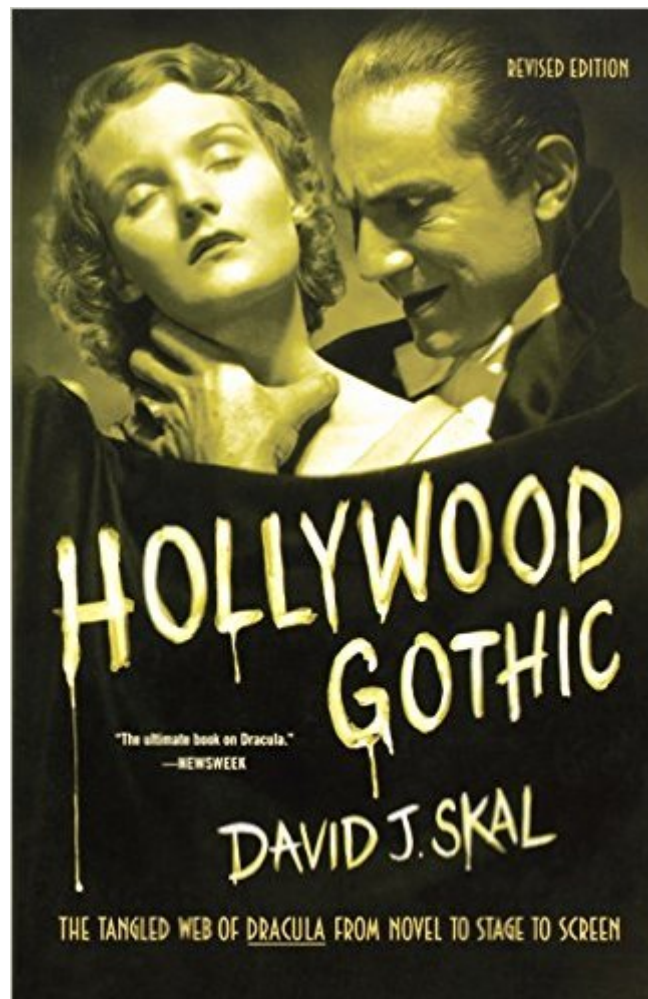


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Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web Of Dracula From Novel To Stage To Screen



Synopsis

The primal image of the black-caped vampire Dracula has become an indelible fixture of the modern imagination. It's recognition factor rivals, in its own perverse way, the familiarity of Santa Claus. Most of us can recite without prompting the salient characteristics of the vampire: sleeping by day in its coffin, rising at dusk to feed on the blood of the living; the ability to shapeshift into a bat, wolf, or mist; a mortal vulnerability to a wooden stake through the heart or a shaft of sunlight. In this critically acclaimed excursion through the life of a cultural icon, David Skal maps out the archetypal vampire's relentless trajectory from Victorian literary oddity to movie idol to cultural commodity, digging through the populist veneer to reveal what the prince of darkness says about us all.

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Customer Reviews

In "Hollywood Gothic" David Skal tells the story of "Dracula" that came after the classic of gothic horror was published in 1897. It's a fascinating, fact-filled tale of colorful personalities, legal battles, Hollywood politics, and a culture still captivated by the King of Literary Vampires. The book's seven chapters begin with author Bram Stoker, end with the Count's recent incarnations on stage and screen, and include the most insightful analysis of "Dracula"'s origins that I have read in the course of my minor obsession with the novel. Chapter 1 explores "Dracula"'s literary and theatrical predecessors before moving on to discussion of the intellectual and sexual climate into which the book was published in 1897, the life and elusive character of its author Bram Stoker, and how the novel was received in its own day. David Skal does an impressive job of pulling together the relevant details, from diverse perspectives, of the novel's birth. Chapter 2 details the legal battle

waged by the Bram Stoker's widow, Mrs. Florence Stoker, to suppress the first cinematic adaptation of her husband's novel, 1922's "Nosferatu", the unauthorized German production directed by F.W. Murnau, now recognized as a masterpiece of silent cinema. Chapter 3 sees Mrs. Stoker finally authorize an adaptation to British dramatist Hamilton Deane, whose wordy, plodding "Dracula" play nevertheless achieved great financial success, attracting the attention of American theatrical producer Horace Liveright. Liveright enlisted journalist John Balderston to rewrite the play for Broadway and make it a smash hit on this side of the Atlantic. Chapter 4 moves to Hollywood for the protracted negotiations over "Dracula"'s film rights.

A review from the Los Angeles Times quoted on the back cover of David J. Skal's Hollywood Gothic calls the book "comprehensive." This is technically true, since the book does indeed cover the history of Dracula film and stage adaptations from the earliest days (1897, when Bram Stoker wrote a stage play version of his novel) to the most recent (2004, when the book was last revised), but a little elaboration is needed. The vast majority of the book, the first six chapters out of seven total, covers a limited area: Stoker's 1897 novel, the unauthorized 1922 film adaptation Nosferatu, the early stage plays (focusing mostly on those of the mid to late 1920s), the 1931 film starring Bela Lugosi, and the Spanish-language film produced concurrently with the Lugosi film. It's not until the seventh and final chapter that Skal covers the post-1931 adaptations, blowing through them quickly in about 60 pages, and doing his job not nearly as well as he does in the preceding six chapters (more on that below). Those first six chapters are where the book shines. This is where Skal's interest (or, more appropriately, obsession) lies, and his enthusiasm for his subject matter makes for engrossing reading. Although he does judge the artistic value of the adaptations, he writes much more about the people behind them, both in their professional and personal lives; but like the writers from the History Channel who can somehow manage to make something like the history of toothpaste sound fascinating, Skal makes the most mundane details of these people sound nearly as interesting as (and sometimes more interesting than) the fictional drama that they put on film.

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