Anno Dracula by Kim Newman

Of all the fiction I’ve read over the years, it’s Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* that I’ve returned to the most. Sure, it’s not perfect; one can argue long into the night over the weak female characters in the novel, the rampant clichés and technical errors, but when it comes to the crunch, *Dracula* is a cracking read. Even after all this time, Jonathan Harker’s time spent in the evil vampire’s castle remains chilling – if the rest of the novel seems weak by comparison, as many argue, that’s because it falls victim to such a superb start.

Kim Newman likes *Dracula*, too. So much so, that he’s taken the classic novel to a different conclusion and asked the question: “What would have happened if Dracula won?” This is the base concept of *Anno Dracula*; the Count has destroyed almost all of those who opposed him, and seized the power of the English throne by marrying Queen Victoria, spreading his vampiric nature throughout Great Britain and the Commonwealth. Bloodsuckers are everywhere, from the gutter to the House of Lords.

Fortunately, *Anno Dracula* is much more than a simple “what if?” tale; a novel that could so easily have felt like *True Blood* Victorian style. At its heart is the mystery of a certain Jack the Ripper, although this time the serial killer preys on vampires. Jack’s identity isn’t kept secret from the reader for long, and anyone familiar with the vampire hunters from Stoker’s original novel has probably already guessed who the Ripper is. Charles Beauregard, English gent and spy, is assigned to find and capture the Ripper. Together with the centuries-old vampire Genevieve Dieudonne, Charles is drawn to the darker areas of London, where he finds a larger conspiracy is afoot.

Initially, I was reluctant to read this book, thinking Newman would have bitten off more than he could chew by drastically altering the outcome of one of my favourite novels. Well, it’s certainly an audacious move, but one that combines both reverence to the source text and Newman’s own bold style. To sound less like a school report, *Anno Dracula* is a great read.

The plot reads like a true *Boy’s Own* adventure; one man against the world, battling not only vampires, but also the political maneuverings and machinations of those opposed to such creatures of the night. Beauregard has enemies on both sides, but also had friends in high places, friends who the reader may or may not have heard of. It’s something that could have been a conceit, placing other writers’ characters and real people in one’s own story, but Newman pulls this off so well. Not once does the appearance of a recognisable name – Oscar Wilde on one side, Fu Manchu on another – detract from the flow of the story. In fact, each appearance adds to the tale and is able to ground it in its own reality. Newman also litters the plot with knowing references – a masked cowboy vampire killer in America who fires silver bullets, for instance – but again, these don’t take anything away from the story; if anything, these tips of the hat raised a smile from this reader.

There’s nothing new about the vampires in *Anno Dracula*, all of them falling into appropriate traditions such as sleeping in coffins and needing a stake through the heart to die. If you’re wealthy, becoming a vampire is merely a matter of fashion; if poor, it becomes an illness, an
addiction that often becomes a losing battle. It’s this that drew me into *Anno Dracula*; Kim Newman hasn’t attempted anything new with the vampires, other than place them in what feels like their rightful historical location. Vampires are ten a penny in fiction nowadays, each with their own modern-day twist to vary them from the norm; Newman’s twist is that he’s left them alone, kept them in *Dracula*’s timeline, and the book is all the better for this.

The author has a superb grasp of dialogue, and it’s easy to believe this book was written at the close of the 19th century, that it is a natural sequel to the original – in this Newman has done a wonderful job of capturing the essence of Victorian times, the essence of *Dracula* itself. Newman’s style of writing is ideally suited to this genre; by choosing his words carefully, there is never too much description, allowing him to tell us enough about where we are for us to complete the picture. While I wouldn’t describe it as minimal, it’s refreshing that an author allows the reader to drown in a story this way, as well as allowing the plot to flow.

My only disappointment was that *Anno Dracula* was shorter than most books. While the ending wasn’t rushed, it felt like everything fell into place rather quickly in the latter stages, and suddenly the end was in sight. But there’s more…

Originally published in 1992, *Anno Dracula* has been given the DVD treatment. By this, I mean it now includes an additional short story, author’s notes, and even the beginning of an un-filmed screenplay. Kim Newman relishes in admitting his influences within his informative afterword, which also includes a list (although not completely comprehensive) of the characters, real and fictional, that populate his tale. In all, the extras are a fascinating addition to the novel itself.

I enjoyed this book, a gripping vampire yarn with conspiracies thrown in for good measure. It’s great to see Dracula back as he was meant to be, a primal force rather than an angst-ridden aristocrat. There are three more books to follow *Anno Dracula*, and I for one can’t wait to read the next one. Bravo, Mr. Newman – you’ve created a worthy sequel, of sorts, to one of my favourite novels.