

Steven Spruill: Seeing Vampires In A New Light

by Miriam Ruff

Can vampires actually exist outside the realm of myth and the supermarket tabloids? According to Steven Spruill, author of the just-released novel "Daughter of Darkness" (Doubleday, \$22.95), the answer is unquestionably yes. Spruill, a longtime Arlington resident, created a believable race of real-world vampires called hemophages, people whose DNA compels them to drink the blood of "normals" or die. These people "are not bent," he emphasizes. "They kill because it's what they were born to do. It's a biological imperative."

And writing seems to be what Spruill was born to do, though even he did not realize it until he had already embarked on another career. As a child he was fascinated with books and the way the words looked on the page, but being a writer never really occurred to him; he thought he might want to be a printer. Fate, however, and his parents, had other plans in mind. He ended up pursuing a degree in biology, eventually earning a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. It wasn't until he was in his second year of clinical training at Catholic University that -- prompted by his wife, Nancy -- he started to write. Though his first novel didn't sell, he says that the rejections were so nicely worded that he was actually encouraged. His second novel, "Keepers of the Gate", was published in 1976.

When he completed his internship five years later he chose to pursue writing full time, but he never strayed too far from his roots. After concentrating for several years on science fiction, he returned to the medical field in 1990 with "Painkiller", the first in a series of medical thrillers. "Daughter of Darkness" is technically in the same genre, but its vampire storyline definitely gives it an otherworldly twist that distinguishes it from the rest. Always inquisitive, Spruill says he wondered if there could actually be some biological reality behind the vampire myths, and he liked the idea of using medicine to convey the idea "that you're not doing something too far out."

Medical thrillers, though, he readily concedes, are "not about laying out vast amounts of medical information. It's about what happens with the characters and the story." And what intrigued him about this story was the struggle that such a person might go through if they were to try to deny their nature.

Enter Jenn Hruska, "Daughter"'s heroine. She's a pediatric resident at a fictional Washington, D.C. hospital, young, beautiful and dedicated to healing the sick, but hiding a deadly secret: she's a phage, and like all other phages she hungers for blood. Unlike most, however, she refuses to kill in order to satisfy her urges. Instead, with the help of her grandfather Merrick (the hero of "Daughter"'s predecessor, "Rulers of Darkness"), she learns to transfuse herself with blood from sleeping victims - a procedure harmless to them, but one that helps her keep the demons at bay.

All that is jeopardized, however, when late one night she discovers a freshly killed corpse on her apartment floor. She recognizes the corpse for what it really is - an invitation from her supposedly long-dead father to reclaim her "true destiny," the taking of blood by deadly force. When she refuses to accept that destiny, Zane frames her for murder, and Jenn must choose - she can run away and thereby deny her life as a healer, or she can stay to clear her name, knowing that in jail she will die a horrible, lingering death cut off from the blood she needs to survive.

Ultimately she realizes that she must face her father and end their struggle once and for all, even though it may be a confrontation one of them is destined not to survive.

“All of us struggle [like Jenn],” Spruill says, “between what we want to do and what we decide we won’t.” That makes it easy to identify with both her and her situation, and there’s no question that is a large part of what makes them so compelling - that and the fact that they’re couched in a page-turning story. The writing is spare, yet it’s rich with detail; the effect is an almost unconscious evocation of all the sights and sounds and feelings the author wants us to experience. “You have to make people see and hear and feel what the character is going through,” he comments. “The reader should open the book and it should go straight into their brain.” We live vicariously through these characters in a dangerous place, and it is, appropriately, a thrilling experience.

The book has an added attraction for local residents - its locale. Though it could have been set in any city or a fictional town, Spruill again went for realism and set it in the place he knows best, Washington, D.C. and its surrounding areas. It’s populated with streets and names and places that could only come from someone who’s been to every one of them, and that casual familiarity unquestionably helps bring the story to life.

“Daughter of Darkness” is just now reaching the stores, but Spruill is already hard at work on the next book in the series, this one titled “Lords of Light.” In it he’ll explore the potential reality of angels, as well as the collision of light and darkness when one of the angels falls in love with a hemophage.

The question remains, though, why someone with a promising clinical career gave it all up to become a full-time writer. Could it be destiny, something predetermined in his genes? Interestingly enough that idea, like the vampires that Spruill created, might not be so far-fetched - in some ways the two careers are very similar. Writing novels, he found, gave him an opportunity to “provide a few hours of relief to thousands of people trying to escape their cares and worries rather than give thousands of hours to only a few people.” There is a lot more to “Daughter of Darkness” than just escapist relief, but even if that is all the novel manages to provide for some readers, it definitely will be worth the effort.

Steven Spruill will appear at Borders Books & Music in Bailey’s Crossroads on June 18 at 7:00 p.m. to read from his novel “Daughter of Darkness,” and to sign copies of the book.

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