

Dracula in the Comics

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[Perry Lake not only reads comic books, he writes and illustrates them for adult comics such as *Demi the Demoness* and *Sex Squad*, sometimes featuring his Cassiopeia the Witch character.]

Dracula Lives! Is this a defiant declaration of the immortality of the most evil fiend the world has ever known? Or is it the pitiful admission that humanity's greatest undead threat will never be defeated? Neither. It is the title of a comic book. In magazine format, *Dracula Lives!* ran from 1973 to 1975, and was published by Marvel Comics. But it was by no means the only appearance of the King Vampire in graphic format.

When *Dracula* fell into public domain, Bram Stoker's vampire lord appeared in other novels, short stories, scores of motion pictures, a couple of television series, Halloween costumes, computer games, and even on a brand of breakfast cereal. But while there has been much discussion and analysis of these versions of *Dracula*, less attention has been given to the amazing number of appearances by Dracula in the field of comic books. Not only have a variety of comic book writers and artists dealt with the character Dracula, but so have different publishers. The most famous of these comic books is Marvel Comics' *The Tomb of Dracula*, which ran for seventy issues from 1971 to 1979. Though best known, they are not alone. Oddly enough, even though there is the potential for a wide interpretation of the character, the majority of the comics seem to conform to a particular pattern.

Let me present what I consider to be the Ten Best Dracula comics ever published. The list is given in chronological order, based on the events of the story.

1. *Dracula: Vlad the Impaler* #1-3 (Topps Comics, 1993). Here we are given a traditional origin for Dracula. The storyline by Roy Thomas largely recounts the biography of Vlad as McNally and Florescu give it in their book *In Search of Dracula*, yet still there are interesting insights into Vlad's motivation. After all, Vlad is the narrator, so we see everything from his point of view. In his mind, all his acts are justified, and that might be a little hard for some readers to take. Estaban Maroto provides some exquisite art. Thomas's theory of how the historical Vlad is transformed into the demonic vampire lord is probably the best ever presented, despite its departure from Stoker. This excellent trilogy is one of the best Dracula stories ever seen in the entire field of comics.

2. *Dracula Lives!* #1-13 (Marvel Comics Group – magazine sized, 1973-75). Various editors, writers, and artists contributed to this series which featured the lord of the undead's adventures spread over his five hundred year reign, set in numerous locales. As with any anthology, the quality is variable. A three-part origin (in issues #2-4) seems a bit bland, even with the great Neal Adams drawing the first installment. The best tales include a battle with Robert E Howard's puritan adventurer Solomon Kane (#3), "Parchments of the Damned" (a trilogy in #12), a team-up with the historical blood countess Elizabeth Bathory (#4), a series of entanglements with Cagliostro (#1, 5, and #6), and a serialization of Stoker's novel (beginning in #5). Regrettably, the magazine folded before this serialization came to its conclusion.

3. *The Frankenstein-Dracula War* #1-3 (Topps Comics, 1995). A sequel to *Frankenstein* and a prequel to *Dracula*, well written by Roy Thomas and well drawn by Claude St Aubin and Armando Gil. A few years after the Mary Shelley novel, the Monster is hired by the evil Comte de Saint Germain to cut out Dracula's heart. It seems the Comte needs a vampire's heart to brew his elixir of immortality. But the two monsters see a common bond and turn against Saint-Germain. The alliance is short lived as Dracula's natural lust for blood overtakes him and he kills the Monster's mate. Then the Monster takes his revenge against Dracula. It was not an earthquake that destroyed the original Castle Dracula, but the seventeen-

page fight between these titans of terror. In spite of weaknesses (brevity of the period of friendship, and Dracula's motivation for killing the mate), this three-parter is one of the best Dracula comics ever produced.

4. *Blood of the Innocent* #1-4 (Warp Graphics, 1985). Dracula visits England a few years before the events of the novel. He falls in love with a Whitechapel prostitute, only to have her fall prey to – Jack the Ripper. The art is rather cartoony and exaggerated, yet it works here. Curiously, while most comics come out on a monthly basis, this limited run title was one of the first to be published once a week.

5. *Creepy* #8-9 (Warren Publishing, 1966). "The Coffin of Dracula" written by Archie Goodwin and illustrated by Reed Crandall is a fine sequel to the novel, presumably occurring the required seven years later. Most of the original cast is back as Dracula's spirit reaches out from his coffin and takes possession of a British fop. Dracula is not yet a vampire, but he's still a powerful threat. Archie Goodwin excelled at writing pastiches and this was one of his best. Harris Comics later reprinted this story in *Creepy: The Classic Years* in 1991.

6. *Vampirella* #16, 18-21, 39-41 (Warren Publishing, 1971-72). The beautiful (and almost naked) Vampirella is no normal vampiress, but an alien from a living planet called Drakulon where blood flows in rivers. When a drought threatens to destroy the planet, Vampirella travels to Earth, where she discovers that blood is inside people. Thus she becomes a deadly huntress, but eventually discovers an artificial serum to control her bloodlust. Conrad and Adam Van Helsing – father and son vampire hunters – battle, then befriend Vampirella. But her constant companion is the ever-so-slightly tipsy stage magician, Pendragon. Vampi's ability to turn into a bat is the main attraction of his show. In issue #16 Vampi and Pendragon are hired to perform at a private party for none other than Count Dracula! But writer Archie Goodwin's Dracula is not just another vampire – he is the leader of the Cult of Chaos. He serves the mad Lovecraftian god who plots to one day conquer the Earth. Dracula is also from Drakulon (that's where he got the name), was executed for his crimes but then revived by Chaos to serve him. In *Vampirella*, the last Drakulonian, he has at last found a vampiress worthy to become the Bride of Chaos. Of course, Vampirella does not agree and a fight ensues. This is a great one. But in issue #18, Dracula is revived by an inferior writer and for the next three issues Vampirella has to save him from himself and a giant, alien slug. Also, *Vampirella* #39-41 had a short Dracula series set in 1908, but he did not meet Vampirella; it was quite forgettable. Jose Gonzales was the first artist to really capture Vampirella and truly bring her to life. In fact, he may still be the best.

7. *The Tomb of Dracula* #1-70 (Marvel Comics Group, 1972-79). This is the best Dracula comic ever. Gene Colan penciled every issue, and Tom Palmer inked most. From issue #7 on, Marv Wolfman wrote the book. They would prove to be the best horror team in comics. Never has a comic book title run so long in which the main character was a villain. This would not surprise anyone familiar with the comic book – the quality of the writing and art, and the depth of the storyline. Marvel's Dracula is not just a thirsty vampire; he is an evil man. When he cannot slay an enemy, he kills a family member and hurls the corpse in their face and then laughs about it. He is vainglorious, saying, "I am your god! Your god, do you hear me?" He is brilliant, plotting world domination, where humans will be raised as cattle for vampires to feast upon. As portrayed by Marv Wolfman, Dracula is just plain mean – but he also is a very human character with cares and concerns, and it is no surprise that some readers empathized with him.

Approximately the first third of this series deals with a group of vampire hunters and their efforts to destroy Dracula: Frank Drake (Dracula's own descendant), Rachel Van Helsing (guess who she's descended from?), the giant mute Taj, and even Blade, the first Vampire Slayer, who would go on to have a book of his own for a time (and a brace of recent motion pictures). But the leader of this group was Quincy Harker. Introduced as a baby on the last page of Stoker's novel, he is now an old man in a wheelchair, broken in body from his many battles with Dracula, but rarely in spirit. The Harker group would continue to pester Dracula throughout the series, but the next third also had Dracula battling the

mysterious Dr Sun. The final third has Dracula becoming the object of worship for a band of Satanists. This leads to his marriage with coven member Domini, and the birth of their son, Janus. After Janus is killed, an angel dressed like a superhero shows up and battles Dracula. It turns out the angel *is* Janus, back from the future. All this eventually brings Dracula before the throne of Satan himself. Satan curses Dracula with something lesser writers would think Dracula would desire – humanity. The human Dracula is still impressive, but he is not happy until he makes himself a vampire again. But then came the inevitable final battle between Dracula and Quincy Harker, and the cancellation of the series.

8. *Defenders* #95, *Doctor Strange* #58-59, *Thor* #332 & 333, *Doctor Strange* #60-62 (Marvel Comics Group, 1983). Since Doctor Strange fought Dracula before, this epic-length tale is a rematch. After being revived by the demon Mephisto, Dracula searches for the book of sins, the Darkhold, thus pitting him against the good Doctor and vampire detective Hannibal King. Dracula is served by the Darkholders cult and a couple of American Indian vampires – who turn into eagles, not bats. Then Dracula's battle shifts to the Norse god Thor, and he nearly turns the goddess Sif into a vampiress. Her blood gives him superpowers and immunities he has never had before. When superheroes like the Scarlet Witch and Captain Marvel cannot stop Dracula from taking the Darkhold, Doctor Strange enlists the aid of folks better suited to this kind of work – Blade and Frank Drake. Finally, Doctor Strange uses the Darkhold's magic to thoroughly wipe out not only Dracula, but also every vampire on Earth – or at least the Marvel universe. It was not a bad story at all, even if the quality of the art fluctuated from one artist to the next. Dracula is a deadly, power-mad villain, and he is more powerful here than in any previous comic. But that is all he is. He has lost much of his humanity at the hands of lesser writers.

9. *Purgatori: Dracula Gambit* #1 (Chaos Comics, 1997). Purgatori is half vampire and half demoness, so she feeds on other vampires. She plans to conquer Heaven and Hell, but first she must bring all vampires under her rule. Naturally this brings her into conflict with Dracula. A nice touch comes when Purgatori arrives at the ruins of Castle Dracula and she is able to see through the illusion, realizing the castle is very much intact. So is its master. But it is actually a trap, and Dracula seduces Purgatori and they end up exchanging blood (among other bodily fluids). Purgatori does not realize that by drinking the blood of Dracula his blood will be within her, making her his bride. This is a very good, thoughtful book, and the painted art adds a certain dreamy, gothic quality. Usually, painted comics are just pretentious.

10. *The Curse of Dracula* #1-3 (Dark Horse Comics, 1998). Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan return to their greatest character – but this Dracula comes from a new publisher. There are numerous similarities to their *TOD* version, but some surprising differences as well. Dracula looks different, but he's as power-mad as ever. Dracula has handpicked his own candidate for the Presidency, and he's having an affair with the future First Lady. Again a team of vampire hunters has assembled to fight Dracula, but these are more on the edge than Quincy Harker's crew, and perhaps not as likable. Nonetheless, Dracula is *always* one or two steps ahead of them. He is surrounded by vampire legions that obey to the death his every command, and without hesitation.

The art is shot from Colan's original pencils with no inking embellishment. Few artists could pull this off, but his work is powerful and atmospheric. Rarely have an artist and a writer been so perfectly matched. Marv and Gene may have not only matched their brilliance of their old days, they may have even surpassed it. If there is a complaint it is that *The Curse of Dracula* was only a three-parter, and a short one at that.

Altogether, there are about two hundred comics about Dracula. Yet for all the different people working on Dracula, and the different situations, the character is generally consistent. He is evil incarnate. He is cruel and power-mad, and he has a distinctively dark sense of humor. This is how Vlad the Impaler acted in life, and this is how Stoker's Dracula acts. But there *are* other interpretations. Some writers soften him and try to make him a romantic or tragic character seeking redemption. These weak Draculas do not work as well. Yes, though he is a supernatural monster and a sociopathic butcher, he *is* human. He has things

he cares about. But to have him grieve for lost loved ones, and show sympathy for his enemies, seems to miss the main point: Dracula is the bad guy. Some writers – no matter how good they are otherwise – just cannot get into the main character of a story without making him sympathetic. They insist of turning villains into heroes.

Comic books are another, completely legitimate, representation of the Dracula myth. Through them a great deal has been written (and drawn) about this character, his actions, his methods, his insights, his feelings, and his soul. He came from the past, he exists in the present, and he will proceed into the future. Comics have played and will continue to play a major role in perpetuating Dracula's immortality.

APPENDIX: LIST OF AMERICAN DRACULA COMICS

[Not included are several funny books and those in which Dracula is wheeled out for a one-panel gag and nothing more. For example, in an issue of *Howard The Duck* a thirsty Dracula is briefly seen biting a cow; the rest of the story has Howard dealing with this vampire cow in a cape! And if you want to know about Dracula's presence in *The Flintstones* #33, you can pick it up yourself at your local comic book retailer. I do mention some comic books where Dracula does not appear, but his influence is still strongly felt. And, no doubt, a few titles may have slipped by me.]

Creepy #8-9 (Warren Publishing, 1966), “The Coffin of Dracula”

Creepy #19 (Warren Publishing, 1967)

Eerie #24 (Warren Publishing, 1969), Bram Stoker’s “Dracula’s Guest”

Vampirella #16, 18-21 (Warren Publishing, 1971)

Eerie #40 (Warren Publishing, 1972)

The Tomb of Dracula #1-70 (Marvel Comics Group, 1972-79) [The best Dracula comic ever]

Dracula #1-8 (Dell, 1972-73) [#6-8 are reprints and there is no #5]

Eerie #50 (Warren Publishing, 1973), “Genesis of Depravity!”

Werewolf By Night #15 (Marvel Comics Group, 1973)

[In 1973, Warren Publishing produced a comic art magazine called *Dracula* in both hardback and softbound editions. But the stories had nothing to do with Dracula.]

The Witching Hour #34 (DC, 1973). “Dracula Had A Daughter”

The Frankenstein Monster #7-9 (Marvel Comics Group, 1973)

Chamber of Chills #2 (Marvel Comics Group, 1973), “Thirst”

Dracula Lives! #2-4 (Marvel Comics Group –magazine sized, 1973-75) [An anthology]

Giant-Sized Dracula #4 (Marvel Comics Group, 1974)

Eerie #46-48 (Warren Publishing, 1974)

Giant-Sized Spider-Man #1 (Marvel Comics Group, 1974)

Giant-Sized Chillers #1 (Marvel Comics Group, 1974)

Giant-Sized Dracula #2-5 (renamed from *Giant-Sized Chillers*, Marvel Comics Group, 1974-75)

Vampirella #39-41 (Warren Publishing, 1975)

Fright – Featuring The Son of Dracula #1 (Atlas/Seaboard, 1975)

Marvel Preview #3 – Blade the Vampire Slayer (Marvel Comics Group, magazine-size, 1975, continued from *Vampire Tales* #9-10)

Doctor Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts #14 (Marvel Comics Group, 1976)

Marvel Classics Comics #9 (Marvel Comics Group, 1976)

The Haunt of Horror #12 (Marvel Comics Group, magazine-size, 1977), “Picture of Andrea” and “Profits Are Plunging”

Creepy #111 (Warren Publishing, 1979), “Blood-Lust” [This issue also featured an ad for “Genuine Soil From Dracula’s Castle” in a tiny plastic coffin]

The Tomb of Dracula #1-6 (Marvel Comics Group, 1979-80) [A B&W magazine]
Superman #344 (DC, 1980)
Uncanny X-Men #159 (Marvel Comics Group, 1982)
Uncanny X-Men Annual #6 (Marvel Comics Group, 1982)
Bizarre Adventures #33 (Marvel Comics Group –magazine sized, 1982), “The Blood Bequest”
Defenders #95, *Doctor Strange* #58-59, *The Mighty Thor* #332 & 333, *Doctor Strange* #60-62 (Marvel Comics Group, 1983) [A multi-issue rematch between Doctor Strange and Count Dracula]
Tales of Jerry #1-10 (Hacienda International, 1984-92) [Dracula puts in an appearance in issues #3, 5, and 7]
Blood of the Innocent #1-4 (Warp Graphics, 1985)
Silverblade #6 (DC, 1987)
Dr. Strange, Sorcerer Supreme #14-18 (Marvel Comics Group, 1990), “The Vampiric Verses”
The Tomb of Dracula #1-4 (Epic Comics, 1991)
Blood of Dracula #1-4? (Apple Comics, 1991)
Carmilla #1-6 (Aircel Comics, 1991)
Dracula the Impaler #1 (Comax, 1991)
Dracula #1-4 (Eternity, 1991) [Interpretations of “Dracula’s Guest” and the rest of the novel]
The Ghosts of Dracula #1-4 (Eternity, 1991)
Fright Night – the Resurrection of Dracula! (Now Comics, 1992) [in 3-D]
Bram Stoker’s Dracula #1-4 (Topps, 1992), the official adaptation of the Coppola film
Dracula, The Suicide Club #1-4 (Adventure Comics, 1992)
Nightstalkers #1-18 (Marvel Comics Group, 1992-94) [The survivors of the old *Tomb of Dracula* form a detective agency]
Vampirella, the Dracula War #1-4 (Harris Comics, 1993) [The king and queen of the vampires have almost no scenes together]
Dracula: Vlad the Impaler #1-3 (Topps Comics, 1993). [Roy Thomas’s version based on McNally and Florescu’s *In Search of Dracula*]
Dracula Versus Zorro #1 & 2 (Topps Comics, 1993)
The Frankenstein-Dracula War #1-3 (Topps Comics, 1995) [A sequel to *Frankenstein* and a prequel to *Dracula*]
Wolff & Byrd, Counselors of the Macabre #14 (Exhibit A Press, 1997)
Purgatori: Dracula Gambit #1 (Chaos Comics, 1997)
Vampirella/Dracula: Centennial (Harris Comics, 1997) [If only all Harris comics were this good]
The Curse of Dracula #1-3 (Dark Horse Comics, 1998) [Marv Wolfman and Gene Colon return to their greatest character – but with a new publisher]
The Supernaturals #3 (of 4) (Marvel Comics Group, 1998)
Dracula: Lord of the Vampires #1-3 (Marvel Comics Group, 1998)
Generation X/Dracula (Marvel Comics Group, 1998).
Purgatori #7 (Chaos Comics, 1999)
Countess Vladimira: Blood Relations #1-3 (Peregrine Entertainment, 1999)
Lady Rawhide #4-6 (Image Comics, 1999)
The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen #1-6 (America’s Best Comics, 1999-2000) [Mina Murray’s further adventures]
Purgatori Vs. Vampirella (Chaos Comics, 2000)
Superman #180 (DC Comics, 2002)
Digital Webbing Presents #10, “Ice” (Image Comics, 2003), the prelude to *Sword of Dracula* (Image Comics, 2003) [The latest appearance of the King of the vampires]