DRACULA, BEKSIŃSKI, AND OLLIDGES

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Inspired by Bertha, heroine for those who dare to be free.

Pierre Durand's monthly newsletter for readers of quirky realism and that kind of thing

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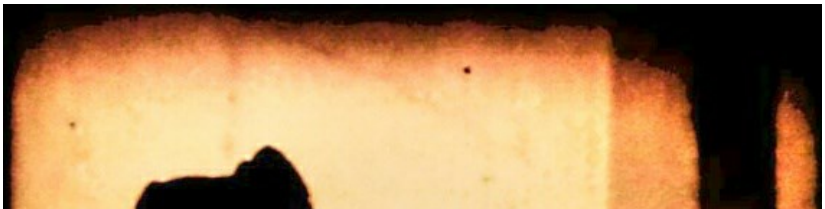
In this newsletter, hear about the genre-defining novel Dracula, the remarkable world of artist and writer Zdzisław Beksiński, the world of ollidges and in the non-fiction corner there's something about cross-species friendships.

But first, you may notice I have changed the byline above to 'quirky realism'. I think that label is a good description for the genre of fiction I write. It's taken me two years to put a name to it (the publishing industry needs this) and it captures the unusual characters, plots and places, although there are sub-genres. Bertha's Law, for example, is very much quirky realism of an adventure-type. And my next fiction book is quirky realism of the true story/memoir type. Even for my non-fiction, I was once introduced at a conference as someone whose is 'left field'. So, while the hat fits…

Dracula

Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror (1922) was the first feature-length vampire film based on *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. Several remakes have followed and I watched the 2024 version and having enjoyed it, I decided it was time to read the novel, which by all accounts is one of the most influential fiction books ever written. Take a look at the iconic image below.



Dracula is a fantastic read. It follows the epistolary style (I had to look that up), meaning it is based on things like journal entries, diaries, and newspapers articles. The style really draws you in. Even if you haven't read Dracula, you will know it's about vampires. But it is also much more than that. I love the way Jonathan Harker, who becomes a prisoner in Count Dracula's castle, loses his sense of reality, a reminder of how our senses can betray us.

Even by today's standards the book is frightening. There are some beautifully visual scenes: I love the wolves and Harker's account of Dracula crawling down the castle wall. And at one point Harker is rescued by Dracula from three vampire women and he gives them a child in a bag as replacement. Horrifying! Harker eventually escapes and teams up with others, including Professor Van Helsing, who knows what vampires all are about, and they set about stalking Dracula. It's a cracking story.

Interestingly, Stoker may have been aware of the historical Vlad Dracul III from Wallachia, which is in modern day Romania where Dracula's fictional castle is located. There isn't a specific historical link to Dracul III in the book, but I can see why his name was used. He was known as Vlad the Impaler. Say no more.

Zdzisław Beksiński

I came across the Polish artist Zdzisław Beksiński in my reading. You may not know of him, but you may well recognise his surreal, apocalyptic art. He survived a genocide during WWII and became an enormously influential painter (do you recognise the one below?) with his harrowing images. I am sure he was influenced by the horrors of WWII and I can't help feeling that the eastern front, where he was, was another level up from the brutality on the western front that we hear more about.

Beksiński was very much his own person. He was invited to study and work at the Guggenheim in New York, but he turned it down! He seldom travelled (I don't know if he ever left Poland) partly because of an anxiety disorder, but he also said he had no reason to leave. He just wanted to paint the images in his mind without thinking too much about it or listening to what others have to say about them. I immediately liked him for this. No interest in recognition, only the creation of his art. It was the same when it came to his writing. He wrote stories to express his feelings and the images in his mind. They were of a similar chaotic, frightening flavour as his paintings, and he didn't care if people read them or not. In fact, he thought they weren't particularly good and he destroyed some and hid others. It seems they were published much later, but only in Polish.

How I would have enjoyed going for a coffee and a chat with Zdzisław Beksiński.

Ollidges

Now about those ollidges (or *les ollèges* as they called in francophone Africa). As I mentioned last month, the name for them was coined by my bother Jean du Rand (yes, his surname is spelt differently to mine) when he studied social anthropology. Ollidges, it turns out, are both real and imagined (depending on your cultural perspective). They remind me of the jinns in the Arab world and early Islamic theology. Both jinns and ollidges are non-corporeal spirits, part of an invisible world that exists alongside humans, and like them, they may be good or evil. However, being invisible to humans they are often tempted to do evil and are therefore feared. Like the jinns, ollidges live mostly in desolate places. They roam open spaces on the African continent, especially southern Africa and may take the form of wind or shadows.

Ollidges (unlike jinns) are the spirits of people who have died without ever having experienced love. And without love, so says the oral history, the spirit is ejected from the body when the person dies and it becomes known as an ollidge. It is a lost soul, forever destined to roam the world looking for a way out. Curiously, the only way they can pass into the next world is by parasitizing another unloved human, displace their spirit and live in their body, hoping to have another crack at experiencing love. The expelled spirit will then exist as ollidge. It's said that corpse of someone who has died as one of the 'unloved' has a typical appearance that marks them out.

I'm taken with the history of ollidges, so much that I have included them in a fiction book proposal that I will submit to a publisher next year. It's also quirky realism, perhaps of a thriller or spooky kind of sub-genre. Let's see what happens.

The non-fiction corner

After last week's discussion of *Letters To My Sheep*, I wondered about the concept of cross-species friendships. I'm sure you will agree that the author and the sheep considered themselves friends and I don't think that's

particularly unusual. However, as someone with a background in evolutionary biology, I expect that some colleagues will object to the language and say that these are other kinds of attachments, imprinting of some kind (I won't go into what imprinting is) or spurious relationships for whatever reason. Social animals, they may say, form attachments to another species in the absence of others of their own species simply because sociality is 'in their genes'.

What is friendship anyway? Isn't it just a way of sharing time and space in a way that feels good? Or some version of that. Surely, there's no reason why that experience can't be between two animals of different species. Absolutely, some friendships are more meaningful, but it doesn't mean the others aren't real and valuable. Maybe some people value non-human friendships even more. The author of the book seemed to think so. And here's a little secret I've kept to myself for six years.

If you peeked at my non-fiction book *The Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death* (possibly not, since it was written for a specialised audience), you'll notice that it is dedicated to Donald. Who was he? Well, I was intentionally secretive about it because he was a rooster, and one of my closest friends for many years, someone I loved dearly. After he died, I wanted to honour him in some way and decided to do so in my science book. But on the advice of my aunt, I didn't specify who he was for fear that a stodgy academic reading my book may have thought I'd completely lost my mind. Or simply discount my work as that of an unhinged scientist. But I am now liberated from thinking like that. It is no longer a concern of mine, nor am I interested in what they might think, so I relish sharing this snippet of personal news with you.

Another cross-species friendship…I recently read an article about a capybara and a tapir in a zoo somewhere in southwest England. They spent most of their lives together and seemed to develop an unbreakable bond, so when one of them became moribund, it was decided to euthanise both of them for fear that the other would be inconsolable. Personally, I think they made the right decision, you can read about it here

In May…

…I think I will have finished reading Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery.* And, have you ever heard of tarantism? I'll share all this and more. Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre

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