, as the wicked love child of rural folklore and urban decadence. But in writing these depraved tales, Byron and Polidori and company were refining the raw ore of peasant superstition. And the peasant brain had simply been doing what the human brain does best: sorting information into explanatory narratives.

I found lots of reports of vampires from Europe—from urban France, rural Russia, the islands of Greece, the mountains of Romania. Along the way, I was reminded of something I already knew but hadn't thought of as relevant in this context: During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, dead bodies were a common sight. Plague and countless other illnesses ravaged every community. Corpses of the executed and tortured were displayed in public as warnings, even left hanging as they decomposed.

Few bodies seemed to rest peacefully even in the ground. Often people in the 18th century had an opportunity not only to see corpses but also to glimpse them again after they were buried. Urban cemeteries were densely overcrowded, sometimes with the dead stacked several graves deep, causing horrific spillage during floods or earthquakes. More corpses than the ground could accommodate resulted in the stench of decay and the constant risk of disease. Grave desecration was also common; a thriving trade in illicit cadavers for medical students joined a vicious rivalry between competing religious groups. After Louis XIV abolished the convent at Port-Royal des Champs as a hotbed of Jansenist heresy, drunken locals dug up nuns' bodies from the cemetery and fed them to their dogs. Corpses of executed heretics were dragged through the streets, then reburied in too-small graves by breaking the body into small pieces.

I found in older vampire stories that often the person who returns as a vampire was irreligious during life—irreverent, scornful of the infallibility of the church or the need for communion, for example. People worried especially about those who had been excommunicated and denied burial in a church-approved cemetery. If your soul didn't sleep peacefully in the arms of the Lord, what might it be up to?

In his 1746 compendium, *The Phantom World,* Augustin Calmet explored those questions. In a section headed "Do the excommunicated rot in the earth?," he examined the common fear that the body of a heretic does not decompose but instead lingers in the earth, profaning the laws of God in death as it did in life, polluting the ground with its sinfulness and disease. Unlikely comrades, such as natural philosophers and village priests, found themselves allied in an antipollution movement, lobbying for the segregation of cemeteries to rural areas beyond dense centers of population—where their rotting inhabitants could inflict less harm on the living.

The scholar Marie-Hélène Huet sums up the subtext of many early vampire accounts: "All the dead are vampires, poisoning the air, the blood, the life of the living, contaminating their body and their soul, robbing them of their sanity."

As I continued digging into the literature, I wondered: If ordinary people were encountering the corpses of the recently dead or even long-dead friends and relatives, what were they actually seeing that they misinterpreted and then wove into a vampire mythology? Not surprisingly, no one understood the process of decay within a subterranean chamber. They had no forensic body farm at which to chart a corpse's fade from nauseating stink to cautionary bones.

Any variation from "normal" in the grave provoked fear, yet there isn't really much of a norm in the process of decay under different circumstances. Some coffins protect their residents better than others. Lime helps preserve a body, as do clay soil and low humidity. Graves in different climates and latitudes vary, depending upon air temperature and humidity, soil composition, and insects, not to mention those invisible sanitation workers who turn us all back

into the dust from which we came—and of course in the 18th century, no one knew that such creatures existed.

Many natural changes after death were judged to be evidence that the late lamented had turned into a bloodsucker. Like hair, fingernails don't actually continue to grow after death, but as fingers decompose, the skin shrinks, making the nails look abnormally long and clawlike. You begin to look as if you're turning into a predatory animal. Dead skin, after sloughing off its top layer, can look flushed and alive as if with fresh blood. Damp soil's chemicals can produce in the skin a waxy secretion, sometimes brownish or even white, from fat and protein—adipocere, "grave wax." In one eyewitness account from the 18th century, a vampire is even found—further proof of his vile nature—to have a certain region of his anatomy in a posthumous state of excitement. The genitals often inflate during the process of decomposition.

And what about the blood reported around the mouths of resurrected corpses? That too has a natural explanation. Without the heart as a pump to keep it circulating, blood follows the path of least resistance. Many bodies were buried face down, resulting in blood pooling in the face and leaving it looking flushed. Sometimes blood also gets lifted mouthward by gases from decomposition. Vampire stories recognize that death is messy.

Much of the original folklore does not include our familiar theme nowadays, that the undead recruit their own next generation by infecting victims when they drink their blood. Often I found the fear that a corpse might spontaneously transform into a vampire without ever once making an unwilling blood donation during life. Your behavior before death was more important because it might increase your odds of coming back as a vampire. Felons, especially murderers, were thought likelier to be cursed in this way—as were those poor souls presumptuous enough to commit suicide and take their departure schedule out of the hands of God.

Here's a list of other likely vampires: murderers' victims, the battlefield dead, the drowned, stroke victims, the first person to fall in an epidemic, heretics, wizards, alcoholics, grumpy people, women with questionable reputations, people who talk to themselves, and redheads.

Throughout my research, I found parallels between my own experience and vampire stories. When I read that list, I realized that the psychic vampire I once dated was a redhead. I'm just saying.

What I didn't foresee, when I signed on to compile an anthology of Victorian vampire stories, is that these tales from the dawn of the genre would tap into fears from the dawn of my own life, as well as more recent experiences. Once, in an emergency room, I was given an overdose of morphine for severe back pain. I flat-lined. My consciousness rushed away like an outgoing tide, and everything went black. I had just enough time to think, "Wow, dying is so easy." My wife recounts the next few minutes: a buzzer screaming, nurses racing in, calling to each other, giving me another injection, my EKG line getting excited again. Slowly I returned to consciousness, as if washing up on a beach. I shivered for days after that experience.

I didn't shiver like that again until late one night while reading Aleksey Tolstoy's "The Family of the Vourdalak." Gorcha, the grandfather of a village family, returns from 10 days in the mountains a disturbingly changed man, pale and slow. That evening he lures his own young grandson out into the darkness. I was reading this story late at night in the living room, with my wife already upstairs asleep. I began to shiver. I remembered my own grandfather's death when I was 7, how my memory of him merged with a late-night horror movie I had seen, how he kept coming back in my nightmares. In one dream, he limped up the gravel road from our family cemetery and tapped on my bedroom window. He wanted me to join him.

Of course he did; the dead always want us to join them. They frighten us because we know that someday we will see the view from a grave.

Invent

Michael Sims argues that literary depictions of the dead as vampires arose from our ancestors' experiences with the real dead. In the absence of scientific explanations, people imagined all sorts of reasons to explain how and why people died. Using Sims's logic, what real-life situations might account for the belief in ghosts, or witches, or even elves?

Compose

According to Sims, "The dead always want us to join them. They frighten us because we know that someday we will see the view from a grave." In a short essay (3–5 paragraphs) discuss your view of the dead. Are you afraid of dead bodies? Are you the kind of person who would be afraid to visit a funeral home, or do you love the thrill of the unknown? Do you find horror movies too scary, or do you find it all just silly and boring?