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Review by Hannah Priest

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## **THE NATURE OF THE BEAST: TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE WEREWOLF FROM THE 1970S TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY (2019) BY CARYS CROSSEN**

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**Crossen, Carys. *The Nature of the Beast: Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century*. University of Wales Press, 2019, 304pp.**

The figure of the werewolf has appeared in Western literature for a very long time. As Carys Crossen rightly notes in *The Nature of the Beast* (and as many other writers have noted), the werewolf's literary history can be traced back to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and versions of the (hu)man who transforms into a wolf have appeared in myriad texts and textual traditions since then. On the one hand, the relative familiarity of the werewolf allows for an imagined continuity, an unbroken line of descent from *Gilgamesh* to the contemporary pop culture lycanthropes that grace the pages and screens of the twenty-first century. However, on the other, the sheer breadth and range of texts featuring werewolves, with the concomitant complexity of contextualising these within both literary and cultural traditions, undermines that sense of continuity and renders a 'literary history' of the werewolf an impossible project.

This impossibility is something that is addressed clearly and cannily in Crossen's *The Nature of the Beast*. While the book's subject matter is situated within the longer textual history of the werewolf, it is a study of a particular lycanthropic moment. *The Nature of the Beast* is not a literary history – nor does it make any claims to be one – but rather it is an analysis of specific developments in popular literature from the late 1970s.

The parameters of Crossen's study, or what we might call the 'lycanthropic moment' chosen for analysis, are both shrewd and thought-provoking. The book's overarching argument is that, over the past forty years, werewolves in literature have been in the process of 'becoming' subjects (the book draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's formulations of 'becoming' in its exploration) or of 'acquiring' self-awareness and subjectivity. Crossen's introduction identifies stories in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) as formative texts in the development of the werewolf's subjectivity, but notes that, unlike Fred Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape* (1975) and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) for vampire fiction, "there is no corresponding text that marks the advent of the werewolf's subjectivity" (23). Instead, Crossen examines the werewolf's development as a subject in terms of "gradual process," which begins in the late 1970s but – as the textual analyses she offers reveals – really begins to develop in the 1990s (23).

The first chapter of *The Nature of the Beast* explores the notion of 'werewolf subjectivity,' offering both correction and clarification of the Freudian 'beast within' conceptualisation of the werewolf. As Crossen points out throughout her argument, the 'beast within' paradigm is not sufficient for understanding 'lycanthropic subjectivity,' particularly when considering recent developments in Fantasy and Horror writing. The four subsequent chapters each take a 'key' development in recent fiction about werewolves and examine it through the lens of 'lycanthropic subjectivity' and with analysis of both individual texts and wider literary trends.

Chapter Two explores the creation of the werewolf pack as a popular trope in Fantasy and Horror fiction. Other writers have noted the 'invention' of the pack as a recent pop culture phenomenon, but Crossen's alignment of this development with the progression of 'lycanthropic subjectivity' allows for an astute and nuanced consideration of its significance. She argues that "the rise of the subjective werewolf and the receding of the beast within" has allowed werewolves to "form packs" but also to "integrate themselves among humans" (91). Identifying the presentation of the werewolf as "social animal" as beginning in the 1990s, Crossen makes a compelling case for reading these two literary trends – subjectivity and the pack – as being inextricably connected (59).

Developing the analysis of the 'social animal' further, and considering some of the ways in which the werewolf has sought to 'integrate' with humans, Chapter Three looks at the relationship between the werewolf and the law(s). Noting that "the werewolf has chiefly existed outside the law prior to the late twentieth century" and that "[t]raditionally, the figure of the werewolf has been synonymous with evil, the Devil and the outlaw," Crossen turns her attention to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century fiction that seeks to reimagine the werewolf's relationship to "law-giving" (96, 99). Crossen contextualises the argument with reference to reading habits and trends in the twentieth century, and it is in this chapter that the divergence between page and screen werewolves begins to become apparent. *The Nature of the Beast* is, foremost, a literary study, and, as Crossen highlights on a number of occasions, the subjective werewolf is really a figure of literature, rather than film. This argument is not without its problems, particularly with regards to the blurring between media that we see both in popular culture and in Crossen's analysis. For example, several of the texts referred to in this study – most notably *Blood and Chocolate* – exist in both literary (1997) and cinematic (2007) forms. This issue becomes more apparent in the final two chapters of the book.

In Chapter Four, Crossen focuses on place and environment by analysing the relationship between the werewolf and the city. The chapter begins with an overview of the werewolf's long-standing relationship to nature and the wilderness, and of the connected conceptualisation of the 'natural' and the 'unnatural.' There is a convincing argument here about the transition from "wilderness werewolf" to "urban werewolf," which brings together formulations of "nature as a human construct" with the anonymised, yet public, urban landscape to make the case for the city's role in developing "lycanthropic subjectivity" (138). I particularly enjoyed a passing – but beautifully illustrative – observation about the urban landscape of *Blood and Chocolate* (2007) being a shared space of multiple purpose.

However, this chapter's argument becomes a little less concrete when it moves into the space (ostensibly) between the rural and the urban – suburbia. Crossen does a good job of outlining the ideological forces at work in the construction of suburbia, and offers some examples of the dominant tropes in its presentation in pop culture to explore the possible reasons why suburban werewolves are relatively rare in popular fiction. It is a provocative and convincing argument, and one that is as much a reconsideration of suburbia as it is of the werewolf, which reveals one of the more subtextual strands of the book's argument: understanding 'lycanthropic subjectivity' is inevitably bound up in our evolving understandings and imaginings of human subjectivity – our werewolves, our selves. The difficulty with suburbia, though, is precisely that so few werewolves have made it their home. As such, in order to illustrate her argument, Crossen turns to the film *Ginger Snaps* (2000), which is held up as the quintessential 'suburban werewolf' text. This is a problem that appears elsewhere in the book, as the reference above to the film adaptation of *Blood and Chocolate* indicates. Although Crossen is careful to note the difference between literary and cinematic traditions of lycanthropy, there are some slippages between media that could have been addressed more directly. Commentary on the television series *Being Human* (2008-2013) and *Angel* (1999-2004) further underline this question of media, as there is little acknowledgement of the specific format and genre conventions that might complicate textual comparison, or – conversely – might undermine a tentative argument for divergence between cinematic and literary traditions.

In Chapter Five, the issue of differing media recedes, as the chapter is focused specifically on a literary genre (or mode): Young Adult (YA) fiction. In the wake of 'phenomena' and franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and (to a lesser extent) *The Hunger Games*, a body of scholarly work on YA fiction has emerged. This final chapter of *The Nature of the Beast* makes a very strong contribution and intervention in this field. Crossen very successfully synthesizes a large amount of existing scholarship and uses this to shed a new – and genuinely thought-provoking – perspective on the teenage werewolf. This begins early in the chapter, when she argues that "[t]he werewolf has been associated with adolescence since soon after the notion of 'teenagers' came into being" (175). This deceptively simple observation in fact offers a significant modification of how we might view the relationship between the 'teen' and the 'wolf,' revisiting the notion of werewolf as "well-worn metaphor for adolescence" by considering the ways in which both the teenager and the werewolf are becoming-subjects (and also becoming subjects for scholarly analysis) (175). Crossen continues this with an examination of key themes and tropes in twenty-first-century YA fiction, including rebellion, sexuality, race, and class.

*The Nature of the Beast* is a persuasive and engaging examination of a significant moment in the development of the literary werewolf. The argument for how, when, and why 'lycanthropic subjectivity' is developing, and why fiction has moved away from the limitations of the 'beast within' paradigm, is well-observed and convincing, and Crossen strikes a good balance between cultural theory, social context, and textual analysis.

Nevertheless, at times I found myself returning to the question of the werewolf's literary history – the history that stretches back millennia before *The Bloody Chamber*. As noted above,

Crossen is careful not to lay claim to writing about this history, being clear on the parameters of the study and recognising that an attempt to analyse the entirety of werewolf literature would be an impossible task. That said, *The Nature of the Beast* does occasionally err on the opposite side: in firmly locating its focus on the literature of the last forty years, there are moments when earlier literary creations are overlooked or misrepresented. In elucidating the paradigm against which she will be reading the contemporary 'subjective' werewolf, Crossen talks about the "classic, monster-once-a-month Freudian werewolf" (21). The word 'classic' recurs in the first chapter of the book, implying the longevity and dominance of this mode of representation. This is misleading, as the "monster-once-a-month Freudian werewolf," while undoubtedly standing in distinction to the contemporary "subjective werewolf," is a product of 1930s cinema viewed through the lens of psychoanalytic discourse. It is arguably as distinct from earlier traditions, such as the medieval romance werewolf, as it is from the popular literature of the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, as with most studies of contemporary werewolf literature and film, the only reference to medieval literature in *The Nature of the Beast* is the obligatory nod to Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, and there is no mention of, for instance, the fourteenth-century *William of Palerne*, a text that (perhaps) offers an ancestor of the subjective werewolf. The mid-nineteenth-century penny blood *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* is mentioned but with little indication of its content or style, leaving the question of why *Varney the Vampire* might (as Crossen argues) be considered a foundational text in the development of the vampire's subjectivity, but its sibling-text *Wagner* is not considered as the lycanthropic equivalent. I do not wish to imply that *William of Palerne* or *Wagner* should be considered as participating in the same negotiations of identity and subjectivity as, say, *Twilight* or *Kitty Goes to Washington* (2006), but rather that their absence is somewhat misleading. Crossen makes a good case for seeing the development of 'lycanthropic subjectivity' as a recent and fast-evolving literary convention – but that does not mean that werewolves have never spoken for themselves before.

My comments on the absence of certain earlier texts may seem like pedantry, but, though they began as a criticism, they also serve to illustrate one of the key strengths of *The Nature of the Beast*. As I have said, this is a thought-provoking book. It offers compelling and new perspectives on literary texts and genres, but it also raises questions and encourages further analysis and interrogation of ideas (and, importantly, of texts and traditions beyond those included in the book). Crossen's textual analysis offers ways of reading popular texts that enhances understanding, not only of the werewolf, but of the contemporary Gothic more broadly. The construction of the book's overall argument brings together tropes that have not previously been studied in dialogue with one another, offering an insightful and coherent study that poses a powerful challenge to the continued centrality of the 'beast within' in werewolf studies.

## BIONOTE

**Hannah Priest** is an Associate Lecturer in English at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She is the editor of *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (Manchester University Press) and has published numerous articles and book chapters on popular culture, medieval literature, YA fiction and the Gothic. Under the name Hannah Kate, she is a short story writer and presenter of a long-running weekly literature radio show on North Manchester FM.