

INTRODUCTION

BY KELLEY JONES

First things first, if ever a comic was meant to be read at night, *Tomb of Dracula* is the one. So, if the sun is still up, I'll wait until dark to tell you the wonders that await.

Dark now? Good! Let's get rolling!

Making comics is a great life, and I have been lucky enough to do it for a living since 1982 when Marvel first hired me. But you know what's better? Having Marvel hire you to *read* comics—the very comics that made me want to be a comic book artist in the first place. Poor Cory Sedlmeier, the wonderful editor bringing you this masterpiece of comic literature, he hired me not knowing I would have done it for free!

Cory thought because I have some association with Lord of Vampires, I might have some insight on the subject. This probably has to do with my drawing Vlad confronting a certain Dark Knight in a little book called *Batman & Dracula: Red Rain*. Lately, I've also spent a lot of time drawing Mr. Stoker's creation in my *Dracula* graphic novel series with Matt Wagner.

So those are good reasons to hire me, but the biggest is I'm a flat-out fanatic for *Tomb of Dracula*. I have been since before the joy of a local comic book shop existed. I had to haunt the local convenience store where the squeaks weren't from vampire bats but the spinner rack. It went 'round and I prayed the latest issue of *TOD* was there. Overcoming spotty distribution and kids on faster bikes were the obstacles between me and "Comicism's Number One Fear Magazine."

What these comics meant to that kid is one thing, but now I see them through the eyes of a guy who can see all the nuts and bolts. And with that knowledge, *Tomb of Dracula* seems even better to me now than it did to that li'l Kel. That's the definition of a classic.

First off, Marv Wolfman is a writer who can flat out tell stories. Horror only works if we care, and Marv creates characters that you instantly just *know*. They're so real that it hurts when something bad befalls them—and great writers can be pretty rough on their protagonists.

This *Masterworks* volume begins with "The Vampire Conspiracy!" and Harold H. Harold. I *know* this guy. I think we have all certainly felt like him. Harold needs to be a hero through his fiction instead of his fists. He hasn't done any real vampire hunting, but neither have we. It's a change-of-pace story. Not a "time out" kind of issue but a keen telling of what Harold thinks of his vampire hunter cohorts and what they mean to him.

"The Forever Man" brings us a man fated to reincarnate again and again over hundreds of years... but he cannot remember the one thing that will bring his doom. Marv reintroduces us to Dracula, not through rehashing Dracula's origins, but with concepts that remind us that Dracula is a curse throughout the ages, a relentless evil. Poor Gideon Smith. Poor us!

A real special treat in this tome is a wonderful standalone story starring Blade. It really works like a first issue for the character. Blade's friend Musenda's wife Lorraine has been infected by vampirism, but she's not a vampire in the way you'd think. We wonder, as Blade does, how he can cure her without killing her. Blade's relationship with the awesome Safron underscores how he would want someone to save the woman he loves rather than jumping to the stake-in-the-heart solution. Again, Marv shows us how big the world he's created is. Dracula's not even in the book and it keeps on humming. That's magic. I told'ja this Wolfman guy can write.

Now I know you're all thinking I've forgotten something, and you'd be wrong about that. I have not ignored Gene Colan. I'm an artist, so I know how great art burns a book into your mind. Gene's gift can be summed up by the fact that super-hero fans all thought he was a horror artist and the horror crowd thought he was a super-hero artist. Gene was *both* and utterly unique. That's the definition of a towering talent.

The proof of his skills can be found as the ongoing saga of Dracula returns to the fore in issue #59's "The Last Traitor!" Comics like this need emotion to work. They can be loud and violent, sure, but subtlety is the key. Quiet. And in that quiet, let the power of the tale wash over the reader. The whole series pivots on a single moment, and Gene handles the pain and shock of it with quiet, just the delicate turn of the head and simple looks of surprise and realization. In a book of terror and horror, Gene draws betrayal. And love.

I'll be honest, I was shocked when I read this issue. Most conflicts like this are stalemates where you can see the endgame long before it's revealed. Well, I didn't. And man, this issue still packs a punch.

When telling a Dracula story, the challenge is how to create depth that isn't just through evil acts. Domini, Dracula's wife, does this. She isn't some simple henchwoman or prop. Domini loves Dracula, not out of fear or worship. She loves the man he was and still is. How is this possible? Marv and Gene will show you.

Their relationship is one of love and respect going both ways. What Dracula doesn't anticipate is how that is amplified when Domini bears his child. She possesses a power that isn't supernatural but something all mothers have. Dracula must relent to her. And we know how hard that is for him!

Domini's love is sincere and Dracula knows this. Her defiance is something he can understand for he, too, is a defiant being. Yet her desire isn't his own echoed back. She wants something from him—and Dracula cannot and will not do what it takes to give it to her.

What is the epic divergence that only Marv Wolfman would come up with? SPOILER WARNING: The death of Dracula and Domini's son, Janus. It is catastrophic, but as ruinous as the loss of their child is, to Dracula, more so is the blasphemy his wife commits in bringing about the child's resurrection by the power of God. Dracula is evil itself and cannot create. Domini's true love for Dracula allowed for her to bear his child—a dream that he never thought could happen. Now, with Janus's resurrection, Dracula knows that his son will be something that will oppose him.

Don't you just love this?!? This is what made me scour those squeaking spinner racks! Wolfman and Colan were simply on fire! And these two unpredictable storytellers don't give us a simple son-hates-father schtick. Both have their ordained parts to play and it's not what we readers think it's going to be. And you know what? We still get some terrific fight scenes!

Wolfman and Colan's *Tomb of Dracula* is bloody to be sure, but it's also a tale of morality and justice. When Satan enters the story, Dracula is revealed to still be more man than monster. Drawn by the greater evil of Satan to an ancient, cursed mansion, Dracula is joined by Topaz, who *Werewolf by Night* readers will instantly recognize. Satan's power could be threatened by Janus's actions—Satan cannot have this! Has Dracula spawned a power greater than himself? It's what every parent wants. A child to surpass them...or does he?

But good ol' Marv...he's got more tricks up his sleeve. A distraught father hires a hitman to find and kill the vampire who destroyed his dear daughter. Here's another dad dealing with the loss of his child and the dreams he had for them. The best part? Dracula didn't kill the poor girl! See how Marv does this? We are back to dealing with "mere" mortals, yet the same motivations drive events. Tremendous

resonance! And so very, very good. It must have been a snap to publish this book. All you had to do is stay out of the way and make sure Gene had paper! And for us readers? Brag that we were reading one of the best comics ever!

Now within all this mayhem, Satan has taken Dracula's powers and let him wander the world as a mortal man. To feel the cold. To feel hunger. To *feel* the sun again! All great moments, then add that food and such—*living*—costs money. Dracula has to face the *economy*!!! Oh, how the mighty have fallen! Marv and Gene make this look easy, but it isn't, folks, not at all. You gotta be *good* to come up with this.

Then, let's add something that very few storytellers can do. Just drop in a moment here or there in a story, just a panel sometimes, where something happens or a minor character just flits in and is gone—something that doesn't need to be there but is so unforgettable that the whole story is enhanced immeasurably by that small touch. Marv and Gene made a longer workday for themselves with these flourishes, but they gave me memories for a lifetime by doing it!

For example: In issue #66, Dracula is hunted down by mere humans. A priest offers the non-vampiric but still prideful Dracula refuge in his church, which Dracula silently refuses. Perfection in a single page.

As the story continues, we see the heroic aspect of Dracula the once-prince of his people before he was Lord of all Vampires as he saves a drug-addicted woman. Don't misunderstand, Dracula's still terrifying. He skews more closely to a thing of retribution and that's something much more frightening.

It's fascinating to see Dracula brought to this place. He appeals to his daughter, Lilith, for help to regain his powers and is met with a resounding *no* to say the least. I mean, it's tragically funny that he'd even try. Dracula cruelly killed her mother and sent Lilith away so he could be with another woman. Five hundred years hasn't taken the sting out of that for Lilith, and Dracula, in his arrogance, doesn't take this into account. Since they are both vampires, he wrongly assumes she'll see his point of view. The venom Lilith responds with is worth the price of admission alone.

On a fun sidenote, part of Dracula and Lilith's fight takes place at a theater where a play called *The Passion of Dracula* is being performed. In attendance is Harold H. Harold. In reality, the play was co-written and co-produced with set design by Marvel's own Bob Hall! A nice plug by Wolfman and Colan!

Now, most cruelly rejected by his daughter, Dracula comes to realize that he is truly alone and has been probably even before becoming the Lord of Vampires. Just when you feel like Lilith gave him exactly what he deserved, Marv gets me to feel sorry for him again. I love it!

Satan humiliates Dracula by tricking him into begging God for mercy in his torment. Pride was always Dracula's primary power and chief flaw. In issue #68's conclusion, Satan restores Dracula's vampiric strength but his will is shattered. He's not the vampire we knew. Colan conveys the moment so well that you almost need no words. The utter defeat of Dracula's soul is so palpable that even his nemesis Quincy Harker is taken aback. The whole series has been about bringing about Dracula's destruction. But that is too easy. Marv makes us feel pity. It's simply great stuff.

This victory has unexpected results as Dracula returns to his native Transylvania. While a vampire once again, Dracula is not restored to his lordship. His former servant has taken that mantle and Torgo's followers take out their grievances on Dracula for all his brutal offenses against them over the centuries. Colan delivers such great corrupted vampires, not noble but feral, corpse-like monstrosities. It's glorious! I can just look at them all day, er night.

The concurrent story is that of a peasant woman who must set out into the night to bring her dying

daughter to a doctor while the vampire hordes roam about. Again, the power of motherhood appears. She charges her oldest child to safeguard the younger ones. With Torgo's horde at his heels, Dracula begs entrance into their home from the children. Now there are vampires on *both* sides of the door! Dracula's "forty days in the desert" have forged him to something more than he was. Surrounded by vampires, he clutches a crucifix to drive them off!

The lasting power of any story is defined by whether or not it sticks the landing. The journey may be rewarding, but can the creators deliver a satisfying ending? The failures are legion. *The Tomb of Dracula* is not one of them.

We are given the satisfaction of a truly gothic ending. Gothic being defined in that the right things are achieved but not without death and sacrifice. Dracula wants his vampiric supremacy back, but Torgo humiliates him, forcing him to kneel and supplicate himself. As Marv has demonstrated, pride is Dracula's great power and, in his rage, he battles the superior Torgo. The confrontation is epic, as it must be, and the stakes for Dracula are more than simply regaining the title as Lord of Vampires. It's much deeper than that. He's regaining his identity.

Torgo never had a chance. But Dracula doesn't revel. He doesn't even take revenge on those that betrayed him. The recent months of his existence have changed him more than he could imagine. Dracula doesn't know who he is now, only that he's not who he once was, even when he was alive.

His confrontation with his adversary Quincy Harker is thoughtful and indeed powerful. Marv does something wonderful here in that rather than Harker getting some form of revenge, he gives them both release. The seemingly endless and possibly pointless existence Dracula has endured comes to an end. And Harker's life has found its meaning but perhaps not in the way he foresaw.

The final moments of the story are reserved to tell fellow vampire hunters Rachel van Helsing and Frank Drake's story. In a great nod to Stoker's novel, Harker explains in letters why he's done what he's done: End the endless battle. Rather than cheers and celebration there's a surprising emptiness. Marv then asks a poignant question.

If all you've ever known is hatred and war, what do you do when that's over and done? The pointlessness that Dracula felt Rachel felt as well. She didn't know it, but Quincy did. He had to free her as much as destroy Dracula who was also weary of this endless battle. In Harker's words, she finds hope. The gift Dracula never had.

So to Marv, Gene and Tom, I say thanks, and to those of you who hold this book, I say welcome, fellow traveler, from one *Tomb of Dracula* fan to another.

And to the ones who've not read these stories before, I envy you most!

Kelley Jones
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Kelley Jones started his career at Marvel, first inking and then penciling The Micronauts and has also drawn Venom: The Madness and Magneto among others. His credentials as a modern master of horror were cemented with his work on Deadman, Swamp Thing and an award-winning stint on The Sandman. He and writer Doug Moench co-created DC's Elseworlds vampire Batman and collaborated on a three-year run on the monthly Batman title. Recently, Jones, writer Matt Wagner and color artist José Villarrubia produced an epic, four-volume series of Dracula graphic novels.