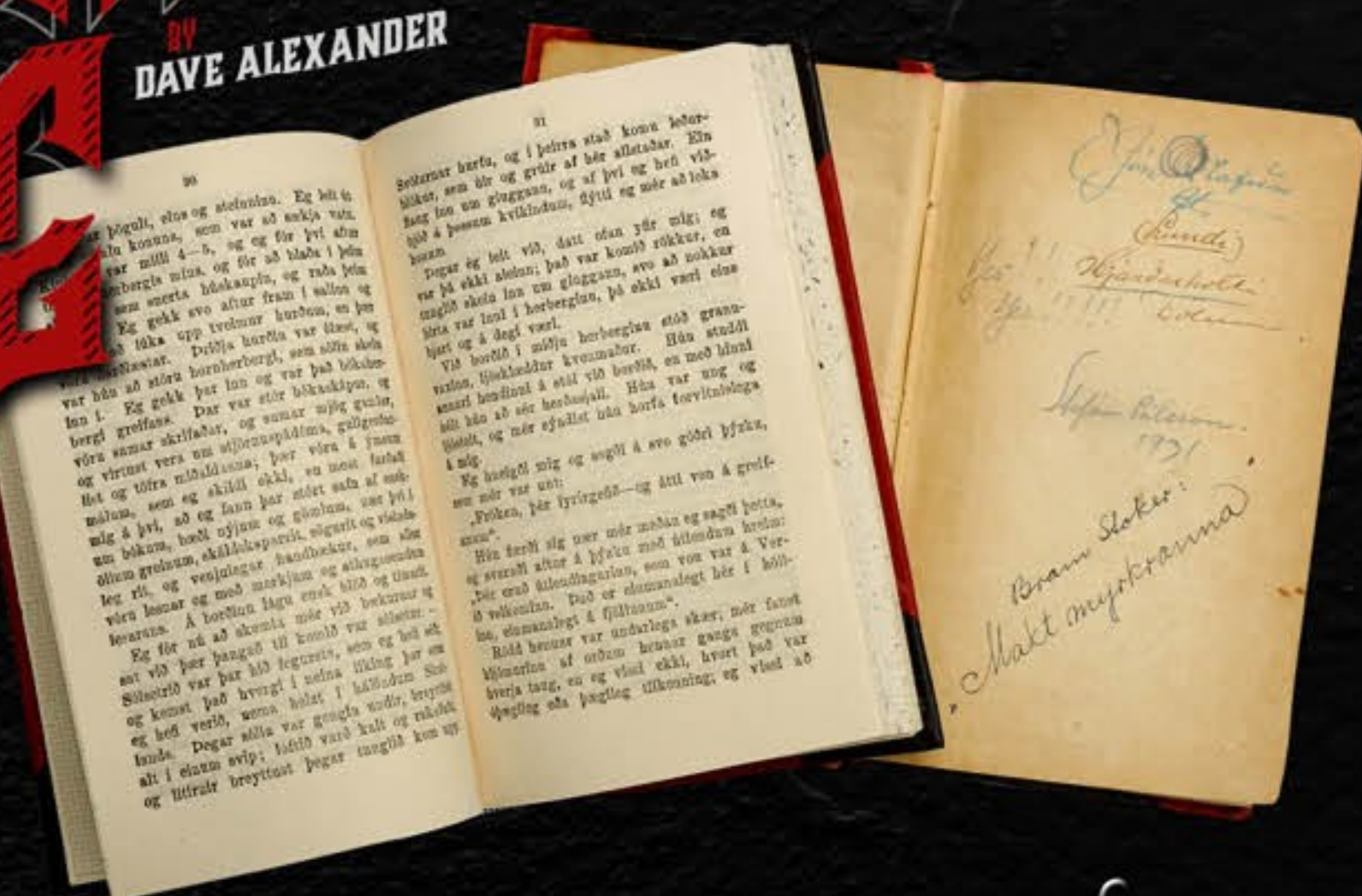


IN POWERS OF DARKNESS: THE LOST VERSION OF DRACULA, HANS CORNEEL DE ROOS REDISCOVERS THE SURPRISINGLY DIFFERENT SCANDINAVIAN VERSION OF THE BRAM STOKER BOOK THAT WAS SANCTIONED BY THE AUTHOR HIMSELF MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO

SOMETHING IN THE ICE
BY DAVE ALEXANDER

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YOU MIGHT THINK YOU KNOW BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA, BUT THERE'S ANOTHER VERSION OF THE COUNT AND HE'S BEEN HIDING IN ICELAND SINCE 1900. When *Dracula* was released in 1897, it wasn't an immediate success, despite favourable reviews; the novel didn't really take off until cinema popularized the vampire for audiences, after Stoker had died poor in 1912. This might explain *Makt Myrkranna* (*Powers of Darkness*), a retitled Icelandic translation with a reworked plot, new characters, a different type of vampire antagonist and a distinctly Scandinavian flavour, which Stoker wrote a preface for and may have had a hand in crafting.

It was the work of Valdimar Ásmundsson (1852-1902), a highly respected "man of letters" in Iceland. He was a self-taught go-getter who founded a popular magazine called *Fjallkonan*. It was here that he ran his serialized translation of Stoker's novel, before it was published as a book in Iceland (in 1901), where it essentially remained.

That's about to change thanks to literary researcher Hans Corneel de Roos – a celebrated photographer and author of *The Ultimate Dracula* (2012), creator of the in-progress *Bram Stoker Travel Guide* (with Stoker's great grand-nephew Dacre Stoker) and acting editor of the Transylvanian Society of Dracula's international newsletter. Although the Stoker introduction – which, intriguingly, is written as if the tale is true and makes a reference to Jack the Ripper – has been somewhat internationally known since 1986, de Roos was the one who started digging into the story itself in 2014.

He assembled a team of scholars to help him create *Powers of Darkness: The Lost Version of Dracula*, the first English translation of *Makt Myrkranna*. The 352-page book, which comes with a historical overview, an introduction from Dacre Stoker, an afterword by author John Edgar Browning (*The Forgotten Writings of Bram Stoker, A Companion of the Horror Film*), ex-

tensive notes on the text and even a map of Dracula's castle based off of the story, delves into something truly eye-opening. It explores a version of *Dracula* in which the Count has sinister political aspirations; a fair-haired female vampire develops a relationship with Jonathan Harker that's more erotic than anything in the original story; and, as the book's official website (powersofdarkness.com) notes, has specific nods to Scandinavian folklore such as "giant trolls, seductive Elven Queens, orinious fylgja (shadow spirits) [and] fortune-promising haugeldar (flames appearing on burial mounds)."

What remains unknown is how much of it was Ásmundsson inventing his own take on the tale, and how much, if any, was Stoker rethinking his own mythology. *Dracula* fans can speculate for themselves when the *Powers of Darkness* is released on December 6 in the UK (from Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd), and in January (from The Overlook Press) in North America.

In the meantime, de Roos gives us his take on how *Makt Myrkranna* reframes the most famous vampire story of all time, and what dark new mysteries have been unleashed.

WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES LED YOU TO THIS PROJECT? WHY DOES IT SPEAK TO YOU?

In an article for the *Journal of Dracula Studies* I needed to quote from the preface to *Makt Myrkranna*. Two different translations of this foreword exist, so I decided to check the original. While searching for the preface, I also found the rest of the book. I discovered that it contained characters and plot turns not occurring in *Dracula*. No European or American *Dracula* scholar had ever looked into this story; it had always been considered as an abridged translation of *Dracula*. Now we are confronted with a new plot – very exciting! And also the preface with its hint to the Ripper murders

points to something completely else than assumed 'til now.

THIS PROJECT WAS SUPPORTED BY AN ENTIRE TEAM. HOW DID YOU MANAGE HAVING SO MANY COOKS IN THE KITCHEN?

I am no native English speaker and I never studied Icelandic before. I split the text into small portions and found twenty Icelandic volunteers to improve the first draft. From their feedback, I learned to understand the language and finally do my own research on outdated Icelandic expressions that cannot be found in modern dictionaries. I also had help from native English speakers. But after each editing round, I checked the whole text again to see if it still was true to the Icelandic. That guarantees the consistency of this translation.

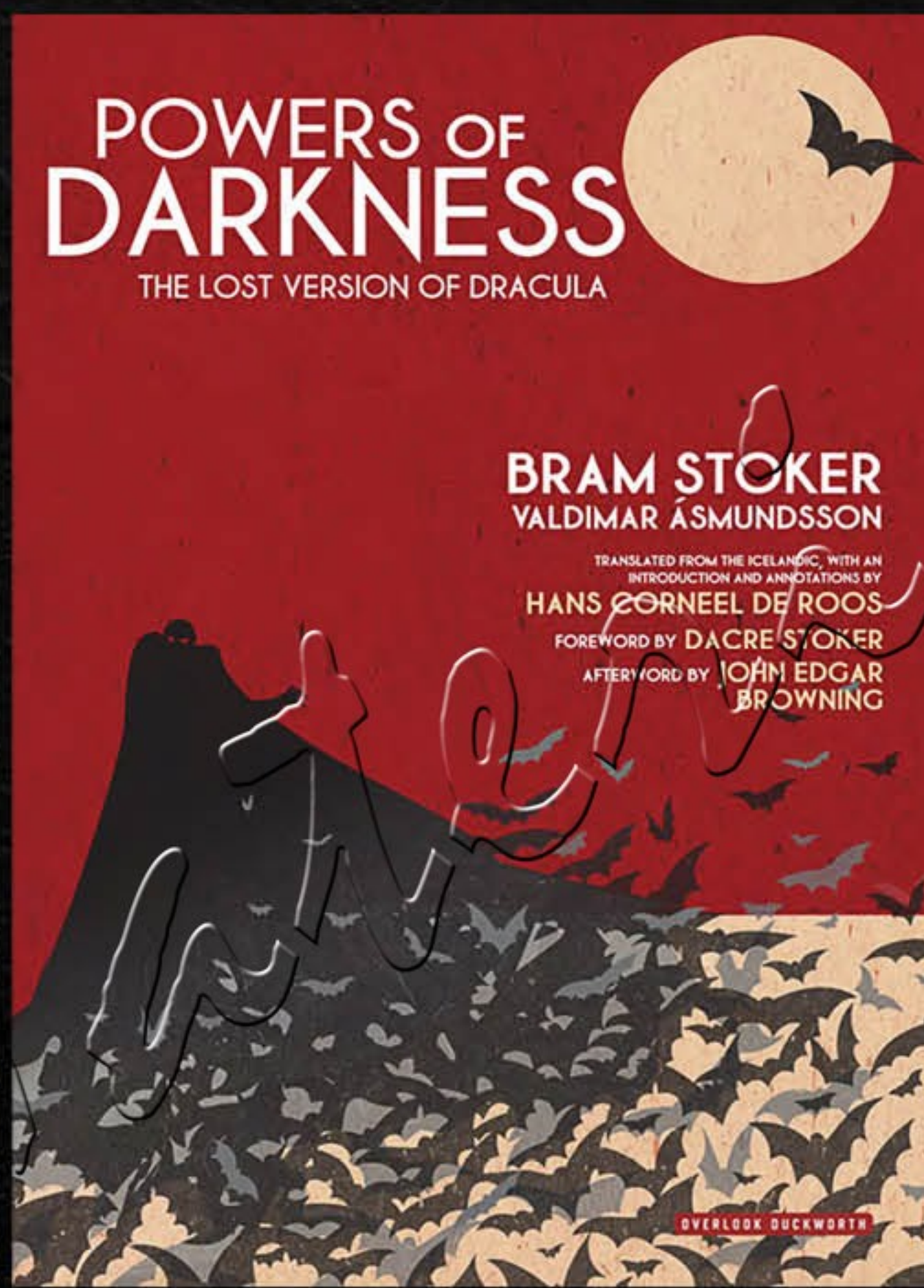
HOW DOES THE ICELANDIC COUNT DRACULA COMPARE TO STOKER'S ORIGINAL? IS HE MORE "MONSTROUS" OR DANGEROUS?

Like in *Dracula*, we never witness how the Count physically attacks a victim, except when Harker is shaving and cuts himself. He appears even smoother and more ironic than in the English version, but he commands a horde of ape-like followers who bite like beasts. And he has plans to overthrow all democratic institutions, together with his international allies. In this sense, he is more dangerous.

HOW DID ÁSMUNDSSON INTEGRATE CREATURES OF SCANDINAVIAN FOLKLORE INTO THE VAMPIRE STORY?

They only appear in figures of speech, not as actual characters: men "as strong as trolls," a girl with seductive powers "like the Elven Queen," etc. Ásmundsson was an expert [in] Icelandic sagas, so I suspect these expressions were added by him. But there is no reference to the Icelandic berserker warriors, as there is in *Dracula*, and no mention of the *draugur*, the Icelandic revenant. We simply do not know to what extent *Powers of Darkness* was created by Stoker, and to what part by Ásmundsson. That is the most intriguing riddle of this book.

IT IS MENTIONED THAT POWERS OF DARKNESS IS MORE "EROTIC" – WAS THIS AN ATTEMPT TO PERHAPS MAKE IT MORE LURID FOR MASS APPEAL OR DID ÁSMUNDSSON HAVE A SPECIFIC NARRATIVE OR THEMATIC GOAL WITH THIS CHANGE?



Again, I can only suspect that this was Valdimar's contribution. In Stoker's work, we never find denuded beautiful girls. In *Dracula*, Mina is once described as having her nightgown "in disarray" after the Count forced her to drink his blood – but Van Helsing immediately covers her with a blanket. Ásmundsson had a more liberal stance. In an article about the USA, he poked fun at the American prudishness that forbids a man to hang his underwear to dry at a place where a woman could see it, and stops mothers from breastfeeding in public.

WAS THE PROMINENT ROLE OF A FAIR-HAIRED VAMPIRE GIRL PERHAPS A WAY TO APPEAL TO THE AVERAGE FAIR-HAIRED SCANDINAVIAN?

We can only guess if *Powers of Darkness* was based on an early draft or an alternative version of *Dracula* submitted by Stoker, or if he granted Ásmundsson a license to rework the story himself, or a combination of both. Personally, I feel that the dominant role of the blonde girl and also Mina's more emancipated behaviour were Ásmundsson's work. But in *Dracula*, the most seductive of the vampire sisters also was blonde and blue-eyed.

WHAT SORT OF A WRITER WAS ÁSMUNDSSON, AND IN WHAT WAY IS THE STYLE OF POWERS OF DARKNESS TYPICAL OF HIM?

Valdimar never visited high school or university, but taught himself nine languages. As a school teacher, he wrote a much-used grammar book and later, he became a journalist and newspaper publisher. But all along, he studied the medieval literature which is unique to Iceland, and edited 38 book volumes of Icelandic sagas. I think this interest shows up in the expressions and metaphors used in the book, in the laconical way of storytelling.

SO THEN, WHAT IN YOUR OPINION IS THE MOST RADICAL CHANGE IN THE BOOK, AND HOW DOES IT RESHAPE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE NOVEL?

The ending has been shortened drastically and takes place still in London. It almost runs parallel to the stage and screen versions developed only 25 years later, after Bram's death. This similarity is a major mystery. For the understanding of the Count's nature, the added political dimension is significant. In *Makt Myrkranna*, he leads an elitist conspiracy. His ambitions reach much farther than satiating a personal lust for blood.

HOW WAS POWERS OF DARKNESS ORIGINALLY RECEIVED IN ICELAND?

Ásmundsson published *Makt Myrkranna* in installments first, to promote his own newspaper, *Fjallkonan*. The rest of the press ignored the story, for obvious reasons. There was one slating comment by a young author who feared that imported novels might replace Icelandic literature. But in the 1930s, when the *Dracula* movie with Bela Lugosi was released in Reykjavik, *Makt Myrkranna* developed into a sort of brand name for all sorts of vampire films. In the 1970s and '80s, the Icelandic Nobel Prize winner for Literature, Halldór Laxness, highly praised the book. Now it is considered a classic.

IN THE END, WHICH VERSION OF THE STORY DO YOU PREFER?

The Icelandic version, definitely. If this were not the case I would not have put so much energy into this project. The narrative is more to the point than *Dracula*, there are no lengthy sentimental conversations and no superfluous legal discussions. Harker's emotional addiction to the vampire girl is a highlight, as is the Count's sarcastic report on the erotic affairs of his first cousin. There are animalistic sacrificial rites in the basement of the Count's castle – elements of true suspense not offered in *Dracula*. If readers love *Dracula*, they will love *Powers of Darkness* more.