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## **Un-Dead Girl Walking: Unearthing a Feminist Alternative to Problematic Media Tropes**

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Un-Dead Girl Walking:  
Unearthing a Feminist Alternative to Problematic Media Tropes

by

Molly Ann Behun

A Master's Essay submitted to the faculty of the  
Graduate Program in English in partial fulfillment  
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*To the little girl who wanted a hero,  
We found her.*

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## ABSTRACT

Inspired by Alice Bolin's *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*, this personal essay explores the history of the Dead Girl archetype in crime fiction and beyond, meditating on the ways in which the Dead Girl has infiltrated almost every realm of Western culture. The Dead Girl, and her sister the Living Dead Girl, are figures that allows patriarchal writers to include women in their fiction at the expense of female agency, authenticity and life, as seen in the frequency with which dead women decorate the page and the screen. An examination of crime fiction illustrates the qualities of both tropes and the current problems within the genre itself as a result of their continued usage. The focus then shifts to the Gothic, a genre of transgression, and the search for a figure to stand against these "Dead" tropes. Through an analysis of the YouTube serial *Carmilla: The Series*, this essay defines and presents the "Un-dead Girl" as a model for the future of feminist storytelling.

In the early part of June 2018, I sat in the Newsroom at the British Library reviewing issues of the *Illustrated Police News* as part of a research project exploring the history of violence against women in the late Victorian press. A white-haired man sat hunched over at the microfilm machine next to me, paging through farming advertisements, while I surveyed pictures of dead women from the 1870s and 1880s. The *Illustrated Police News*, founded in 1864 and published by George Purkiss, was one of the earliest tabloids to combine crime news with lurid illustrations. I wasn't entirely sure what to expect, or how often I would encounter images of brutalized women on its cover pages.<sup>1</sup> Nothing could prepare me for what I saw.

Almost every cover page featured images of women being stabbed, blood spurting from their slit throats. Or women on fire, their clothes burning upwards, revealing their shapely legs as well-dressed men rushed to their rescue. Or pretty, blonde corpses collapsed into small boxes, their voluptuous curves straining against the confines of makeshift coffins. Or women falling out of windows, their lovely faces drawn in alarm as they plummeted towards certain death. Or the soaked, bloated bodies of women pulled from the water. Or –

With every new image I found, it was as if the dead women on the page were joining in a chant - words that took far too long for me to comprehend, even though they were entirely too familiar, echoes of a creeping suspicion that seemed to have followed me my entire life. And as I gazed down at these dead women, Alice Bolin's words rang in my ears: "There's no salvation for the Dead Girl."<sup>2</sup>

I'd encountered Alice Bolin's book *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* shortly before my trip to London. As a lifelong fan of mysteries, I found the subject immediately compelling. Bolin argues that the Dead Girl – white, young, virginal, beautiful, and

brutally slain – is the product of a sexist and hyper-violent American media culture. Stories about Dead Girls allow men to “work out [their] complicated feelings about the privileged status of white women in our culture,”<sup>3</sup> by enabling the (assumedly) male viewer to both vicariously act out the sadistic murder of the Dead Girl and solve the crime, thereby also becoming the hero of the story. This is perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of the Dead Girl story: they really are “always and only about men.”<sup>4</sup> Whether as criminal or detective, the Dead Girl is nothing but a decorative backdrop, a pretty corpse sacrificed at the altar of the male ego.

I flew home from the UK with a suitcase stuffed with books, a flash drive filled with the lurid covers of the *IPN*, and a head full of unresolved questions. The Dead Girl had clearly existed for far longer than Bolin had hypothesized. Why was she so omnipresent in Britain during the 1870s and 1880s? What did her immense popularity mean, both in the Victorian age and in my modern-day feminist world? And, most important of all, was there salvation for the Dead Girl, or was it a trope that would continue to haunt women, endlessly objectifying their bodies, nullifying their subjectivity, and serving as a pretext for male heroism? There were no easy answers to these questions. But the more time I spent thinking about Bolin’s book and the images in the *IPN*, the more I came to realize that the Dead Girl had, in fact, been my constant companion for the past twenty years of my life.

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My earliest memory of the Dead Girl is an intimate one. As a young girl, I went to St. Raphael’s Catholic School, and during the first grade I was chosen by my teacher to portray St. Agnes at the All Saint’s Day Mass. It was a special honor because I got to dress up in a pretty pink robe during the procession to the altar. One of my school friends was jealous and tried to get me to pass off the role to her, but this was An Honor and I wouldn’t give it up for anything. St. Agnes,

as the legend goes, was a thirteen-year-old girl who lived during the Roman persecution of the Catholic Church. When a Roman official wanted to marry her, she refused him, saying Jesus Christ was her spouse. The story goes that the Roman official made her strip and walk naked through the streets of the city in chains as punishment, but she still didn't waver in her faith. She was sent to a "place of sin" but still didn't waver. The official had some of his men try to rape her, but instead they were struck blind. Other officials tried to sway her, to offer her gifts because of her beauty, but she refused since she "hated sin worse than death." Well, she got her wish anyway: she was beheaded at the age of twelve or thirteen and has been celebrated ever since as a martyr, as a girl who would rather die than give up her virginity. Today, Agnes is not celebrated or honored because she was a victim of the Roman persecution; she's celebrated because she remained pure.

As I walked down the aisle with a lamb in my arms, a symbol of Agnes' virginity, I had my first unknowing encounter with the Dead Girl. All of the pomp and circumstance seemed so innocent at the time. However, the reality is that on that day, I was dressed up in emulation of a girl who was only a few years older than me when she was murdered by sex-crazed psychopaths. The irony is terrifying to me now, as I look back, and I wish I could say that Agnes was a special case in the hall of saints. The awful reality is that the story of St. Agnes is one of many stories about pure, virginal women who were killed for resisting rape. These were the women I was told to idolize, and these praise-filled platitudes created a sort of fog around my entire early religious experience. It baffles me that I wasn't able recognize that fog before, because now I can't un-see it. This idolization of these brutalized women has, for better or worse, irrevocably colored how I see the faith that raised me. But perhaps what is most terrifying is the trend that this parade of saints wrought: St. Agnes was the first Dead Girl to haunt me, but she wouldn't be the last.



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Thankfully, my childhood wasn't all martyred virgins. My earliest love was for a Titian-blonde detective with a penchant for solving mysteries: Nancy Drew. Even now, I can still see her sitting on a grassy knoll at night, wearing a bright green dress and holding an ornate clock in her hands, a triumphant smile on her face.<sup>5</sup> Much of my childhood was spent searching antique stores for collectors editions of the books and scouring libraries for every terrible mid-nineties *Nancy Drew File* I could get my hands on. The mystery genre of my youth had always been female-centered; when I wasn't devouring *Nancy Drew*, I was reading Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* mysteries, enjoying *Murder She Wrote* with my grandmother or watching *Scooby-Doo* with my younger sister (granted, the cartoon was really dog-centered, but everyone knows that Velma was the real brains of that operation). Eventually, however, the brightly colored shores of Cabot Cove faded into the dreary fluorescence *CSI* and *Criminal Minds*. My time with my grandmother was now spent consuming male-centric crime stories, with most episodes centering on the Dead Girl – dead women found in sewers or disintegrated in tubs of acid (the list goes on and on and on). As I consumed hours upon hours of these crime shows, I couldn't shake the creeping feeling on the back of my neck that something wasn't quite right. Now I realize why: these shows were never actually about Dead Girls. They were about men: the men who love women, the men who kill them, and the men who exonerate themselves by delivering justice.<sup>6</sup> Women in patriarchal crime shows, whether murder victims or colleagues of the male detective-hero, are for all intents and purposes dead. They are mere devices in an unquestioned heteronormative, white male-centric world, figures who cause emotional turmoil for the male protagonist or function as pretty pieces of scenery for him to use at his pleasure before completing his heroic journey.

For every Dead Girl, then, there are dozens of what I would call “Living Dead Girls,” characters who might as well be dead since they are little more than props in male-centered stories. They are like Bolin’s Dead Girl in that their existence provides the male characters with a “neutral arena on which to work out male problems,” but they aren’t literally dead, so the amount of trauma their male counterparts experience as a result is reduced.<sup>7</sup> Mary Morstan in Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes*<sup>8</sup> is a perfect example of the Living Dead Girl: she’s a pretty, blonde piece of scenery that causes the men angst because, oh no, bachelor fun times are coming to an end because Watson’s getting married! She doesn’t fare much better in the sequel: Sherlock Holmes literally throws her out of a moving train into a freezing cold river on her honeymoon and then forces her to remain in Mycroft’s care (who feels perfectly fine parading around naked in her presence, paying no mind to her evident discomfort).<sup>9</sup> Irene Adler fares a little bit better in Ritchie’s imagination: she has some modicum of intelligence, although she is squarely defeated by Sherlock Holmes at the end of the first film, and all of her interactions with said detective have a layer of erotic interest. She’s quickly killed off in the sequel, which causes Sherlock some angst, but not too much, since she was never Watson. (We have to have Mary and Irene because otherwise, God forbid, someone might think Sherlock and Watson were gay.)

Many Living Dead Girls, in the course of their story, unfortunately end up dead. Feminist writer Gail Simone first defined this process within the comic book genre, as she noticed an excess of female supporting characters who were killed in order to motivate the male hero. She coined the term as “fridging,” in reference to a particularly gruesome issue of *Green Lantern* in which Kyle Raynor (the aforementioned Green Lantern) discovers that his girlfriend has been murdered and stuffed into a refrigerator, an event which kickstarts his heroic story.<sup>10</sup> Upon the explosion of superhero media into the larger popular culture, this has been applied to the

treatment of female characters within other genres, with perhaps one of the larger subsets appearing in the world of crime serials. Take, for instance, one of the two female characters on the recent television show *The Alienist*. The show centers around three investigators – the titular Alienist, an illustrator, and a New Woman – who work together to figure out who is raping and murdering young boys. There are various side plots within the first season’s narrative that are given some attention, but the most frustrating of them all has to do with Mary Palmer. Mary is the Alienist’s mute maid who entered into his service after she was acquitted of murder. Her character is single-mindedly focused on serving and romantically idolizing the Alienist. All of her limited screen time is spent either caring for the Alienist, trying to provoke him into jealousy, or physically romancing him. Of course, by the time the Alienist realizes and reciprocates her affection, she is murdered by one of his enemies, and the last episodes of the season show him grappling with her loss, before eventually setting his feelings aside so that he can save the day.<sup>11</sup>

Dead Girl and Living Dead Girl narratives in contemporary crime film and television reinforce cultural Western narratives of white male superiority: women are a necessary part of the plot but only so far as it serves the white, heterosexual man or motivates his quest. As I watched these stories with my grandmother, I heard their message loud and clear: “good” women who support the hero end up with an attractive, alpha-male detective love interest, should they survive the story. Naughty girls, silly girls, and sexual girls, always end up dead. As Clare Clarke notes, “much of our most popular pop culture is dominated by the spectacle of the beautiful Dead Girl.”<sup>12</sup> Once I truly saw the Dead Girl and the Living Dead Girl for what they were, I realized that these figures were everywhere. I saw Dead Girls lying on gurneys in the fluorescent mortuaries of *Bones* and *NCIS*. I saw Living Dead Girls become Dead Girls in *Star Wars*<sup>13</sup> and the Marvel Cinematic Universe,<sup>14</sup> their tragic deaths serving as a springboard for tales of male

heroics. I saw stories of Dead Girls – really, stories about their killers – in true crime podcasts such as *My Favorite Murder*<sup>15</sup> and *The Last Podcast on the Left*. Such representations of the Dead Girl and the Living Dead Girl were of course nothing new, as I had seen during my research of the *IPN*, but it was unnerving to see how eagerly they were *still* consumed as nothing more than titillating entertainment. After returning from my trip to London, I finally realized that I was haunted: haunted by the silent graves of Dead Girls, fictional and real, whose stories were – and continue to be – forgotten or who never even had stories in the first place.

It was from these ruminations that I settled into what would become the driving question of my studies: as crime fiction, written or televised, is largely overrun by Living Dead and Dead Girls, what other genre, if any, might provide an alternative female type? This led me to the Gothic. Surely in a genre known for sexual transgression there would be female characters who did not conform to Dead Girl and Living Dead Girl stereotypes. Surely there was a Gothic narrative that would disrupt this Male-Alive/Female-Dead binary.

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The foundations of Gothic literature lie in transgression. Carol Davison notes that the Gothic genre “serves as a barometer of socio-cultural anxieties in its exploration of the dark side of individuals, cultures, and nations – to interrogate socially dictated and institutionally entrenched attitudes and laws relating to gender roles, identities and relations.”<sup>16</sup> It would seem, then, to offer an alternative to the one-dimensional figure of the Dead Girl or Living Dead Girl prescribed by patriarchal culture. In short, I was looking for the creative possibility of identifying what I was beginning to call the “Un-dead Girl.” Trying to articulate just what I meant by “Un-dead Girl” was difficult at first. I didn’t want this new categorization to function just as a synonym for the female vampire. Rather, I was looking for a female character who has agency

and is not literally or figuratively dead. Consequently, I felt that the question of her status as a “living” self had to be blurred as well. Such a character would also reside outside the binaries associated with women’s experience in patriarchal society and would thus exist in the realm of the fantastic. Crime narratives, which are built upon the cultural foundation of patriarchal heteronormativity, define death as being intertwined with the feminine, as the male characters – the heroes – are always the ones who live, who remain standing at the end. Authentic, living women are impossible creations under the burden of this binary, as seen via the prevalence of Living Dead Girls. Because living women are an impossibility within this system, the figure of the Un-dead Girl would have to exist in a space outside of the gendered binary of life and death. She couldn’t be fully dead, but as a woman in a man’s world, there would be no way for her to be truly alive. She had to exist in an in-between liminal space, the realm of the fantastic. These, I decided, were the basic parameters of the Un-dead Girl. I then went in search of textual examples to fill in the empty spaces – and to help further define what sort of emotional, intrinsic qualities or potentialities the Un-dead Girl must possess. Since I’d been a voracious reader of vampire fiction as a teenager, I determined that I would start my search for the Un-dead Girl there. And if I didn’t find her, well, at least I would find out what she *wasn’t*.

I started with one of my favorite vampire tales, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and was quickly disappointed. Just because a female character is a vampire, I discerned, *doesn’t mean* she’s an Un-dead Girl, and the female vampires in *Dracula* prove this definitively. Mina Murray is the ideal Living Dead Girl: she’s young, beautiful, white, and constantly defers to the men around her. She is routinely praised as being the pinnacle of womanhood, especially by Van Helsing. “She is one of God’s women fashioned by His own hand,” he effuses, “to show us men and other women that there is a heaven where we can enter, and that its light can be here on earth.”<sup>17</sup> The

threat of her demise provides the male characters with a motivation for their violent quest, and they all valiantly race to protect her when Dracula comes calling. Lucy Westenra is her sinful doppelganger; unlike Mina, who only has one suitor (not including Dracula), Lucy has three. Lucy is much more invested in her relationship with Mina than with any of her potential husbands, and she readily becomes prey to the advances of the vampire due to her (inherent) “feminine” weakness. Her death causes consternation for the would-be vampire hunters; having to kill her again (once she has transformed into the Bloofer lady) causes even more angst. Mina doesn’t fare much better in the long run. Though she’s pure of heart, she’s still overpowered by Dracula and bears the mark of damnation. (Vampirism is, for Stoker, the antithesis of Catholic salvation, as shown by the scene in which Mina is physically scarred by the Eucharistic host.)

The figures that at first seemed to have most transgressive potential in the novel were the “brides of Dracula” that terrorize Jonathan Harker during his stay at the Count Dracula's castle. Yet they are unquestionably minor characters and function merely as objects of sexual temptation. Jonathan laments, “there was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips.”<sup>18</sup> They excite male sexual desire, which seems to be their sole function as creatures of the night, and they laugh gleefully in response to Jonathan’s arousal, as seen early on when they discuss their plan to “kiss” him. However, whatever sort of sexual agency they might have is completely overshadowed by Dracula’s power, since with a single word he is able to drive them away from his guest. They reappear at the end of the narrative, this time hoping to seduce Van Helsing, but he is able to overcome the temptation in order to ritualistically behead and stake them. Whatever potential might be inherent to the brides is drowned out by the aggressively heterosexual, patriarchal values of Stoker’s writing. Having

found nothing more than a procession of Living Dead Girls in *Dracula*, I turned to the other vampire saga that stole my teenage heart: Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight Saga*. Surely in a more contemporary Gothic narrative, one that is replete with female characters, I would be able to find the Un-dead Girl.

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I encountered *Twilight* around the same time that I encountered *Dracula*. I was a freshman in high school, desperately awkward, and hungry for a world that could distract me from the loneliness of my teenage years. Like many others of my generation, I found my solace in Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight* series. Today, the series is usually met with obligatory eye rolls due to its conservative and romantic subject matter, but within its stereotypical love triangle romance plot, there exists a quiet sort of rebellion. Vampirism wasn't a sentence of damnation for Bella Swan; it was a chance for her to live a life that she wouldn't be able to live otherwise. *Twilight's* heroine was no Lucy or Mina; she was always, for better or worse, the agent of her own actions. Bella chooses an immortal life for herself, chooses to carry a life-threatening pregnancy to term, and when she finally becomes a vampire, is able to psychically project a shield around herself and those she loves. It's in her "un-death" that her life truly begins.

And it's not just Bella that achieves this sort of fantasy afterlife: as vampires, the three female Cullens – Esme, Alice, and Rosalie – gain what was denied to them during their mortal lives. Esme, who fled an abusive husband and lost her only child, gains a loving, supportive family. Alice was locked away and abused in an institution for the insane due to her psychic abilities but as a vampire is given the freedom to live beyond her sheltered existence with people who respect and admire her strange gifts. Rosalie has the most tragic story out of the three: gang-raped and abused by her fiancée and his friends and left to die, she's bitten by Carlisle and, upon

realizing she's no longer human, begins to systematically hunt down and kill all of the men who attacked her, saving her ex-fiancée for last. And while she states that she never would have chosen this life for herself, being a vampire doesn't stop her from pursuing what she wants. She is the one who instigates a relationship with her chosen mate, who supports Bella's autonomy, and who truly sees the value in being mortal. Esme, Alice and Rosalie could have all easily been Dead Girls. Instead, they are able to rise above gender role limitations and become some of the most powerful characters in the *Twilight* universe.

Even with all of the steps forward from *Dracula* the *Twilight* series represented, it nevertheless reinforced the same sort of Victorian-heterosexual values that made *Dracula* problematic. All of the female vampires in *Twilight* attain their "happily-ever-after" outcome via heterosexual marriage.<sup>19</sup> The Cullens themselves adhere to Victorianesque morals, championing sacrifice over gratification. Feeding on humans is analogous to sex outside of marriage, and as feeding on humans is framed as immoral, extramarital sex is, too. In spite of retrospections arguing for the subversive power of female safety,<sup>20</sup> the male characters are still the most traditionally powerful, and the most popular. No one ever championed "Team Bella" during high school; it was "Team Edward" and "Team Jacob," full stop. For a series that prided itself as being for girls, it's unforgivable that it made its lead female character the least interesting – and least popular – character within the entire series. I still believe *Twilight* was a step in the right direction, but as I continued my search for my Un-Dead Girl, I quickly realized I needed more than a step; I needed a full-on leap away from these patriarchal notions of womanhood and feminine desire. It was at this point that I began to research other vampire narratives and stumbled upon a novella entitled *Carmilla*, and here, for the first time, I felt that I was on the right path towards this elusive savior.



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The worldview in *Dracula* is incredibly static: there's good and evil, Englishness and Otherness, men and women, love and destruction. No part of the text tries to stretch beyond this binary structure: the evil Other is destroyed, the good Englishmen win, and that's that. In *Twilight*, heterosexual love guarantees a "happily ever after" for the main characters, and those who try to disrupt this bond end up being destroyed. While the female vampires are certainly granted more agency in *Twilight* than in *Dracula*, at the end of the tale they are still confined in and defined by their heterosexual relationships, by the men that they choose to "mate" themselves to. Traditional heterosexuality, in both *Dracula* and *Twilight*, conquers all. Nothing is quite so simple in *Carmilla*.

The story takes place in Styria, which is the southeastern part of Austria. Laura, through a mysterious accident, finds herself a companion in the enigmatic Carmilla, a languid beauty who rouses attraction and disgust in equal measure. Laura recalls, "I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion."<sup>21</sup> This sense of ambiguity pervades every aspect of the novella. From the dream-like beginning of the tale and moonlit night of the carriage disaster to the ghost of Carmilla's presence that remains unvanquished at the end of Laura's correspondence, Le Fanu makes it difficult to draw any sort of objective conclusion about any portion of the story. This stage is set right away at the start of the tale, as Laura describes the night which changed her life: "At our left the narrow road wound away under clumps of lordly trees, and was lost to sight amid the thickening forest. ... Over the sward and low grounds a thin film of mist was stealing, like smoke, marking the distances with a transparent veil; and here and there we could see the river faintly flashing in the moonlight."<sup>22</sup> This misty, mysterious setting serves as a physical representation of the enchanting fog that

envelopes Laura. Even less clear are Carmilla's and Laura's respective motivations and feelings. Laura remembers that Carmilla "would whisper, almost in sobs, 'You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever.' Then she has thrown herself back in her chair, with her small hands over her eyes, leaving me trembling."<sup>23</sup> To what extent are Carmilla's romantic ecstasies authentic? Is Laura something more than Carmilla's next victim? Laura's own feelings are as ambiguous as Carmilla's intentions: "I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust, ... I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence."<sup>24</sup> What causes these mixed feelings? Is it the fact that she is able to sense, on some level, Carmilla's devilish nature? Or is it the cognitive dissonance produced by her burgeoning same-sex desire? There are no clear answers to these questions, just Laura's acknowledgment that "whatever it might be, my soul acquiesced in it."<sup>25</sup>

What remains entirely explicit, despite the novel's pervasive mysteriousness, is the fact that Carmilla has a remarkable level of agency and power. In her Un-Dead state, she is able to transgress social boundaries, for good or for foul, in a way that entirely eludes the patriarchal system surrounding her. Having been dealt the worst the system has to offer – she herself was victimized at a society ball – she is able to maneuver both outside of and within the systems of respectability, seducing and disposing of her victims without drawing suspicion until it is much too late. Under the guise of feminine weakness and distress, she is able to take advantage of proper English hospitality and gain access to intimate friendships with Bertha and Laura, two girls in her age group. It's the perfect plan: no one would suspect that something sexually transgressive was happening between two women. Carmilla knows exactly what she needs to say in order to steal her way into the affections of her "friends." She says to Laura, "If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you, but being as you are, and you and I both so

young, I feel only that I have made your acquaintance twelve years ago, and have already a right to your intimacy; at all events it does seem as if we were destined, from our earliest childhood, to be friends. I wonder whether you feel as strangely drawn towards me as I do to you; I have never had a friend – shall I find one now?’ She sighed, and her fine dark eyes gazed passionately on me.”<sup>26</sup>

Beyond her devious social maneuvering, Carmilla, as a vampire, is physically stronger and much more dangerous than any of the men who would seek to stop her, including General Spielsdorf. It’s only in the light of day, among a large group of hunters, that she is presumably defeated, killed off in a ritual that reads as a sort of gang-rape: “The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck.”<sup>27</sup> I say “presumably” because the novella offers no final guarantee that she has been vanquished. Even if her physical form has been destroyed, her spirit still lingers on, haunting the one who got away – Laura, who we can reasonably assume will become a vampire herself.

*Carmilla* was the closest I’d gotten to finding my Un-dead Girl. Her status as a queer vampire allows her to subvert and transgress the social boundaries that would otherwise constrain her, and the fact that she resists patriarchal control is remarkable. However, *Carmilla* still falls short in two very important ways. She might be a physically and psychically powerful character, but she uses it to harm and kill other women. After all, her seduction of Laura, despite whatever romantic inclinations she may or may not have been feeling, is just a means to an end of drinking away Laura’s life force. And, as noted above, she is killed off in a sensationalized

rape scene where a band of men become the heroes, hijacking the queer narrative. *Carmilla* was a definite improvement from the other vampires I had encountered to date, but, *Carmilla* fell all too easily into the “demon temptress” mold, a trope whose sole purpose was to highlight the virtue of her male conquerors.<sup>28</sup>

Despite these problematic elements, *Carmilla* remains a beloved and important work within the lesbian literary canon. As Ardel Haefele-Thomas notes, “The mere fact that *Carmilla* has been included in several lists and anthologies meant to entertain and empower points to a queer readership comfortable with reading between the lines and reading within the ambiguities to find something positive to take away. In many ways, it no longer matters what Le Fanu’s intentions might have been. Clearly, lesbians and other queers are still enchanted with his vampire tale; it has become part of queer culture.”<sup>29</sup> I wasn’t the only person seeing the transgressive potential within *Carmilla*. Le Fanu’s novel carries within it the seeds revolution: the social power of expressive queerness, the strength in subverting male homosocial structures, and the power of expressing female sexuality as natural and authentic. *Carmilla* raised a lot of nascent possibilities for the future of feminist writing, but I was still looking for a female character who was not dominated or subsumed by male heroics, whose narrative remained entirely her own. As I did further research, I discovered a fan narrative that seemed to realize this potential – *Carmilla: The Series*. This YouTube serial, which began in the fall of 2014 and concluded with a feature-length film in 2017, spawned a massive internet following and was routinely praised for its portrayal of female and LGBTQ+ characters. With nothing to lose but a bit of time, I sought it out, and fell in love.

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*Carmilla: The Series* is a loose adaptation of Le Fanu's novel created by Jordan Hall, Steph Ouaknine, and Jay Bennett and sponsored by Kotex (yes, that Kotex). The three-part series is centered on the relationship between Laura Hollis (Elise Bauman) and Carmilla Karnstein (Natasha Negovanlis). When Laura's roommate goes missing and a mysterious new girl (Carmilla) moves in, Laura starts to investigate the mystery of the disappearing women at her Styrian college campus. While the first season is mostly devoted to the events of Le Fanu's novel, the two remaining seasons – and feature length film – are devoted to Laura and Carmilla's attempts at rectifying the crimes in Carmilla's past and ending Carmilla's mother's murderous reign once and for all. The cast is almost entirely comprised of female characters, and almost all are queer, nonbinary, or traditionally "other" in some important way.

Laura serves as the conduit into the supernatural world of *Carmilla*, and as viewers, we're with her every step of the way. We are introduced to Carmilla at the end of the second episode. Laura is in the midst of complaining about the university's lack of concern about her missing roommate when in walks a woman with black leather pants and a see-through tee. "I'm your new roommate, sweetheart," Carmilla croons, smiling seductively at Laura, and the screen cuts to credits.<sup>30</sup> Her attempts at sweet-talking Laura are quickly rebuffed in the next episode, as Laura will not be swayed from solving the mystery of her missing roommate. Carmilla quickly tosses aside her seductively sweet disposition in favor of a harsh and brooding demeanor when she's around Laura. While the idea of the moody vampire is nothing new – as popularly satirized in the post-Edward Cullen age of YA vampire novels – Carmilla's initial melancholy feels true to her character. Consistently abused by the woman she calls "Mother," she's incredibly jaded and routinely mocks Laura's attempts at doing the right thing. Episode 6 of season 1, entitled "Why Bother?", showcases this perfectly:

Carmilla: You really think you're doing anything to help that girl? To help poor Betty? ... Oh, are you trying your very best? Because I'm sure if you stay pure of heart and really believe that, that'll make a difference.

Laura: Well, it's better than lounging around all day and pretending to be cool and disaffected when really, you're just miserable and alone.

Carmilla: Do you really think you're doing an actual lick of good? Do you know anything you didn't know the day before she vanished? You're a child, and you understand nothing; not about life, not about this place, and certainly not about what it takes to survive in a world – you know what? The sooner you stop playing Lois Lane, the better off you'll be.

Carmilla is sarcastic and lashes out at people, but this is just the product of her internalized pain, anger and self-hatred. Her depressing existence has continued on for centuries, and she probably would have remained in that same state if not for Laura, who follows Carmilla's monologue with one of her own: "Girls go missing, and nobody seems to care, so maybe that's just the way it is, but that does not mean I have to accept it. I deserve better, Betty deserves better, hell – even you deserve better."

Laura's vocalized resistance to the Dead Girl status quo and her unwavering belief that "girls deserve better" draws Carmilla like a moth to a flame. She doesn't become a hero overnight, but as the season progresses, we start to see Carmilla begin to genuinely care about her idealistic roommate, on both a personal and romantic level. This is initially manifested in her criticism of Laura's other romantic interest, Danny. When Laura begins to have dreams that other victims had experienced before her, Carmilla puts on her seduction hat, giving Laura a bracelet said to ward off bad dreams. Carmilla then tries to seduce Laura in her typical fashion,

which Laura misreads as Carmilla attempting to hand her over to her Mother, and consequently ties Carmilla up with garlic, trapping her in their room. It is then, when Carmilla is at her most powerless, that Laura hears Carmilla's story: how she was brought back to life to serve Mother and would be horribly punished if she disobeyed or tried to save one of Mother's marks.

Carmilla eventually fell in love and was subsequently betrayed by one of her victims, a situation that ended with her lover being sacrificed and Carmilla herself being buried alive in a coffin of blood. She's eventually freed through random happenstance and resumes her role as a lure for Mother's victims. She tries to undermine her when possible, saying "there can be great satisfaction in small revenges."<sup>31</sup> She doesn't know why her Mother keeps taking these girls, but she follows Mother's instructions in spite of the pain Mother has caused her. The series doesn't sugarcoat the fact that Carmilla is responsible for this multitude of murdered girls, but it doesn't blatantly demonize her for her past either: Carmilla has done bad things, yes, but only because she was part of an oppressive system. It's after Carmilla's confession that Carmilla and Laura's relationship irrevocably shifts. Laura learns to trust in Carmilla's innate goodness, and the two begin to work together to stop Mother. Laura does this in hopes of ending Mother's murderous schemes once and for all, and Carmilla? Well, Carmilla does it for Laura. When Laura's upset, she makes her hot cocoa. When Laura is beset upon by mutant mushrooms, Carmilla saves her life, even while trying to pass it off as self-preservation. "Don't start expecting heroic vampire crap from me, cupcake," she quips.<sup>32</sup> When Laura is threatened by Mother, Carmilla agrees to derail her plans in order to keep Laura safe. And when Laura decides to go after Mother herself, Carmilla rises to the occasion, ostensibly sacrificing her life to save her friend, and stop the angler-fish god from bringing about Armageddon.<sup>33</sup> In the final episode, it's revealed that she

survives, and Laura and Carmilla kiss passionately, giving both characters the a happily-ever-after denied them in Le Fanu's novel.

*The Carmilla Movie*<sup>34</sup> picks up five years after the series concludes, with Carmilla and Laura enjoying their completely human domestic bliss, but Carmilla is forced to once again reckon with the ghosts of her past – quite literally, as Carmilla accidentally summons up the spirits of her past victims in a counseling-session gone awry. This in turn causes her to start “vamping” out, i.e., drinking Laura’s blood. At the same time, Laura begins dreaming about episodes from Carmilla’s past, specifically the events of Le Fanu’s novel, as through the eyes of Elle, who is an amalgamation of both Laura and Bertha. Carmilla’s vampiric episodes and Laura’s dream-visions lead the couple, along with their friends LaFontaine, Perry, Kirsch and Mel, back to Styria, where they encounter Carmilla’s victims face to face. Those victims, we learn, were trapped in a nightmarish hellscape where they were forced to relive their biggest regret. They can only be freed by Carmilla sacrificing her human life for theirs. At the same time, the group is hunted by Elle, who is furious over both Carmilla’s and Mother’s betrayals and wants Carmilla’s life for her own.

Upon arriving in Styria, Carmilla is confronted face-to-face by her victims. Instead of harboring any sort of hate for her role in their deaths, they greet her happily. Their welcome and forgiveness makes Carmilla feel “twitchy,” as seen in her exchange with her previous victim Emily, who thanks Carmilla for returning to Styria to help them:

Emily:            Whatever you’ve done in the past, you’ve come to help us now, and I think that shows a strength of character that is quite remarkable.

Carmilla:        Yeah. Sure.



The spell quickly goes wrong, with Elle stealing Carmilla's life force and sending the other ghosts back to the void. "Did you really think there'd be no consequences?" she snarls as she rips Carmilla's life from her. From that point on, the film becomes a race to stop Elle, with Carmilla and Laura confronting an impossible choice: either Carmilla gets her life back, consigning her victims to an eternity of despair, or she gives up her human life and allows her victims to finally find peace. Laura is adamant that there has to be some other way and is fiercely protective of Carmilla's right to live a normal human life with her. For Carmilla, however, the choice is clear. "It's my life or their freedom," she says to a crying Laura, who asks Carmilla why she's giving up on their mortal life together. "I'm not giving up on our life, but I can't keep running away. Not after what I've done," she responds. Carmilla, in sacrificing her chance at a human life to give peace to those she hurt, becomes what Laura believed she was all along: the vampire-hero of her own story. "I'm responsible for what happened to you, so this is how I can help," she bids the ghosts of her victims, and as she blows out the candles on her "Happy Re-Birthday" cake, she becomes a vampire once again and lays both her victims – and the sins of her past – to rest. The film ends with Laura, Carmilla and company drinking wine together and planning the next steps of their life. And while Laura is hesitant about Carmilla's newfound immortality, Carmilla has no such concern, concluding, "Whatever happens next, we'll do it together." End credits reveal indeed that this is so: Carmilla and Laura pose with a baby boy.

The Carmilla who closes the film is the archetypal Un-dead Girl: assertive, powerful, and capable of actively destroying the system that would hold a lesser character in place. Carmilla's queer, un-dead nature allows her to push beyond the boundaries of conventionality and live a life that is unapologetically female and unapologetically queer. The supporting women and non-binary characters are given the same opportunity to rise beyond conventional frames. Almost all

of the characters in the story are queer in some way, and this rampant female-centric queerness is treated as the status quo. The series operates under the assumption that its queer, countercultural values are completely and entirely normal. It isn't flaunted as a titillating sex-rush for a male-perceived viewer; any romantic embraces are always just that, *romantic*. Since the series is filmed as if Laura is recording the events happening for a class project, what is or isn't shown is completely subject to her creative control. The static camera allows for the characters to operate in the space as they see fit, turning what could have been simple voyeurism into a respectful chronicle of the characters and their relationships. This is even played for comedy in season three, when the camera cuts from a shot of Laura and Carmilla kissing to a "technical difficulties" screen. The characters are in control here, and their agency in what they choose to show is as revolutionary as the series itself.

Just as importantly, one of the show's major characters – known simply as LaFontaine, or Laf, for short – experiences a moment of awakening during the course of the show and reveals themselves to be a non-binary individual. Instead of drawing this plot point out into a season-long, pain-filled arc, Laf's characterization as a non-binary person is quickly met with acceptance from the community surrounding them. The fact that the most important acceptance comes from this queer, mostly female community is also revolutionary; it undermines the male/female heroic/romantic binary of the past, instead allowing all of the characters to act heroically, romantically, or some mixture of the two at whatever point they choose. This countercultural rebellion isn't just limited to the showcasing of various sexualities, gender identities or gender roles; the cast is almost entirely composed of female actors, and the characters in the story with the most agency are always, *always*, the women or the female-passing non-binary character. It is a woman who is intent on ending the world, and it is women who stop it from occurring; any and

all attempts by the few male characters to either save or intimidate the female characters fail, time and time again. And the women don't just win through sheer brute force (Carmilla's vampiric strength) but through their intellect, emotional intelligence and steadfast belief in the triumph of goodness and love over death and destruction. *Carmilla: The Series* is a small universe of hope, and like Le Fanu's text, it provides a blueprint forward for telling female/non-male stories in a way that feels authentic and hopeful about the possibilities of storytelling. It is Carmilla's undead status that makes all of this possible. She might be technically dead by normal societal standards, but she is certainly not a Dead Girl. It is in her death that she gets to live her life. This serves as the ultimate weapon against the female/death foundation of much Gothic and crime fiction. The Un-dead Girl, by her very existence, breaks the shackles of destruction that keep the Dead Girl in her place.

In this way, *Carmilla: The Series* stands in stark contrast to Bolin's "Dead Girl show." Instead of a mystery that ignores women except in instances of exploitative sexualization or death, all of these women, victims and heroes alike, are able to speak, act and live. Feminine detection is celebrated, the non-binary gaze is dominant and the show actively encourages all viewers, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, to be an active part of their Un-dead community. After witnessing the authentic life in these characters, it's hard to be satisfied by the usual tropes offered up by crime and detective fiction. *Carmilla: The Series* provides subversive comfort as a story that *for once* gets the idea of female-centric writing absolutely right.

Perhaps the only sticky point that remains, then, is the issue of genre. It took my leaving crime fiction and journeying into the Gothic in order to find an alternative to the Dead Girl in the first place. But just because it may be more natural for a character type to appear in a certain kind of genre (we rarely see vampires outside of the realm of the fantastic), it doesn't mean that the

Un-dead Girl is doomed to exist solely within the confines of the Gothic either. If the Dead Girl can appear in almost every genre, I would expect that the Un-dead Girl could do the same, although I don't yet know just what that would look like. In the same vein, I don't feel that it is right to damn crime fiction either, or say that it is beyond feminist salvation. There are many active writers and supporters of the crime genre that are attempting nuanced storytelling, trying to find an inclusive way of sharing these sorts of stories. Searching for a way, Carolyn Murnick writes, "that really says something, or sends a message, about gendered violence, rather than just doing these discrete stories over and over again about mutilated women and male killers."<sup>35</sup>

Trying to rid the genre of female victims isn't the answer, as seen in the backlash to the recently-announced Staunch prize, which would be awarded to an "author of a novel in the thriller genre in which no woman is beaten, stalked, sexually exploited, raped or murdered."<sup>36</sup> While we can be sure that the creators of the Staunch prize have the best intentions at heart, to erase the female victim from crime fiction entirely isn't the answer either. That sort of fiction wouldn't be an accurate reflection of reality in which so many women are brutalized and killed year after year, unfortunate byproducts of our violent, patriarchal society. Instead, I would suggest that the answer lies in the directed focus of these narratives. It is safe to say crime narratives, regardless of media, have viewed the detective and the killer as the primary focus of these stories for far too long. After all, the greatest loss in crime stories isn't in the squandered societal potential of the killer nor in the detective's ever-present ennui; the great loss has been, and always will be, the victim who was taken away too soon, and that is where our gaze should have always been in the first place. The Dead Girl is a warning from our past and from our present; let the Un-dead Girl be a guide for our future, and for the future of feminist story-telling, regardless of genre. I can't entirely picture what these enlightened narratives would look like, but I see hints of what they

could contain in *Carmilla: The Series*, in which the complex interior lives of women are on full display. All I can say for certain, at the end of it all, is that the time for playing compliant Dead Girl is over. It's time for feminist writers to embrace their inner Un-dead Girl, pull themselves out of the grave, and start walking.

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Whenever I visit my grandmother nowadays, we still end up watching a crime show. She will switch on the latest series she has binged, and I persuade her to re-watch *Murder, She Wrote* with me instead. If I were younger, I probably wouldn't insist on revisiting that particular series; I'd be drawn in by the promise of the Dead Girl and Living Dead Girl narratives and completely overlook their problematic elements. I would have vacantly consumed the shows my grandmother selected and feel bereft without any clear reason why. This is why becoming a self-aware media consumer is a bittersweet process, especially for women: we are able to enjoy truly empowering narratives more than we could before, but more often than not, we feel a sense of disappointment as promising novels, films or series fall short. No matter how much my family or friends tease or insist that I try to "just enjoy" whatever it is I'm watching, I can't. Honestly, I don't want to. Because every disappointment, every Living Dead Girl masquerading as an actually-realized female character deepens my desire to see the Un-dead Girl instead. And when I do see the her, either in a book or on a screen, it makes her revolutionary presence all the more rewarding. Unearthing the Un-Dead Girl has irrevocably changed the way I view media, and the way in which I myself write stories. In my writing, reading and viewing, I have finally cast off the ghosts of the past, and though I remain haunted, I remain haunted by hope, and this hope has a name: the Un-Dead Girl.

~Epilogue~

“So,” my friend Sarah murmurs, setting down her styrofoam cup of Earl Grey tea.

“You’re writing about Dead Girls, huh? That’s fascinating.”

“Yeah, I’m enjoying it. Well, as much as you can enjoy dead corpses and all that stuff.”

We share a conspiratorial laugh, earning a sharp look from a young man in headphones typing into his Mac at the adjacent table.

“Are you doing any other writing? How’s your fanfic going?”

I smile, wrapping my hands around my lukewarm latte miel. “I actually have an idea for an original story.”

I look up just as a young woman with short black hair saunters into the room, her black motorcycle jacket pulling at her androgynous frame. She drags an open chair over to our table, twirls it around on its leg and sits down, the back of the chair leaning up against the table. She then unceremoniously drops her motorcycle helmet onto the table, and with a smirk, she crosses her arms and leans forward, catching my eye.

“It’s about a girl who falls in love with a vampire,” I begin, my eyes locked on the girl in black. “The vampire’s name is Sam, and she’s nothing but trouble.”

Sam shoots me a wink and disappears back into the depths of my imagination just as quickly as she had materialized.

“Oh my God, I love it,” Sarah enthuses. “Tell me everything!”

I smile back at her. And I do.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My survey of the *Illustrated Police News* covers for 1869 yielded images of 41 dead women and 28 women in peril. 1870 had similarly high results, with illustrations of 26 dead women and 40 women in peril. Given the sheer amount of illustrations dedicated to the Jack the Ripper craze over fifteen years later, it's safe to say that dead and dying women remained popular imagery for the *IPN* throughout the late nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23. Passage reads: "Clearly Dead Girls help us work out our complicated feelings about the privileged status of white women in our culture. The paradox of the perfect victim, effacing the deaths of leagues of nonwhite or poor or ugly or disabled or immigrant or drug-addicted or gay or trans victims, encapsulates the combination of worshipful covetousness and violent rage that drives the Dead Girl Show. The white girl becomes the highest sacrifice, the virgin martyr, particularly to that most unholy idol of narrative."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Keene, *The Secret in the Old Clock*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap).

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Dead Girl Show, see to Bolin's chapter in *Dead Girls* entitled "Towards the Theory of a Dead Girl Show."

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Ritchie, dir. *Sherlock Holmes*. (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2010), starring Robert Downey Jr., Jude Law, Rachel McAdams, Mark Strong, and Kelly Reilly.

<sup>9</sup> Guy Ritchie, dir. *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*. (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012), starring Robert Downey Jr., Jude Law, Rachel McAdams, Mark Strong, Kelly Reilly, Noomi Rapace, Stephen Fry and Jared Harris.

<sup>10</sup> This topic was initially explored by Gail Simone in the late '90s on her website "Women in Refrigerators," <http://www.lby3.com/wir/>. Jeffrey A. Brown further analyzes this trope in *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroes, Gender, Fetishism and Popular Culture*, (University of Mississippi Press, 2013). See also *Tropes vs. Women Series*, episode 2, "Women in Refrigerators," *Feminist Frequency*, 2011, YouTube.

<sup>11</sup> *The Alienist*, episode 8, "Psychopathia Sexualis," directed by David Petrarcha, written by Caleb Carr, featuring Daniel Brühl, Luke Evans, and Dakota Fanning, aired March 12, 2018, on TNT.

<sup>12</sup> Clare Clarke, "Our Culture is Obsessed with Beautiful Dead Girls," *The Irish Times*, June 11, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/our-culture-is-obsessed-with-beautiful-dead-girls-1.3512783>.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of fridging in *Star Wars*, see: Rachel Bolton, "Twenty Years of Padme Amidala Deserving Better," *Women Write About Comics* (blog), May 17, 2019, <https://womenwriteaboutcomics.com/2019/05/twenty-years-of-padme-deserving-better/>.

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of fridging in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, see: Rosie Knight, "Avengers: Endgame Failed Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow," *Esquire*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a27274694/avengers-endgame-black-widow-death-marvel-failure/>.

<sup>15</sup> For analysis on the problematic elements of how *My Favorite Murder* fails to address issues of diversity in crime coverage, see: Ashley Duchemin, "White Women Need to Do Better: The Death of 'My Favorite Murder,'" *Bitch Media*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/death-my-favorite-murder>.

<sup>16</sup> Carol Margaret Davison, "The Victorian Gothic and Gender," in *The Victorian Gothic*, ed. Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 124.

<sup>17</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.), 144.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> In its afterlife, the *Twilight* fandom has embraced the inherent queerness of the figure of the vampire. The *Twilight* fanfiction tags are filled with queer iterations of these beloved characters, and in some ways, *Twilight* has been reborn as a space of queer affection and expression. See: Jami McFarland, “Resuscitating the Undead Queer in Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* Issue 5.2 (July 15, 2016): <http://jprstudies.org/2016/07/resuscitating-the-undead-queer-in-stephanie-meyers-twilight-sagaby-jami-mcfarland/>.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis on themes of protection in *Twilight* and its importance to female fantasy, see: *Fandom Uncovered*, episode 1, “Twilight Forever,” (2019; Los Angeles, California; Fandom Entertainment), YouTube.

<sup>21</sup> J. Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2009), 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> For further discussion of this trope, see: *Tropes vs. Women*, episode 4: “The Evil Demon Seductress,” *Feminist Frequency*, 2011, YouTube.

<sup>29</sup> Ardel Haefele-Thomas, ““One does this abroad that one would not dream of doing in England”: Miscegenation and Queer Female Vampirism in J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire*,” in *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2012), 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Carmilla*, episode 2, “Missing,” directed by Spencer Maybee, written by Jordan Hall, featuring Elise Bauman, Natasha Negovanlis, Sharon Belle, Kaitlyn Alexander, and Annie M. Briggs, aired August 19, 2014, YouTube.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, episode 20, “Sock Puppets and European History,” directed by Spencer Maybee, written by Jordan Hall, featuring Elise Bauman, Natasha Negovanlis, Sharon Belle, Kaitlyn Alexander, and Annie M. Briggs, aired August 19, 2014, YouTube.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, episode 27, “Required Reading,” directed by Spencer Maybee, written by Jordan Hall, featuring Elise Bauman, Natasha Negovanlis, Sharon Belle, Kaitlyn Alexander, and Annie M. Briggs, aired August 19, 2014, YouTube.

<sup>33</sup> The series takes place in a Lovecraftian-like universe where the supernatural is a normal, everyday occurrence – at least at Silas University. The feature film later reveals that supernatural occurrences such as were-people and angler-fish gods are entirely normal within universe, and seasons 2 and 3 of the series attempt to reckon with and stop Mother from opening up a portal to hell. All incredibly interesting plotlines, but not incredibly pertinent to this discussion of *Carmilla* here. Still, seasons 2 and 3 are fascinating, and I highly recommend them for the character interplay alone.

<sup>34</sup> Spencer Maybee, dir. *The Carmilla Movie*. (Toronto, Canada: VHX, 2017), starring Natasha Negovanlis, Elise Bauman, Annie Briggs, Kaitlyn Alexander, Nicole Stamp, and Matt O’Connor.

<sup>35</sup> Alex Segura, “Inverting – and Avoiding – the Dead Girl Trope,” *Crime Reads*, August 5, 2019, <https://crimereads.com/inverting-and-avoiding-the-dead-girl-trope/>.

<sup>36</sup> For further discussion of the Staunch prize, see: Sophie Hannah, “A prize for thrillers with no violence against women? That’s not progressive,” *The Guardian*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/31/staunch-prize-thrillers-no-violence-against-women-sophie-hannah>. See also: Marissa Martinelli, “Why an Award for Books Without Violence Against Women Is So Controversial,” *Slate*, July 5, 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/07/staunch-prize-violence-against-women-controversy.html>.