

The First Two Pages: “Darkness Visible”

By Eve Fisher

I originally wrote what I thought was a one-off called “The Dark Side of the Moon” which conflated a trip I’d made to Kodachrome National Park, an idea I’d had about serial killers, and my professorial alter ego. After *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* published it, I got thinking about the repercussions of having a serial killer in the area, plus I’d thought of something that I thought was pretty scary, so... “Darkness Visible.”

First line sums up the last story, and why people are listening to John Franklin:

After word got out of John Franklin’s assistance in the discovery and death of serial killer Jason Heirigs, along with rumors of his unique research, he became popular on the Northern Plains talk circuit... The title alone—“The Personification of Death as Imaged in Serial Killers”—filled seats even in Laskin, where he’d spoken before.

Hey, I’d go listen to that lecture.

So I constructed the lecture in my head—*every pandemic is a serial killer*—and thought of various images I’d used in my history classes: *Dance of Death* woodcuts and paintings; *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; plague and TB.

“Romanticism and tuberculosis met like Romeo and Juliet, and Death became a beautiful woman with black hair, red lips, and white, white skin. Which brings us to vampires...”

NOTE: I went to vampires because (1) it was logical; vampire myth and literature skyrocketed in popularity as tuberculosis became the number one [known] killer in the late 1700s onwards, and (2) vampires are hugely popular in our culture; sort of like sex, most readers would continue to find out the connection and see where this thing is going.

“Vampires have a long history in Europe, but when tuberculosis became the number one killer, their image changed from grotesque to erotic. Especially the females: The white skin. The large eyes. The flushed cheeks. The gasping breath. The red, red lips, often literally bloody. The implication of a hectic libido. The result was today’s romantic sexual fantasy of a tamed predator.

“Which may explain the modern romanticizing of serial killers.”

NOTE: Okay, I had an axe to grind. Most serial killers on TV and movies are played “actors of powerful persona and unusual good looks. Athletic, brilliant, alluring, sexual.” Which is completely opposite to reality, and I can prove it to anyone who wants to come to the pen with me. “A good thing to remember when the romantic image becomes too strong. Predators kill. Period.”

So, by now between the skeletons, TB, bloody lips, vampires, serial killers, the reader should feel sure that something criminal, grotesque, etc., is coming down the pike. I put in a quick Q&A period after Franklin’s lecture to show how, even knowing the truth, the public still can’t get enough of serial killers, while Franklin himself is bored with them.

“Serial killers are sociopaths. Completely practical. That’s why I don’t find them particularly interesting. I’m far more interested on their effect on the community at large. The aftermath.”

And the aftermath comes as a nice, quiet, respectable, tiny old woman who (in true Norwegian Lutheran style) asks to ask a question:

“Could I ask you a question? About... evil. How can you tell? If it’s a matter of evil, or if something else is going on?”

“Well –”

She rushed on, “In a house, where things move. Are moved, or at least that’s what he says. To his brother, not to me. Things from here to there, there to here.” She glanced around. “He lives next door to me. He says... he talks crazy. Everybody knows it.”

She’s almost stammering with the combination of her fear of what’s going on next door and her fear of telling someone about it. The recurring word here is ‘odd,’ and she repeats it over and over because she really doesn’t have the experience to give her the language to express what it is she fears, what she thinks might have happened, be happening, will happen, and all of it right next door:

“He’s always been odd – he’s Levi Hofer... Nathan, his brother, brought them both out from the colony. Hutterites, you know...”

“And Levi’s always been odd. Nathan, he’s the strong one of the family. He came out and started working right away, to support himself and his brother...”

“Nathan’s always taken care of Levi. He’s always worried about him.” She glanced around again. “They came from the Hutterite Colony. I asked Nathan once why they left, and he winced. Wouldn’t say. But I think it had something to do with Levi.”...

She whispered, “He’s always been so odd. And then his wife and daughter left him...”

Finally Franklin asks,

“What, specifically, has you worried?”

She paused, then whispered, “Sometimes... I hear crying. A girl’s voice. Coming from his house. And I know there’s no one there but him. I hope there’s no one there but him...”

Well, God knows I’d have to look into it. Franklin does. And I think the reader will, too.

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Eve Fisher has been writing since elementary school, everything from songs to plays to short stories of all kinds. Her mystery stories have appeared regularly in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* for almost 20 years, as well as other publications, and she’s part of the mystery writers’ blog, SleuthSayers, at www.sleuthsayers.org. A retired university history professor, she still writes and publishes historical articles, as well as fantasy and science fiction. She does volunteer work for the Alternatives to Violence Project at the penitentiary, which gives her an interesting acquaintance. She lives in South Dakota with her husband and 5,000 books. Check out her [crude] website at <http://evfishermysteries.wikispaces.com/>.