



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Nature of the Beast: Transformations  
of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the  
Twenty-First Century*

*Jonathan William Thurston-Torres*

Crossen, Carys. *The Nature of the Beast: Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century*. U of Wales P, 2019. ISBN: 978-1786834560.

It is not often that werewolf scholars look to the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Scholars like Brian J. Frost in *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature* (2003) or editors Robert McKay and John Miller with their book *Werewolves, Wolves and the Gothic* (2017) tend to prioritise the Victorian tradition of werewolves, especially in literature. They like Clemence Housman's *The Were-wolf* (1896), and they see Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) as the ending point for much of werewolf lore. Hannah Priest, in her edited collection *She-Wolf* (2015), compiles essays that break the standard scholarly boundary-markers by looking at horror films and even tabletop role-playing games; and, just as importantly, her volume looks at female werewolves across a multi-national corpus of werewolf literature. Carys Crossen starts here, acknowledging that werewolf scholarship both has a predilection for the far-off past and is becoming increasingly political. As a result, *The Nature of the Beast* seeks to prove a wholly modern concern for the werewolf, that it has become the object of sympathy and a greater reflection of humanity than beastliness.

Crossen begins the book with a problem: until the 21st century, the werewolf was a neglected object of critical study, and scholars examining werewolf discourse used a very limiting lens. As Crossen states in her introduction, however, the werewolf is more than the “reductive definition of

the beast within” (1). Crossen attributes this lack of critical popularity for the werewolf, especially when compared with the vampire studies or the recent surge in zombie studies, to a kind of classism: “If the vampire is the adored, sophisticated aristocrat of the horror genre, the werewolf appears to be the poor peasant relation whom it embarrasses people to acknowledge” (3). As such, Crossen is dealing with a fairly large gap in horror discourse, which might make a survey type of goal natural for her book. Instead, she takes the more interesting route: she argues that there is a definite turn in the significance of the modern werewolf, and that modern trends in the werewolf figure “all stem from the werewolf’s acquisition of subjectivity” (10). That precise goal is what makes the book unique. She eschews the “increasingly outdated Freudian concept of the beast within” in favor of the “concept of subjectivity using the theories of Deleuze and Guattari” (10). The book thus takes a novel, yet productive, approach to the literary werewolf. Its core argument, while ostensibly simple in premise, is valuable to werewolf discourse as a whole.

The organisation for this book sets up the initial theory needed, then provides a number of case studies, before reaching a conclusion. Because of the case-study approach, the body chapters could have been placed in any order without much consequence to the book as a whole. Given that “there is no one clear definition of lycanthropic subjectivity” (224), the organisation for the book works as a strength. The introduction begins with an exploration of “subjectivity in relation to the werewolf” (12). The following three body chapters define, exemplify, and analyse what Crossen calls “developments of subjectivity”: the werewolf pack, the werewolf lawgiver, and the urban werewolf. These three aspects form the core of what Crossen sees as modern werewolf subjectivity. These tropes challenge the older Victorian werewolf, which often presents a “beast within” trope, the idea that the werewolf stands in as a physical representation of humanity’s potential to devolve to a more primitive state, or at least the capacity for evil within everyone. Instead, Crossen showcases a werewolf with modern sensibilities, one that engages in social dynamics, participates in the law, and lives in the city. The last body chapter focuses on representations of werewolves in young-adult literature, and the conclusion summarises the main themes of the book while advancing the claim that werewolf subjectivity is still “only just becoming apparent” (224).

The first chapter, “Some Wolves Are Hairy on the Inside’: The Werewolf’s Journey Towards Subjectivity”, presents Crossen’s main concept of werewolf subjectivity. Here, Crossen starts with the “classic werewolf”, the archetype whose theoretical nature relies on a Freudian “beast within” motif, before moving to the “new werewolf” who has the ability to think, feel, and express while in wolf form. This chapter surprised me. Crossen was able not only to link theory to her argument but make that theory approachable and digestible.

Perhaps the oddest aspect of this chapter is essentially one of the core arguments of the book: there is subjectivity in the modern werewolf. To those new to werewolf discourse, as Crossen says, the dominant werewolf scholarship focuses on the Victorian past. So, there really is not much in place currently to theorise the modern werewolf. If you wanted, say, to write about the biracial werewolf in Stephen Graham Jones’ *Mongrels* (2016), you would find yourself probably assessing much “beast within” discourse in your own analysis. But you would also know by being a consumer of literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that there

are sympathetic, subjective werewolves, such as those from *Twilight* or *The Originals*. So, you would know a decent amount about werewolf subjectivity without necessarily having the theory to back it up. I find that Crossen's core argument is not too "profound" – it is something I am sure many high-school students have written about at this point in less high terminology – but, as Crossen indicates throughout her introduction, scholars just are not talking about the new werewolf enough, and the groundwork has not yet been set in this field. Crossen is forging a starting vocabulary for academics to talk about these modern werewolves, even if the argument seems obvious to a general consumer of werewolf media. This chapter, even by itself, is a gem. I absolutely intend to assign this chapter in my horror classes, especially for its use of theory.

The second chapter works much more with close reading. "Do You Enjoy the Company of Wolves?: The Lycanthrope, the Werewolf Pack and Human Society" addresses a trope that emerged from the evolutions to werewolf subjectivity mentioned in the previous chapter: the social werewolf. Crossen includes many examples of wolf society in this chapter, such as the lone wolf and the pack animal. She leans on Priest's work with werewolf gender and sexuality to highlight the cultural shift from the isolated "lone wolf" to the pack animal seen in *Being Human* (2008–13), *Wolfblood* (2012–17), or *Bitten* (2014–16). While the chapter prioritises gender and family dynamics, the animal-studies scholar in me would have loved to see more work in animal studies here. Lori Gruen gets a brief nod (62), but generally the chapter fails to ask a number of important questions. For example, Crossen does note that real-life wolf packs are often led by female wolves, as evidenced by nature writer Barry Lopez, but she does not go on to question the Western myths of the "alpha male" and the cultural significance of the "lone wolf" that seem integral to the conversations around the patriarchal pack and exceptional films that form the cornerstone of the chapter. While I would not necessarily say that writers like Lopez need to have been quoted here, it seems like a missed opportunity for animal studies to be so absent from this analysis of the werewolf, when our evolving knowledge of actual wolves informs our interpretations of werewolves in modern literature.

Next, Crossen tackles werewolves and law in "Before the Law Therefore, There Cannot Be Monsters...". This chapter falls flat, unfortunately, as the definition of "law" seems to shift throughout the chapter. Crossen starts by comparing lycanthrope law to Kipling's "the Law of the Jungle" (95). Next, she references Susan Chaplin in trying to define what she means by "law", but her definition – "a contaminated, limited and even perverse space" (98) – is hardly concrete enough to provide a productive working definition. A representative example of equivocation happens when analysing *The Wolf-Man* (2010), a film where Crossen starts by calling it an example of the "inadequacy of human law in relation to the lycanthrope" but moves on to say the "laws of science are clearly suspended" (100). The next mention of "law" happens a few lines down: "it is safe to assume the law he [Talbot the werewolf] embodies will prove a poor defense against his burgeoning lycanthropy" (100). In a section devoted to the film's lawlessness, it is unclear what law precisely Talbot embodies, and Crossen does not offer an explanation. The term "law" continues being thrown around recklessly, with Crossen making slight claims about lycanthropes and natural law, human law, and even lawgiving (in the case of a werewolf cop). But

Crossen never stays with an argument long enough to be cogent. It would have been more pertinent, perhaps, to focus on one type of law and analyse that alongside the werewolf as opposed to encompassing every possible meaning of the word “law”.

The penultimate chapter, “The Werewolf in the Concrete Jungle”, is much stronger, focusing on the werewolf as a figure in multiple urban spaces. Crossen implements space theory, examining the liminal suburbs and the “urban jungle”. The close readings of works like *Ginger Snaps* makes this a valuable chapter. For example, the reading of the American suburbs as “suitable environments for liminal monsters” makes for compelling readings of subjective werewolves alongside these hybridised social spaces (145). Hybridity becomes realised in a biopolitical way here. Moreover, the various urban werewolf tropes are clearly laid out, fleshed out, exemplified, and analysed. I could easily use this chapter to teach the film alongside modern werewolf films, as well as using the chapter as a case study of strong academic writing.

Crossen analyses YA werewolf literature in the final chapter, “Growing Pains”. The intersectional analyses of race, class, and gender in the close readings here are productive for a classroom setting, showing the richness of werewolf subjectivity in YA literature. She claims early on, despite some exceptions, that werewolf YA lit often “errs” by showing teenage werewolves as “losing the ability to shape-shift as they enter adulthood”, ultimately encouraging conformity in order to come of age (180). Concepts like “fitting in” become integral to this aspect of the subjective werewolf. More than many of the other chapters, though, this one felt too rushed. There are so many short sections here, like one on werewolf orphans, race and class, and sexuality that get glossed over in three or four pages each, making many of these categories feel more like an inclusivity afterthought than an integral aspect of the genre or Crossen’s theory.

Overall, *The Nature of the Beast* should be on the shelf of any horror-theory scholar or werewolf reader. It sets up a number of basic academic arguments that can serve as a point of departure for future werewolf studies. While the work contained here does not *feel* particularly ground-breaking insofar as the claims made seem “easy”, the fact is that this work hasn’t been done yet. Crossen is thus creating a foundation for future werewolf scholars, granting us a term that should become part of our regular discourse around werewolves: werewolf subjectivity. The modern werewolf is such a novel and unpopular figure for academic inquiry that it is important that scholars begin making these inquiries. The theory here is accessible, and Crossen’s writing, especially at the book’s start, models a strong blending of theory with reading popular literature. I know that future werewolf scholars will quote the opening chapters of this book often.

*Biography:* Jonathan W. Thurston-Torres is a PhD candidate in English and Animal Studies at Michigan State University. They are also an HIV-rights activist in the Lansing community. Their book *Blood Criminals: Living with HIV in the 21st Century* was nominated as POZ Magazine Book of the Year, and their edited collection *Animals and Race* is forthcoming from Michigan State University Press.