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Horror books in Centennial writer's blood: Interview with the vampire author

By: Peter Jones



Centennial author Jeanne Stein

A vampire is living next door.

Even more batty is the busybody who peers at him through her binoculars every night. The strange man across the cul de sac works such odd hours and keeps his blinds tightly shut.

Why had he so rudely rebuffed her invitation to church?

"Rats!" the shut-in thinks, clutching her silver crucifix.

If only she had been more careful when dropping her husband's garlic tablet into the darkly clad suspect's latte. She knows she will never get another chance like that. He knows that she knows - and he knows she knows that he knows she knows.

"Norman's cholesterol was down to 210, anyway," the woman whispers silently, as she snaps another Polaroid of the night owl.

"C'mon, c'mon," she says out loud, yanking the cheap print from her vintage machine. But once again, the image is blurry, at best.

If she could only wait for the film to process.

Maybe, next time.

Paranoia about nearby vampires can be found everywhere from Bram Stoker's icon-setting 1897 "Dracula" novel to TV's countless late-night movies. But no matter how often the "undead" are discovered, it is always a surprise when the local count or soccer mom turns out to be a vampire - or an author of vampire novels.

To shake hands with Jeanne Stein, one would not guess that this conservatively dressed Centennial resident, whose blond hair speaks Carol Brady more than Lily Munster, has penned dark, steamy first-person passages about blood lust.

I pin him down with one hand and grab his face with the other. I hear him screaming, but it's from far away. I wrench his head to the side and kiss his neck with my lips. Then I bite down. Hard.

The first lush, warm mouthful of his blood sends fire raging through mine. I push against him, my body moving to the rhythm of his heartbeat. The blood drive. I've never felt more alive.

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It takes but a passage of "Blood Drive" to reveal that this is no public-service announcement. Stein's protagonist, Anna Strong, has proclivities that might be more disturbing were she not "redeemed" by the fictional safety of a vampire dispensation. Even so, as Stein has been told more times than Dracula has risen from the grave, she does not look like someone capable of her dark imagination.

"I love the vampire story," the author explained. "Vampires are kind of the ultimate romantic figure. There's the idea of immortality. There's an idea of danger. It's very sexual." But the vampire is also a cliché of epic proportion - Think, Bela Lugosi, clad in a dark cape he holds ominously under his evil stare, as he slowly rises from his coffin to suck the blood in Old Europe's barmaids. It is an image as tired as drunks singing "Sweet Adeline," Chinese launders touting ancient secrets, and old gunslingers coming out of retirement for one final showdown.

The vampire, unlike some caricatures, has remained in popular culture's "undead," thanks to reinventions in Anne Rice's novels, the "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" television series, and even in the pale, sickly features of shock rocker Marilyn Manson.

Stein has moved the vampire from Transylvania to 21st-century San Diego and has rebirthed "her" as a modern career woman.

"Are you on one of those silly low-carb diets," Anna's mother asks her thinning, coffee-sipping daughter.

Anna lives in a world of Starbucks and modern relationships. Good and evil are not always clearly defined. A "good" vampire might help find a murderer, or even fall in love. Here, the image of a neck-biter cowering before a crucifix may be akin to religious stereotype - and a bizarre subculture of fetishists could seek the thrill of being attacked and bit by a real - and female - vampire.

"I wanted to do a story that was more grounded in reality," Stein said, speaking in relative terms. "One of my favorite books is 'Rosemary's Baby' by Ira Levin. He took the very real world and he populated it with very unusual characters. You could believe that they existed because of the context of the story."

"Blood Drive" is the second in a series of books about Anna, a vampire grappling with her fate and unwanted urges as she attempts to live a normal life. A rape victim, she had fought back against her attacker, using her teeth. The perpetrator was a vampire.

The book and "The Becoming," its predecessor, were published originally by Canon City's ImaJinn Press. The series has recently been picked up by

Berkley/Putnam in New York.

Stein's books are part of a larger movement in neo vampire literature, a genre catapulted by Rice's bestseller, "Interview With the Vampire," and its popular adaptation starring Tom Cruise.

Among modernizations is recasting the vampire as more of a misunderstood deviant than a supernatural evil-doer. The blood-born vampire "affliction," with its ostracism and presumption of anti-social behavior, has also become a metaphor for AIDS.

Is vampirism the result of sinful actions or are its victim's lives innocent unfortunates? In either case, "coming out" to Mom and Dad could present a challenge to the contemporary vampire.

"That's one of the things Anna is dealing with," Stein said. "Part of her angst is that she knows that she's going to have to leave her family. At some point, it's going to be obvious that she's not aging."

Which is worse? To die young of a painful and fatal disease or to live forever as an outcast - unable to grow old, have children, enjoy food or experience normal relationships - not to mention the trappings of not reflecting in mirrors or even casting a shadow.

"The type of person you are does not change when you become a vampire," Stein said of her own interpretations, a "fact" that could further a vampire's anguish. "If you're basically a good person, you're going to remain a good person. But as the series progresses, the vampire side of Anna's nature takes over more and more."

The vampire-author side of Stein is likely to take over more, too. But unlike Anna, the novelist is just fine with her fate, even if it means that she is banished to an eternity of only writing horror books.

"If I was that successful in the vampire genre, I would be extremely pleased," she said of her potential "immortality." "What I like even better is for somebody to say to me, 'I never read that kind of book, but somebody told me about your book and I loved it.'"

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