

Beast in Velvet

reviewed by Markus Widmer

When Jack the Ripper roams the streets of Altdorf, the question is not only who he is, but what he is. Jack Yeovil's perfect murder mystery "Beasts in Velvet" is back in print!

Let me first tell you what "Beasts in Velvet" is not. It is not "A Genevieve Novel"; as the newly added subtitle suggests. The young vampire gets a short cameo appearance in the novel, but nothing more. Clearly, though, the novel is set after the events of "Drachenfels" and there are a number of connections to it, so that ordering "Beasts in Velvet" as the second part of a loose trilogy is justifiable.

The other thing the novel is not is a truly original creation that has never been heard of before. Jack Yeovil, or rather Kim Newman, is not a very good inventor of stories. However, he is downright brilliant when it comes to rewriting, re-combining and re-inventing popular mythology. To talk lit-crit for a moment, he is a master of post-modern pastiche.



So let me finally tell you what "Beasts in Velvet" is - it is the story of Jack the Ripper married to the Warhammer World. Kim Newman is actually somewhat infatuated with the Ripper. Shortly after "Beasts" his hit novel "Anno Dracula" was published, another story featuring Jack, who is now turned into a vampire killer in an alternate reality where Count Dracula has married Queen Victoria and turned half of England into bloodsuckers. Doesn't make any sense? Read it and you will see.

But let us get back to Altdorf, which doubles very nicely for gas-light London. A ruthless "beast" prowls the streets at night and kills prostitutes in a very gruesome way. Two very different defective detectives join forces to find the killer. One is Elector Johann von Mecklenberg, who fears that his brother Wolf, once a beastman, might be involved. The other is a former captain of the city watch, who had to leave his position after killing a nobleman in defence of a little girl. Further drama is added to the equation through the fact that the killer is apparently well-dressed and well-mannered. Agitators and cultists make the most of this, driving the populace close to a revolt. Meanwhile, Johann von Mecklenberg seeks the help of a female seer and finds out that the killer seems to be very close to the throne indeed.

The marriage of Jack the Ripper to the Warhammer World and its distinctive atmosphere, as presented in "Beasts in Velvet", has spawned one of the best novels of its kind. Some of the most fundamental themes of the Old World setting reappear in the Ripper story: a distinctively dark and grimy atmosphere, a man struggling with and losing to the beast inside, social disparity and unrest, a very corrupt set of aristocrats and finally a couple of (at least possible) conspiracies. Jack Yeovil, however, does not just take Jack the Ripper and change some names and places. He turns the whole thing into a perfect Warhammer story, as if it could never have happened anywhere but in Altdorf. Once again, Yeovil's craftsmanship as a writer is immaculate. His language is concise and straightforward, full of humour but never losing touch with the story-line. The way he creates and upholds suspense is absolutely breath-taking and unique in the Warhammer novel canon. Don't start reading it late in the evening, you won't be able to stop until early in the morning!