

“ a kind of vampire novel”:

## About writing *Always Hungry*

The author’s AFTERWORD for the new electronic editions

‘A very popular genre,’ I am often told, when for the sake of having an answer to ‘what it’s about?’ I say my new novel is ‘a kind of vampire novel’. My story’s influences were doing their work long before recent and current manifestations of the genre, marvellous as they are. Vampire stories will not be exhausted until any human can become immortal.

*Always Hungry* originated in a mythical ancestor, an interest in witches and a camp 80s vampire movie.

### *The ancestor.*

The name Erzsebet de Bathory was spoken in my childhood by the adults around me but I cannot tell if this memory is made in imagination. It is not impossible that her name came up, involved in the topic of Wrong Ideas and Myths about Hungarians.

I must have been fourteen when another romantic schoolgirl first told me that because of being Hungarian, I was a gypsy. What nonsense, said my parents, in no uncertainty. Apparently they were familiar with this notion, that Hungarians were gypsies, apparently a mistaken or malicious notion. I suppose I supposed that they should know. Then there was the magical word Transylvania, the place part of my family’s past, but it was made clear that popular notions about that were fictions not worth attention.

Growing up in post-war Australia, being Hungarian seemed to take on the quality of the secrets and silences of displaced people, migrants in a new world making every effort to settle into their lives here and assimilate as they should. There was something literally unspeakable about the history that had brought us here.

History cannot be fixed into a single narrative, history of nations, families, ideas, anything. Some primeval sense of a historical stain in my inherited background collided with some readings of vampire stories and vampire studies for a university cause I co-taught in the late 1990s; my earlier vampire story My Transylvanian Cousin was created. Truly I thought I would find myself inevitably fabricating something dark and creepy but in that story mysterious Vlad, both cousin and ancestor, arrives to induct the narrator into a certain tradition, and is transformed by the Gold Coast setting to embrace mortality as the welcome price for new sunny pleasures.

Perhaps from the first time I heard of her, I attached to the story of Erzsebet Bathory a sense of her as a mythical ancestor of mine. My maternal grandmother's name was Erzsebet; this fed my sense of being related to the name.

From time to time over the years I would see a reference to the story of the pale aristocrat who drank the blood of young girls as a means of keeping her beauty, or was it *bathed* in the blood. It was as if I had always known that that I wanted one day to write about her.

Eventually I obtained a book called *The Bloody Countess*. Bathory apparently had been charged with the torture of hundreds of girls, and the authors describe the atrocities in lurid detail and tones of prurient horror.

As I read what purported to be serious history based on unique access to rare archives, severe misgivings arose. There was no bibliography. There was no citation. And above all there was a tone to the extravagant and delineated claims of torture that reminded me of nothing so much as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the guidebook for identifying the vile antics and frightful ubiquity of evil females: witches, created by the lurid hallucinations of celibate monks carrying out the Christian Inquisition, Patriarchy's most demonic confederate.

#### witches

I once wrote a novel with a witch as a main character, at a time of being surrounded by a New Age spirituality movement claiming a history of pre-Christian goddess worship and the craft of wicca as its progenitor.

I considered the story of The Countess and her reputation as a drinker of young virgins' blood for its power to keep her young. According to the book I held, she and her cohorts conducted inventive torture for their twisted pleasure.

I would write her story based on the premise that all of that was calumny, all of it based on accusations made by her enemies, nurtured and enlarged in the way of gossip and malicious rumours. She was a powerful woman, she'd have enemies for that alone.

She was a rich, beautiful aristocrat in feudal times, she could do whatever she pleased and she did, maybe she even fooled around with young women, but saying it was all vampirism was superstition and misogyny combined.

So that was the premise for the story I intended to write and I told that much to my designated Advisor at the Binger Film Lab in Amsterdam, and he said he'd just been working on a script for a film now shooting in Prague that was based on that very premise. That is, that Bathory was basically maligned for being a powerful woman.

That one sounded like a film that was trying to look like straight historical drama but I already knew I wanted my story to look like the 1984 film *The Hunger*.

*The Hunger*

I was finishing the screenplay I'd come to the Binger to write, a realist political drama, and was wanting to write another film, something very different, an original story, something fantastical.

Amsterdam was a visual amazement, the palest of lights on the wintery canals and cobblestones, the warm lights in bars and nightclubs, and it began to look like the setting for a vampire story, and somehow I knew at once who Bette was, and Marisa, and Tango.

Stories are based on other stories as much as on life, characters are based on other characters as much as on people. *Always Hungry's* constellation of characters began as based on those in the 1983 film *The Hunger*. Bette in *Always Hungry* looks like Catherine Deneuve, and remains the character most closely modelled on that cinematic inspiration. I first wrote *Always Hungry* as a screenplay; when I adapted it to prose the opportunity, indeed the imperative, arose to offer a sciencey explanation for vampires (never so called in my version) in terms of evolution. I now believe this explanation to be true.

*The Hunger* strikes you with its audacious stylishness and eroticism. Its narrative of blood, ageing and transference goes to places I leave alone; *The Hunger* came out in the early days of the AIDS crisis and the idea of blood subject to mysterious infections that could make you age and decay in an instant was barely metaphorical. A quarter century later, my story's characters invite reflections on ambition, pleasure and eternity.

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