

THE DARK SIDE

by George Spelvin

Whether it's a book, movie, TV show, urban legend or radio drama, people on some level like to be scared. It can be as well-known as something by Stephen King or Edgar Allen Poe or as nondescript as an article in a magazine or something on one of hundreds of cable channels, but people enjoy it. With fright, as with comedy, the approach can range from cerebral ("*Comedy is the juxtaposition of two opposing ideals*") to gut reaction ("*I laughed so hard I peed my pants*"). Even if, for instance, you didn't like a movie, one or two images you will always remember, like Lestat swooping down over the Golden Gate Bridge in *Interview With a Vampire*, the alien popping out of a man's stomach in *Alien* or "*I'm your boyfriend now*" in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Like anything else, legends, stories and villains had to start somewhere. In modern times, most know Bela Lugosi as Dracula, Boris Karloff as Frankenstein, Lon Chaney as the Wolfman or Vincent Price as a catchall ne'er-do-well but even though they supply recognizable images, the subjects were popular in times past. Once, for the most part, popular legends, tales were written down and various versions passed throughout the world. The vampire has gone from dread (Lillith, Vlad the Impaler) to horror (Drakul, Barnabus Collins) to comedic (*Dracula: Dead and Loving It*, *Love at First Bite*). The beginning of a figure or legend is often lost in today's fast-paced world. The inundation of today's mass, ponderous media provides only the slant afforded by modern views and actual start is lost. The evolution of a myth or legend sometimes is true to the original; sometimes it is far afield. No one specializes anymore in combating one force of evil but instead must confront all comers, functioning as an equal opportunity force. In the TV series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (based on the movie of the same name), Buffy branched out to battle all manner of other-worldly creatures.

Some popular figures such as Count Dracula and Frankenstein received a big push through literature of the day. Writer Bram Stoker used the premise of a journal kept by one of the main characters, Jonathon Harker, to bring the character of Dracula to the masses. Stories

and tales about vampires in and around Hungary and Europe had circulated for years prior to Stoker setting pen to paper. The tale of Frankenstein evolved from a story-telling episode by Mary Shelly, wife of English writer Percy Byshe Shelly; her story about an aristocrat that reanimated dead tissue left such an indelible impression on others that they encouraged her to write it down. Frankenstein is the Baron [Victor]; Frankenstein's monster refers to the life form with which everyone is familiar. Hollywood has taken her line, "*Today the creature was given life*" and made it into the pyrotechnic and lightning show it is.

The lycanthrope, or Werewolf, was popularized by Lon Chaney, the "man of a thousand faces," in movies and given further impetus by a series of films based on *An American Werewolf in London*. Mummies were fairly well attributed to Egypt and have pretty much proliferated in *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns*. What many films don't explore is that mummification was a fairly strict religious ritual practiced by Egyptian priests, instead concentrating on the finished product, grave desecration and the "mummy's curse" associated with it. William Shakespeare's epitaph, "*Blessed be the man who spares these stones and cursed be the man who moves my bones*" helped to proliferate the notion of the dead exacting a toll from beyond the grave on the living.

Tales of night creatures like vampires, werewolves, zombies (the living dead) and mummies, though frightening enough weren't the only stories of fright. Different worlds provided fodder for the imagination, with Area 51, *Independence Day*, and The Mercury Theatre's adaptation of H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds being among the more popular. *Mars Attacks!* although a comedy, had little green men from another planet subjugate Earth. Area 51, a secret US government project space near Roswell, New Mexico, has provided conspiracy theorists with a wealth of supposition, from weird lights to captured alien spacecraft. Unexplained disappearances in the area around Bermuda, the "Devil's Triangle", have given rise to explanations of home-grown and extraterrestrial forces. Witches and sorcerers, whether practitioners of white (good) magic, such as King Arthur's Merlin in Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, or black (evil) magic, like the Wicked Witch of the West in L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz, have pretty much fallen out of favor, although films featuring *Harry Potter* and TV's *Charmed* have revitalized them somewhat. George Lucas' use of "the force" in the various *Star Wars* movies plays on the ages-old battle of virtue versus decimation, light

versus dark. Ghosts, poltergeists and other apparitions provide “failsafe” availability. TV has been a source of promulgation with Dan Curtis’ *Dark Shadows*, a Gothic soap opera, *Bewitched*, about a family of witches, and *The Night Stalker* in which the protagonist, a reporter named Karl Kolchak, encounters various ghouls but, like *The X Files*, has a main character who isn’t believed even though the strange goings-on have happened thirty or forty times.

Legends also include ways by which people can protect themselves with things that are readily available. Even though ghouls are presented as ghastly and superhuman, the average Joe is given a means of salvation. Whether a vampire, witch, werewolf or other being possessing supernatural strength and talent, each is given a fairly simplistic Achilles’ heel that can be exploited. For instance, the superiority of a vampire can be countered with garlic, crosses, daylight or holy water. Spooky stories generally end with the main character succumbing to a pretty common or easily attainable article, such as the vampire’s wooden stake, a silver bullet felling a werewolf or the Frankenstein monster’s demise by fire. Usually, the seemingly overmatched mortal finds a way to win.