

# SLAYERS AND THEIR VAMPIRES

## A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KILLING THE DEAD

**B**e forewarned: if you are expecting this book to be a titillating account full of, in no particular order: **bats, fangs, widows peak hairdos, capes, looming castles, heaving cleavage, blood, coffins, crucifixes, stakes, innocent milkmaids in low-cut peasant blouses, and creepy guys with lines like, "I want to bite your neck,"** you've got another thing coming.

This is a scholarly work with enough \$10 words to send you scurrying to Webster's. But in academia, you not only have to walk the walk, you gotta talk the talk. The important thing here is Bruce McClelland spent years meticulously researching his topic, here and abroad, in particular, in his favorite foreign country, Bulgaria.

So what is it about vampires anyway? McClelland is asked this question all the time. He patiently explains, "The vampire is a major cinematic literary character that has been around for 100 years." In fact, he continues, "at one point, Dracula was as widely known as Santa Claus in terms of a name that was recognized...[so] there's this literary vampire; it's got bats and fangs and drinks blood. Many novels and movies are based on that. And then there are these Slavic people living in villages in the Balkans; the word vampire probably goes back a thousand years. What's

the connection?" He pauses. "So, I've been spending my academic career trying to figure that out."

What he found was that the Slavic word vampyr first appeared in writing in the 11th century. It had little to no connection to the modern vampire we've come to fear and loath today. "The vampire in Slavic society is a scapegoat, like the witch. The difference is, a witch is a live person. When you torture witches as scapegoats, somebody gets hurt. A vampire is a corpse; serves the same function. You imagine them as alive and then you punish them. You solve the same social problems, and nobody gets hurt." He looks up and smiles. "Isn't that brilliant?"

So vampires were conveniently blamed for all kinds of things that went wrong in these remote Balkan villages. How about this one? A widow becomes mysteriously pregnant. Blame it on her dead husband, who arose from the grave, not her brother-in-law who slipped in to uh, console her, if you get my drift. "A vampire is guilty of impregnating his widowed wife. A woman gets pregnant after her husband dies. Well how could THAT be?" smirks McClelland.

The Eastern Orthodox Church, which was trying to convert these Balkan pagans naturally jumped all over this vampire stuff, saying it was pagan ritual, and later heretical. Meanwhile the Roman Catholic Church was doing a brisk business burning witches at the stake during the Inquisition. Funny, it was always live women in the west and dead men in the east.

Then came the Enlightenment. Queen Marie Theresa of Austria/Hungary dispatched a widely

respected doctor/scientist from Holland, by the name of Van Sweiten, to travel to the nether regions of her empire to specifically debunk vampires following an epidemic of vampire sightings/slayings in the 1730s.

She didn't want to return to the bad old days of the Inquisition. But the stories kept swirling around.

Then in 1897, Bram Stoker, an Irishman living in London and working as a theatrical manager penned the novel, Dracula and, in Chapter One of Bruce McClelland's book, "since then, the vampire tale has been retold with variations, in hundreds of novels, short stories, plays and most significantly, films." It should be noted that in Stoker's novel, a widely respected doctor from Holland by the name of Van Helsing is summoned to identify and slay Dracula. Sound familiar?

McClelland once taught a course at UVA entitled Blood and Sacrifice. Dracula was required reading. He challenged his students to find any reference in Dracula to blood drinking, rising from the dead, changing into animals, all of that stuff. "If you can find any of this information that is not either ambiguous or compro-

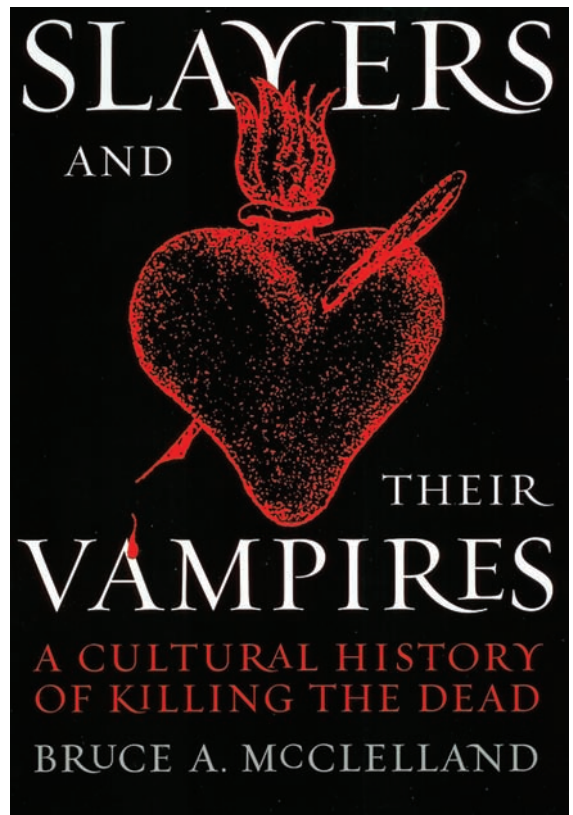
mised, let me know and I'll give you an A." His grade book was safe.

Words change in meaning over time, and vampire has become a metaphor. "What it means now bears no resemblance to what it meant then. Words change their meaning depending on circumstances...they all think it had to do with blood drinking. The blood drinking aspect doesn't show up until at least the mid-1800s." Even Karl Marx used the word when he referred to capitalists. "It just means anathema," says Bruce succinctly.

It became folklore. Fast forward to American television programs...*The Night Stalker*, *The X-Files*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and you come to realize that vampires are now metaphors for hidden evil and their slayers the forces of good that can identify and kill that evil.

So, corpses that rise from the dead and feed on the blood of the living is impossible, right?

Right! But then again...there was that morning after that dinner party in Bulgaria when McClelland woke up and couldn't move a muscle because he felt so...drained.



Bruce McClelland's most recent book is a detailed and scholarly work on the origins of vampires. Note that on the cover, there is a fountain pen through the heart, not a stake.



Bruce and Cindy McClelland took their dog Louise to Russia where they lived for two years. Today, Louise at age 13, sticks a little closer to home in Gordonsville.

Photo by Phil Audibert

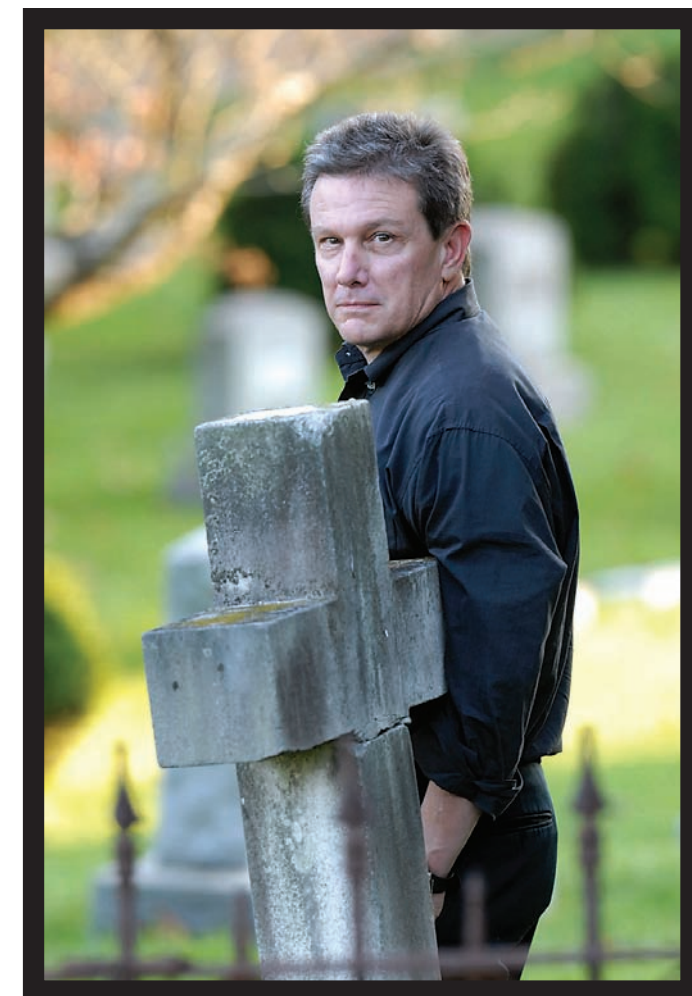
## Bruce McClelland: of Slavs and Poets and Vampires

**S**o anyway, Bruce McClelland of Gordonsville is at a dinner party in Bulgaria with some heavy-hitter Slavic academics and politicians, and everyone is eating and drinking and smoking and the conversation turns away from Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton to the topic of vampires. Now that's a subject McClelland knows a little something about.

So he starts advancing theories and asking questions about the origin of the word 'vampire,' and "this guy who was a Russian Jew got a very intense look to him; he kept looking at me with a half smile; there was something sort of devilish about it."

The party broke up and McClelland went home and fell into bed. The next morning, "I can't get out of bed...I woke up and I couldn't move. And it wasn't paralysis; it was lack of energy, no energy whatsoever." He pauses and thinks about his choice of words, and then says it anyway, "I was drained."

Well...not really...he still had blood running through his veins.



Bruce McClelland, author of *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead*.

Photo by Jen Fariello

INSIDER

By PHIL AUDIBERT  
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"I didn't have a headache, I didn't have a fever, I wasn't paralyzed; I just had no energy. I couldn't walk. I didn't know what to do." He didn't fully recover until the next day.

"There was no nausea, no diarrhea, no flu symptoms, no food poisoning...and I was a medical writer; I knew what to look for." Was it the vodka? Nope, he doesn't drink. The cigarettes? Doesn't smoke.

The grapes they nibbled on...copper sulfate residue? "You'd have to eat a lot of grapes to affect you this way. I didn't eat that many grapes," he says with a note finality.

"To this day I have no idea what it was, but my fantasy was that it was related to this guy and this smirk, this devilish aspect that I kept reading in him." There's no way to prove it, but "Maybe he was just fooling with me, just letting

me know that he had that power, that there are such things, not enough to do any damage, but 'Okay, we're going to show what you're really into, what you're messing with.' It was that kind of feeling."

Bruce went on to publish his dissertation sealing his doctorate degree, and the dissertation became two chapters of his book, *Slayers and their Vampires, A Cultural History of Killing the Dead*. Just recently he had a book signing at Barnes and Noble during the Festival of the Book in Charlottesville.

So now what? Believe it or not, Bruce McClelland wants to go back to the Balkans, to Transylvania, and do research for a novel on what it was like to be Dracula...from Dracula's point of view!

Okay, Dorothy, we're a long way away from Gordonsville here, but bear with us. This past July, Bruce and his wife Cindy celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary, and he turned to her and had the gall to say, "Okay it's our silver anniversary, why don't we go to Transylvania to a silver mine?" By the way, he believes that's the origin of the silver bullet theory.

But back to the story: she had a pretty good comeback to the Transylvanian silver mine idea.

"Why can't you do something about *Italian* folklore," hinting that Venice or Tuscany or Rome would be more appropriate locales for an anniversary. Bruce shrugs and says, "I think she tolerates my interest in all these weird places."

How about the time they picked up and moved to Russia to live for two years! All she knew about Russian housing is what she saw in picture books:



Bruce McClelland of Gordonsville can speak four or five languages, including Russian and Bulgarian, and he can read in 11.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Tolstoy's and Chekhov's quaint dachas. "In the middle of winter, we're flying into Moscow, she looks out the window and she sees these Lego boxes all gray and everything's covered in snow and she started crying." He plants tongue firmly in cheek and adds, "It never got better."

They even brought their dog, Louise! And so, they're running around Sheremetovo Airport, "it's one of the most unhelpful airports I have ever seen...we're looking for our dog. Nobody knew where our dog was and we finally found her at one of those carousels...her crate was just going round and round." For the record, the dog was fine, even came home with them in 1998, and lives to this day to tell about it to two feline friends in Gordonsville.

But it was close there one time when Cindy took the dog out for a walk outside their drab gray apartment building without her passport and more importantly without any knowledge of Russian. So a militia guy comes up to her and asks her for identification.

She managed to work her way out of that one, but Russians are notorious busy bodies. "In winter if you don't wear a hat, the old women will come up and yell at you," says Bruce, who by the way, is fluent in

Russian, so fluent he actually wrote a novel in the language! He has also translated a book of poems by Osip Mandelstam, and all told, he can read in 11 languages, including Greek, Latin, Old English and Old Slavic, but shucks he can only speak four or five: Russian, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian, with a smattering of French and German. But, hell, who's counting?

So what are these good folks doing in Moscow in 1996? This is the era of Boris Yeltsin, the velvet revolution has already happened. Gorbachev is a has-been, and Clinton and Yeltsin have become drinking buddies. There is a thaw here; both sides are "trying to open channels," and Vice President Al Gore, who claims to have invented the Internet, wants to make sure that the World Wide Web is truly worldly and wide.

Bruce McClelland accepts a position as Director of a United States Information Agency (USIA) Internet Access and Training program in Russia. "We set up Internet sites at universities and libraries. We would provide the computers and we would pay for the Internet access," he explains. So while Cindy was getting lost on the Moscow subway, Bruce was running around the remnants of the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, "wherever we had a consulate or an embassy, we would run this program."

Actually the wisecrack about Cindy getting lost on the subway is more frightening than funny. Cindy had landed a job at the US Embassy in the Cultural Affairs Department. She was also co-chair of the Moscow Oratorio Society, but that's a whole other story.

By now, she had learned a few Russian words and the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet. She even knew how to sort of say her address. Remember now, there were still some sore losers in this whole glasnost thing, old Communists who liked to make life difficult for Americans. Cindy, with blond hair and an open smile, was so obviously American, that she was singled out. "She had rocks thrown at her, and spit on her," confirms Bruce.

So, she makes a wrong train change on the subway and "she was clearly lost and some man came up and asked her if she was lost, and she said 'yes,' and asked where she lived, and she spat that out...and he grabbed her by the arm and put her on the train." Cindy keeps saying "Nyet, nyet." And the guy takes her a couple of stops and pulls her off the train and makes a cell phone call, and another man joins them.

Bruce takes a big breath. "Now there are two guys with her, and they get on another train. She has no idea what's happening to her...so they finally get out and they let her go, and she goes up the stairs (of the metro station) and there she is...they took her where we lived. What she didn't understand was that they were holding her so she wouldn't get

separated. She thought she was being kidnapped, but actually they were being very nice to her."

A close call. "That country is in sad shape," continues Bruce. He points out that with the break-up of the old USSR, they lost 100 million people, and now of the 150 million Russians left, "they're losing 500,000 people a year to disease, bad health care, early death. They're dying and they're not replacing themselves...Young people see a bleak future and are not having children."

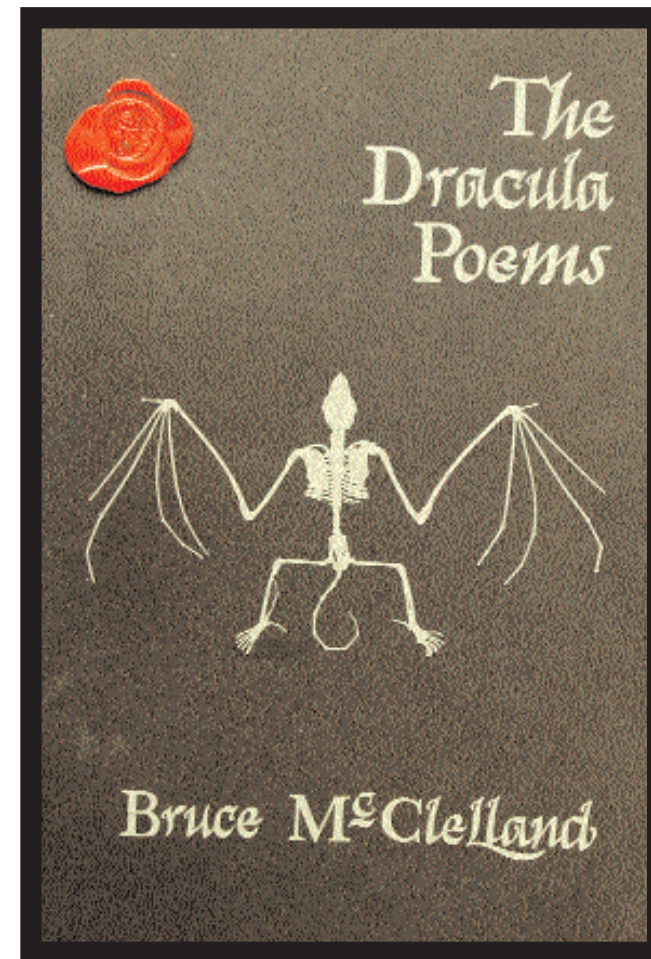
This population decay was rammed home to him when he auditioned for a bit role in a Russian movie. They were looking for a 50-year old American man who spoke broken Russian. Bruce at 48, was perfect for the job. "I could fake a broken accent. I put on a kind of southern drawl...They liked me, but they wanted somebody who looked 50, and to them somebody who looks 50, to us looks 65."

Bruce McClelland's first contact with Russia came from a Polish teacher in a country day school in St. Louis where he and Cindy grew up. "I started studying Russian because everyone else was studying French and German," he says mischievously. It was also in St. Louis that he saw his first horror movie. "I guess that scared me and I liked the feeling of being scared. I liked monster stuff as a kid."

McClelland went on to major in Russian at Bard, the liberal arts college in upstate New York. Classmates included Chevy Chase and Walter



Covers of two other books penned by Gordonsville resident, Bruce McClelland. *Tristia* is his translation of a Russian poet, published in 1988. *The Dracula Poems* were written in 1976 while Bruce was studying Linguistics at Penn.



Becker, of the highbrow rock band, Steely Dan. McClelland was also a free verse poet. So, it was only natural that his senior project was to translate the Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam.

"Russian poetry is very regular in its metrical and rhyme schemes," says Bruce. "English doesn't translate that stuff very well." He points to the quintessential Russian poet, Pushkin. "His language has got this music to it but it's also so simple it sounds like somebody could actually be speaking it." Translations fail to convey this. "It ends up sounding stilted and just terrible." McClelland reworked his original senior project into a book, and it was nominated by *Library Journal* as one of the best books of 1988. But he is still troubled by, what he terms "some mistranslations."

Bruce McClelland is not exactly a household name here in the states, but in Russia he's quite well-known, having been published in an anthology of American poetry. "Apparently I have a reputation in Russia, I didn't know this... as a great American poet," he shrugs, wide-eyed and clueless.

And if Internet sharing, improving language skills and working on his dissertation weren't enough, "I wrote a novel in Russian; it was kind of my homework." An excerpt was actually published in a Russian literary magazine.

So what happened to the horror movies?

Back to 1976. Bruce is studying linguistics at Penn. He, uh, pens a work called *The Dracula Poems*, inspired in part by a charming Slavic ruler by the name of Vlad the Impaler. "My girlfriend had dumped me and my cat had died...I was drinking a lot; I don't drink anymore...and it came out of that dark transformation I guess." And so, the connection between Slavs, Poetry and Vampires was forged.

So was the connection to Cindy. High school sweethearts, they broke up for eight years, until he called her at 1:00 in the morning during this dark period, and she picked up the phone and said something to the effect "Well it's about time you called." She realized right then and there that he was "the love of my life."

Fast forward to the early 1990s, when they moved to Charlottesville, so that Bruce could be close to UVA professor, Jan Perkowski, who wrote, *The Darkling: A Treatise on Slavic Vampirism*. Meanwhile, Cindy established and runs, with daughter, Amy, the Charlottesville women's apparel store, Eloise. She brings with her a wealth of experience in business enterprise, having served as general manager for one of the top 100 restaurants in New York City, among many other things.

Three years ago, the McClellands bought a house in Gordonsville. Bruce holds a day job with the Battelle Memorial Institute in the Research Park. "I work with software; I work with a number of things, research and development," he says cryptically.

Of Gordonsville, he says brightly, "I love that town. My wife and I just love it...we live right in town too. We have the baseball field and the swimming pool and the train, all of those sounds." Bruce jumps up from his chair in the book and CD-laden living room of their 19th century Gordonsville home and charges into the kitchen to make his third double espresso.

Two Greek Gods: Apollo and Dionysius.

In broad terms, we are divided into two personality profiles aligned with these two guys. Apollo... he's left brained; he's the guy with the pocket protector and the calculator and he's figuring out numbers and battle plans and strategies and logic and the like. He is ruled by reason. Dionysius, on the other hand, is the creative flake, the artsy person, the party animal, the one ruled by emotion. Bruce McClelland is full-bore both! He's a poet and a computer geek all at once. Best of all, he is fabulous company.

Dressed in head-to-toe faded black on the day of the interview, he can run with just about anything you throw at him. "Given my druthers, the Dionysian side would be the one that wins out," he smiles, hastily adding, "the other one (Apollonian) pays the bills."

And isn't it interesting that Dionysius was a Thracian God...of a Greek people who settled in the Balkans...where all this vampire stuff got started in the first place.