



The Vampire of Ropraz

Jacques Chessex , Donald Wilson (Translation)

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“Silky prose in this harrowing account of crime and punishment.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Using spare, effective prose, **Chessex** brilliantly renders both the inhospitable winter landscape of the mountains and the harshness of a society that makes monsters of its victims.”—*London Review of Books*

“A superb novel, hard as a winter in these landscapes of dark forests, where an atmosphere of prejudice and violence envelops the reader.”—*L'Express*

“It’s beautiful; it’s pure, like a blue sky over a black forest. Giono without garlic and olives.”—*Le Point*

“Far from just telling us a simple story Chessex has had the intelligence to integrate a dose of poetry, of the aesthetics of sin, and of the metaphysics of the monster.”—*Lire*

Jacques Chessex, winner of the prestigious Goncourt prize, takes a true story and weaves it into a lyrical tale of fear and cruelty.

1903, Ropraz, a small village near the Jura Mountains of Switzerland. On a howling December day, a lone walker discovers a recently opened tomb, the body of a young woman violated, her left hand cut off, genitals mutilated, and heart carved out. There is horror in the nearby villages: the return of atavistic superstitions and mutual suspicions. Then two more bodies are violated. A suspect must be found. Favez, a stableboy with bloodshot eyes, is arrested and placed in psychiatric care. He escapes, enlists in the Foreign Legion as the First World War begins, and is sent into battle in the trenches of the Somme.

Jacques Chessex, born in 1934, won the Prix Goncourt, France’s most prestigious literary prize for his novel *A Father’s Love*. He is considered one of Switzerland’s greatest living authors. He lives in Ropraz.

The Vampire of Ropraz Details

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From Reader Review The Vampire of Ropraz for online ebook

Heather Shaw says

Where I live, winter is not just the name of a season, it's a state of being. Today I look out the windows – sure, there's a line of geese heading to where the Boardman River pours out into West Bay making a little unfrozen spot, but there's also snow like grit, like clouds of icy gnats, and the view beyond a block fades away into clammy gray. From below, all day long, comes the sound of chopping and metal on concrete. The few people on the streets walk with their shoulders hunched into collars and faces obscured by scarves. I can see my car from here, growing a toupee of white, the interior vinyl collecting its special frostiness.

But, when all's said and done, I live in a city. A small city, but nonetheless convivial. You won't find boys hacking their grandparents to death for a couple hundred bucks, or bar fights that end in the spring when the body catches in the dam. Superstition drifts harmlessly in the garden dream-catchers and cement angels of liberal townies.

The regional paper tells another story — one of generational alcoholism, incest, fundamentalism, the desire for the destruction of culture and the longing to survive by tooth and folklore. A drive to the nearest major ski resort (30 minutes) takes you past homes sided with black plastic, ancient peeling doublewides, windowless cinderblock bars, and tiny isolated stores that sell gas and the smoked flesh of the local wildlife. In the summer there are campers and cabin-owners in these hundreds of acres forests of northern Michigan; in the winter, there's the ticking of your own brain, or your wife's brain, or your kid's.

The people who live in the deep forests are not the entrepreneurial spirits found in cities — for a city attracts idea-makers whether they're thieves or manufacturers. They're not of the farmer-type either, who must clear the path to plant and watch the weather, who must plan for good times and bad. Backwoods people live day-to-day, scrap to scrap. Most of them were born in the place; some have been pushed there, like to the end of a rope; a few have invented the place for themselves.

Which is all a long introduction to the kind of chill of the suspected-unknown **The Vampire or Ropraz**, short novel by Prix Goncourt winner Jacques Chessex, produced. High in the Jurat mountains, the twenty-year old daughter of a local dignitary dies of meningitis and is buried in the frozen February earth. Two days later her grave is discovered open, the coffin unscrewed. Intestines are hanging out in the snow, the girl's left hand has been severed, and her flesh bitten everywhere and spit out in the bushes. Although the story takes place in Switzerland, it is not so far geographically from the land of Vlad, and this rapist of dead women is quickly entitled "Vampire" by the press.

All right, so the press has always loved catchy titles for their criminals, and although the violation takes place in the isolated, squalid areas, where "[i]deas have no currency, tradition is a dead weight," where poverty and lack of education leave people "barred inside their skulls," where ailments are nourished with potions, and spells are concocted with menstrual blood and toad spittle, they don't lynch the suspect when they finally get their hands on him.

They hand him over to a psychologist who takes him to his ward on Christmas Day to "sing of Christ's birth, drink mulled wine and eat little cakes baked by volunteers in the kitchen."

The young man ages twelve years in the ward before the War arrives, opening the gates. Immediately, he joins the Foreign Legion (he was rejected by the army in his youth, in his own country) and is killed seven months later on the Souain road. A broken body in a muddy battlefield would seem to be the end of it, but no: in 1920, France's Unknown Soldier is chosen by lot from among eight anonymous coffins. Recent DNA

research suggests that the body of the soldier who lies beneath the Arc de Triumph is none other than Charles-Augustin Favez, convicted in Switzerland of vampirism and desecration of graves. And the question is, how could this man be a monster in one place and a hero in another?

The Vampire of Ropraz is a superb choice for fiesty book clubs.

Carla says

Um livro surpreendente!

Violento, sem dúvida, mas agarra o leitor do princípio ao fim... e que fim!

Recomendado a leitores experientes com estômago e que não dispensam um final espantoso.

(Nota mental: depois deste tenho que ler o "Moravagine" de Blaise Cendrars).

Valeriane says

Oyé Oyé, nouveau partenariat Blog-O-Book, ici avec Le Livre de Poche.

Tiens donc, un vampire... c'est assez tendance pour le moment. Oui, sauf que celui-ci n'a rien à envier à l'édenté Edward Cullen et sa mielleuse Bella (désolée pour les fans... ils commencent à me souler avec leur battage médiatique pro-twilight... y a pas que les vampires mormons dans le vie!).

Bref, Le vampire de Ropraz est une courte histoire (85 pages environs). Le style fait penser à une chronique judiciaire. L'auteur relate les faits, sans partis-pris ou une quelconque émotion. Une écriture simple, qui m'a fait parfois penser à certains poèmes (la balade des pendus de Villon par exemple -je ne suis pas très poésie... mais bon, c'est comme le goût de madeleine... ça vient comme ça) dans ses phrases "chantantes" et rythmées. Cette sensation est sans doute liée aussi à la froideur et au côté sombre de l'histoire.

Dès le début, le décor est planté en février, il neige. Une jeune fille meurt. Le lendemain de son enterrement, sa tombe est découverte profanée, le corps en partie dévoré, mutilé et souillé. Sperme, sang, terre... Les mots sont crus, les descriptions donnent froid dans le dos.

Deux autres profanations ont lieu non loin de Ropraz (lieu du premier crime). La hantise du vampire plane sur les villages alentours. Quel humain pourrait se rendre coupable d'actes aussi monstrueux.

Un jeune garçon est soupçonné. Un coupable idéal sur lequel tout le monde va s'acharner. Emprisonnement, psychiatrie, il finira par disparaître de la circulation...

J'ai lu ce "roman" d'une traite. Basé sur un fait réel, l'histoire se déroule en Suisse en 1903.

Plongée dans cette ambiance glauque et humide, poisseuse et mystérieuse.

Un bon moment de frisson avec une inconnue au bout du livre...

ma note : 3,5 étoiles

Guzzo says

El libro es tremendo y no es una obra de vampiros al uso, para nada, brutal y escueta por partes iguales.

Muy recomendable, pero no apta para almas sensibles.

Repix says

Un relato muy bestia, explícito y desagradable a más no poder, pero también muy interesante conocer los miedos, las supersticiones y costumbres de principios del siglo XX en zonas rurales. Me ha gustado mucho.

Iván Ramírez Osorio says

Leído de un tirón. Interesante novelita negra sobre el prejuicio y la superstición. Nada del otro mundo, pero se deja leer.

Rubén Vilaplana says

Historia de terror que describe con sorprendente naturalidad la vida miserable de la época (principios de 1900), donde el hambre y la ignorancia crean mitos y leyendas. Recomendada a todos aquellos que disfrutan de las historias de terror.

Warwick says

It is 1903; a tiny village in the Jura mountains. Dark nights, long winters, pine forests, wolves, and for the human population a lot of solitary brooding. One morning, a horrific crime: the body of a recently-deceased girl found violated in the cemetery. Cheeks bitten off, entrails removed, breasts cut away; the vulva has been severed and eaten, with bits of cartilage and pubic hair found spat-out in a nearby bush. The perpetrator is quickly dubbed 'the vampire of Ropraz', and the horror spreads as two similar crimes follow in nearby villages over the coming weeks.

The public demands a culprit. And one is found – a suitably damaged stableboy, caught abusing farm animals, who has appropriately reddened, vampirical eyes and even oversized canines. There are problems, of course – there is no physical evidence that he is responsible, and he clearly lacks the facility with a knife that would have been necessary to carve up the dead bodies as they were found. But perhaps, for the purposes of community justice, these objections are not so very important after all.

This brief novella has elements of reportage, elements of horror, elements of crime procedural – but they're all in the service of painting a mood-picture of a particular type of remote community as it was just before the modern age. It is as unromantic and gloomy and sensuous a picture of the Swiss mountains as you're likely to find.

Ici on n'a pas de grands commerces, d'usines, de manufactures, on n'a qu'on gagne de la terre, autant dire rien. Ce n'est pas une vie. On est même si pauvres qu'on vend nos vaches pour la viande aux bouchers des grandes villes, on se contente du cochon et on mange tellement sous toutes ses formes, fumé, écrouenné, haché, salé, qu'on finit par lui ressembler, figure rose, hure

rougie, loin du monde, par combes noires et forêts.

Dans ces campagnes perdues une jeune fille est une étoile qui aime les folies. Inceste et ruminations, dans l'ombre célibataire, de la part charnelle à jamais convoitée et interdite.

(view spoiler)

Well as you can see, the writing here is fabulous. The book was released originally as part of Grasset's *Ceci n'est pas un fait divers* series ('this is not a news story'), and it is in part a retelling of actual events in the village where Chessex lived until his death in 2009; he claimed to have been told the details by a cousin of that first mutilated victim. There are moments here where the prose style reminded me a little of García Márquez's *News of a Kidnapping*, except that this book is to be found in the fiction section and some parts, especially towards the end, must be the result of creative license. However, despite some research that showed me the case was more or less real, I could not work out exactly where the join was.

La misère sexuelle, comme on la nommera plus tard, s'ajoute aux rôderies de la peur et de l'imagination du mal. Solitaire, on surveille la nuit, ébats d'amour de quelques nantis et de leur râlant complice, frôlements du diable, culpabilité vrillé dans quatre siècles de calvinisme imposé.

(view spoiler)

Le Vampire de Ropraz is also remarkable for the attitude it takes towards the 'vampire' himself. Though the full horror of his actions is made all too clear, he is also – through a tremendous exertion of authorial sympathy – somehow accepted. Chessex at one point addresses him directly – *mon double, mon frère !* – and seems to suggest that crimes like these are within him, Chessex, too – indeed that they are within all of us, waiting, perhaps, for the right conjunction of desperation, remoteness and mental perturbation to bring them out. Not a traditional horror story, but plenty to make you shiver here all the same.

Betty says

Una historia fascinante sobre la maldad humana, en una época oscura dominada por la superstición, la religión y la ignorancia. El vampirismo es solo una herramienta para esta excelente novela, dura e impactante de principios del siglo pasado.

Pedro Casserly says

Esta novela breve de Chessex, adopta el estilo de crónica: el cadáver de una joven en el pueblo de Ropraz es brutalmente profanado. El episodio provoca una reacción fuertemente emocional de los puritanos ciudadanos, quienes bautizan al agresor como "el vampiro de Ropraz". La tranquilidad pública requiere encontrar a un culpable, papel que recae sobre Charles-Agustin Favez.

La historia muestra las miserias humanas en un poblado de Suiza de principios del Siglo XX, aunque creo

que podría referirse a los prejuicios de las sociedades humanas de todos los tiempos.
Un libro interesante, para leer de un tirón.

Ink says

Es una historia atípica de vampirismo que se desarrolla en una pequeña localidad suiza de principios del siglo XX. La brevedad del libro y los capítulos cortos hacen que puedas leerlo de un tirón. La descripción de algunos hechos son grotescas, así que están advertidos. Y en cuanto al final como que no iba con el resto del relato.

Agnieszka says

That was really strange reading. *The vampire of Ropraz* is an atmospheric somewhat gothic tale illustrating old saying that *when reason sleeps demons arise*. Young girl died and was buried but the next day her violated and mutilated body was found on the local cemetery, and then next body and one more corpse. Local community was gripped by an uncontrollable fear. Someone indicated on own neighbor as a perpetrator of theses repulsive practices, someone heard something while another saw something. Finally someone cried *vampire* and so peculiar witchhunt began.

Writing here is beautiful, poetic even, with perfect evocation of time, place and people. Small, seemingly ordinary village turns out to be a hotbed of superstitions and poverty, avarice and obtuseness, incest and other degenerations, *land of wolves and neglect*. Villagers, you can almost feel their presence, lead their gloomy life, marked with suspicion and morbid fascination with horror, tormented by lust and dread.

Endlessly construing the threat from deep within and from without, from the forest, from the cracking of the roof, from the wailing of the wind, from the beyond, from above, from beneath, from below: the threat from elsewhere . You bar yourself inside you skull, your sleep, your heart, your senses; you bolt yourself inside your farmhouse, gun at the ready, with a haunted, hungry soul.

Prose is spare and economical, reminds more reportage than novel, and very naturalistic. Yes, some scenes leave you with sense of disgust and disbelief that described here horrendous events could take place, not in some distant era, but at the beginning of the last century exactly. If not the ambiguous ending novel and its message could be a perfect example of how ignorance, prejudice and stupidity eternally prevail. And so you can read it as the irony of fate, muffled laugh of History.

3.5/5

trovateOrtensia says

Per quanti non credono al "migliore dei mondi possibili"

Ropraz, 1903: alcuni terribili episodi di violazione di tombe scatenano l'orrore, il sospetto e la caccia al "mostro".

Ispirandosi a tali fatti realmente accaduti, Chessez precipita e quasi costringe il lettore nell'ambiente cupo e claustrofobico della piccola comunità montana di Ropraz, in cui l'ignoranza e la chiusura rispetto al mondo esterno, la religiosità vissuta come coercizione e la sessualità intesa come colpevole pulsione da reprimere, generano inevitabilmente mostri e vittime.

E il presunto "mostro", Favez il vagabondo, Favez il vampiro, potrebbe a buon diritto comparire nel catalogo degli "uomini infami" di Foucault, oscuri individui di cui conosciamo il nome solo perché incappati un giorno nelle maglie del Potere, di un'autorità che entra nelle loro vite marchiandole con il segno dell'infamia.

La scrittura è scarna, precisa ed efficace nel rappresentare uno scenario di orrore materiale e morale: il risultato è un libro volutamente perturbante e, oserei dire, terribile.

Amina says

3.5 reviewing soon

Manny says

A few years ago, I attended a wedding. We had known Mary (not her real name) and her family since she was a small girl; they had lived a few doors away from us at the time, and Mary had played with our kids. They were very fond of each other. The family was deeply Christian in that old-fashioned way which prioritises loving God and your neighbor, rather than, for example, campaigning to prevent third world aid that involves distribution of contraceptives. Not that there's anything wrong with that either, I hasten to add; I'd hate to appear prejudiced. To each his own. At any rate, Mary had grown up to be a beautiful young woman, and now she was getting married and leaving home.

We'd heard that Mary's fiancé was a soldier who had served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, but we'd never met him. On entering the church, it was obvious at a glance which side was the bride's, and which the groom's. On the left, we had the mild-mannered parishioners of St. Matthew's Church. On the right, and again I'd hate to appear prejudiced, there was a collection of seriously dangerous-looking men in their mid 20s. My first thought was that, if I'd seen one of them coming towards me on a dark night, I would instinctively have crossed the road and hoped he hadn't noticed me. A few seconds later, it occurred to me that several of them, maybe even many of them, had probably killed people in the line of duty. I found myself wondering which ones.

The start of the wedding was delayed by about a quarter of an hour. Mary had entered the hall, looking very lovely in her bridal gown, and then dissolved in tears before she got as far as the aisle. We were sitting near the back, and we could see her bridesmaids trying to comfort her. I have never found out why she was crying. Finally, she calmed down, and the ceremony got under way. There was another memorable incident. Shortly after the vicar had married Mary to her new husband, he gave an address where he told a bizarre joke. A young Welsh woman, who was about to be married, was asking her grandfather if he'd ever considered divorcing his wife. "I never once thought of divorcing her!" said the grandfather. "Murdering her... frequently!" It seemed in singularly poor taste. Perhaps the vicar's subconscious was trying to get out a warning. If so, its timing was less than perfect.

I thought of Mary's wedding when I read *Le Vampire de Ropraz*, a short, elegantly written Swiss French novel based on historical events. In January 1903, a beautiful 20 year old girl named Rosa Gilliéron, living in the village of Ropraz, near Lausanne, suddenly contracted meningitis and died. She was buried in the

churchyard, and many people came to the funeral; she had been widely loved and admired, and it was generally felt to be a great tragedy. The next morning, a woodcutter was walking near her grave, when he saw that it had been forced open, and that there were traces of blood in the snow nearby. He summoned help, and the horrified villagers found that someone had unscrewed the lid of the coffin, removed Rosa's corpse, sexually abused it, and then cut off parts of her flesh and eaten them. It was one of the most shocking crimes of its day, and people began to talk of "The Vampire of Ropraz". Later, two other freshly dead corpses were abused in similar fashion in nearby churchyards. All three victims had been attractive, slightly built brunettes.

Suspicion quickly fastened on a young man, Charles-Augustin Favez, who had been arrested on charges of bestiality. As a child, Favez had been the victim of horrific abuse, first at the hands of his natural parents and then of his foster-parents, and as a result was more or less deranged sexually. He was an ideal scapegoat, not least because his powerful physique, long canines and permanently reddened eyes matched well the standard image of a vampire. Favez was held in custody, suspected of violating the three dead women. But the concrete evidence against him was thin, and the consulting psychiatrist had serious doubts that he was the culprit. While in prison, he was visited several times by a mysterious veiled woman, who bribed the jailer to let her see Favez alone. It is uncertain what happened while they were together, but everything suggested that they had some kind of sexual relationship.

Favez was released after four months due to lack of evidence; the public, however, was convinced that he was the vampire, and he was forced to go into hiding. The balance of his mind, already seriously disturbed, can hardly have been improved by this. Several weeks later, he was apprehended a second time, when he tried to rape a widow who apparently had flirted with him on a few occasions. This time, there was no chance of his being released. The trial only took five days, and ended with him being given a life sentence. The psychiatrist persuaded the court that it could be served at his hospital.

Favez stayed there for fifteen years, until he finally escaped one day, and headed over the French border. The First World War was in full swing, and he had no trouble enlisting with the Foreign Legion. He served with them for a few months, became friendly with his commanding officer, and told him his story. Shortly after, the Germans launched a major offensive on that part of the front. During the fighting, the officer was seriously wounded, and Favez was killed. His body was left lying on the field of battle, and never recovered.

But... modern science added a postscript. For reasons best known to themselves, people with access to DNA testing equipment decided to try and determine who the Unknown Soldier really was. They searched their gene databases, and, as you no doubt guessed, came to a surprising conclusion. The Unknown Soldier was none other than Favez, the Vampire of Ropraz.

I'm not sure how much of this is true; clearly not all of it. Snow, blood, sex, violence, insanity, the soldier's art. It's a powerful story. It probably shouldn't have reminded me of Mary's wedding, but it did. As far as I know, she's still happily married.
