

Amish Romance and Vampires—Are These Books Going Too Far?

There's something strange about Kerry Nietz's new Amish romance novel.

The pretty blond girl on the cover wears a white hair bonnet and has an innocent look on her face.

But then there's the blood dripping down her face and the dead man lying on the floor behind her.

Amish Vampires in Space is the latest literary mash-up to gain rave reviews and social media buzz.

It's part of a small but growing group of new bonnet-and-bloodsucker books that combine two of today's best-selling genres: Amish romance and vampire tales. In addition to Nietz's book, this new genre includes *The Living and the Undead*, a serial e-book about an undead Amish teenager that recently cracked the top 100 download list at .

"It's gotten more buzz than anything I've ever done," said Nietz, a former computer programmer turned Christian sci-fi novelist.

The novel got its start as a joke from Nietz's publisher, Jeff Gerke of Marcher Lord Press.

Three years ago, Gerke was frustrated that Amish fiction was dominating the Christian fiction marketplace. So he mocked up a cover for a book about spacefaring Amish undead with the title *Vein Pursuits*—featuring an Amish girl with fangs—and sent it to Nietz and some friends.

The idea stuck with Nietz and he eventually gave it a go.

"I got about 30,000 words in and realized there's a good story here," he said.

That story ended up being part *Battlestar Gallactica*, part *Dracula*, part *Witness*, the 1985 movie thriller featuring the Amish.

A group of Amish farmers are rescued from a failed space colony by a starship, which plans to take them to their new home.

There's also a vampire on board, which causes a crisis of faith for the Amish.

Staking vampires, it turns out, is against the Amish faith. So the main character has to choose between nonviolence and survival, said Nietz.

"I thought it was interesting to take these Amish people—who are pacifists—and pit them against an antagonist who is the complete opposite," he said.

So far, the book has received mentions in the *Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly*, as well as a great deal of buzz on social media.

Not only are the Amish good candidates for a moral dilemma, said Nietz, they are also surprisingly handy for a science fiction writer.

"If you are colonizing a planet," he said, "it helps to have someone who can plough a field and milk a goat."

The Amish and vampires also meet up in *The Living and the Undead*.

Author Rob Stennett was inspired in part by other mash-up books like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*.

If those worked, why not Amish vampires thought Stennett, a novelist and creative director at a Colorado Springs, Colo., megachurch.

In Stennett's tale, an Amish teen named Eli runs away from home and meets up with an older vampire, who takes him under his wing.

Not only does Eli now have to cope with the modern world, he also has to deal with being a vampire.

That means he goes from being a pacifist to having to kill in order to survive, said Stennett.

Plus being Amish means he doesn't know the first thing about being undead.

"He didn't grow up reading Bram Stoker, so he doesn't know the mythology of vampires like most of us do," said Stennett.

The book started as a satire.

One of Stennett's previous novels, *The End Is Now*, pokes fun at Christian ideas about the rapture. In the book, God decides to do a test run of the apocalypse in a small Kansas town.

He wanted to call the vampire book, *Obadiah: Creature of the Night*, and write it as a comedy.

Instead he got caught up in the story of Eli, who learns the hard way that the grass isn't greener on the other side. He has to find someone to reconcile his Amish past with his vampire future.

The conflict intrigued Stennett. He also said that many people struggle to make sense of faith while growing up. So there was a universal side to Eli's struggles.

Patton Dodd, editor-in-chief of *The Washington Post's* religion website On Faith, agrees. Dodd acquired *The Living and the*

Dead while working for Bondfire Books, which published the e-book.

It started with a joke but ended up with a compelling story, he said.

“Rob and I both related to the idea of this character who was raised in a conservative religious environment and who has always wanted to escape it and experience the larger world—but then, once he does and tries to return home again, he finds that he has changed in ways that make home-going profoundly difficult,” Dodd said in an email. “That’s a pretty widely shared experience.”

Stennett also sees at least one parallel between the Amish and vampires. Both are secret societies that are often closed to outsiders—which is part of their appeal.

They also offer readers a chance to escape from the real world. Amish novels show a simpler life, where family and faith matter more than technology, said Stennett.

And monster stories often show a small group of friends who rely on each other to fight danger—an appealing idea in a world where many people feel disconnected.

Plus the concept of an Amish vampire mash-up is just a lot of fun.

“Every great story starts with a great, ‘What if,’” Stennett said.

But books such as *Amish Vampires in Space* or *The Living and the Undead* may face an uphill battle over the long run, said Marcia Z. Nelson, religion reviews editor at *Publishers Weekly*: They may not reach a broad audience.

“Think of them as the literary equivalent of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*,” Nelson said. “They’re deeply, weirdly gratifying for a small audience.”

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