

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO ANGELA CARTER'S



The Bloody Chamber

“These books are testament to the phrase ‘Big things come in small packages’. They make the daunting and overwhelming accessible and digestible.”

HELENA BONHAM CARTER

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
COLLECTION IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Erica Wagner

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The Bloody Chamber

*by
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A summary of the stories

The Bloody Chamber is a concise collection of ten stories of varying length. The first story, “The Bloody Chamber”, is much longer than any of the others and sets the tone of the book. All the stories use themes and ideas from what are usually called “fairy tales”, but with them create something completely new and original.

THE BLOODY CHAMBER

The Bloody Chamber is a version of the story of Bluebeard, made famous by the French writer Charles Perrault at the end of the 17th century. It also has similarities to a story usually called The Robber Bridegroom, which appeared in the fairy tales published in Germany by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm at the beginning of the 19th century. The Bloody Chamber’s nameless narrator is a poor girl whose father, a soldier, died when she was little; she has been raised by her “indomitable” mother. The story opens at night, on a train from Paris; our heroine has just married a very rich man who is taking her, on their wedding night, to his great estate in the north of France. This estate is on an island with a causeway which is periodically covered by the tides; the place bears a clear

resemblance to Mont St Michel, in Normandy. We learn that our young heroine (she is just 17) was a student of piano at the Paris Conservatoire; she met her much older husband-to-be when she was hired to play in a grand salon. Her mother had doubts about the marriage because her suitor (who is also never named, but called only “the Marquis”) had been married three times already: to a Romanian countess; to a famous artist’s model; and to an opera singer. All of them met untimely deaths – the countess died in a boating accident just three months before our narrator’s marriage. But she is enthralled by his wealth and his sinister charm and they are wed in a small ceremony in Paris.

When they arrive at the “faery solitude” of the castle she is introduced to a life of grandeur such as she has not known before, where her every wish can be answered by an army of servants. He takes her to bed, but not before she has discovered, in his great library, a cache of violent pornography. She is able to have a brief telephone conversation with her mother, telling her – not very convincingly – that she is happy in her new home.

That very night her husband receives a phone call from his agent, calling him on urgent business to New York – the young bride will be abandoned on her honeymoon. (The telephone, along with other clues such as styles of dress, place this story roughly during the Belle Époque, the period from the late 19th century until the start of the First

World War.) Before he leaves, however, he entrusts her with a set of keys to all the rooms in the castle, telling her that it is only the key to his “private study” that she must not use. And because the sea air affects the castle’s pianos, he also hires a piano tuner, the blind son of the local blacksmith called Jean-Yves, to keep his bride’s instruments playable.

When he leaves, she is bored; because there are so many servants, she has nothing to do. And so she goes, of course, to his “private study” – which turns out to be a torture chamber, the “bloody chamber” of the title, and the dreadful grave of his three past wives. The Romanian countess has been killed by the spikes of an iron maiden – and her blood stains the little key to the chamber and cannot be wiped away. In terror, she confides what she has discovered to Jean-Yves, who reveals that the locals call this place “the Castle of Murder”.

And then, to her horror, her husband returns; explaining that he did not, in fact, have to go to New York, he asks for his keys. When she returns them he sees the stain on the key and her transgression is revealed; he presses it into her forehead, and it leaves a red mark that cannot be washed away. He tells her he is going to kill her, and that she should wash and dress herself and prepare for death in the bloody chamber. He tells her he will decapitate her. All the phone lines have gone dead; she cannot call for help. Jean-Yves offers her the comfort of his love, but still she must

go, and bend her neck for her husband's sword. But just before the dreadful deed is done, her mother – who had suspected from the phone call that all was not well – comes storming into the room, having travelled from Paris to rescue her daughter. She shoots the Marquis dead; his bride inherits his estate but gives much of her wealth away, as it is so tainted. She and her mother, along with Jean-Yves, go back to Paris and open a music school; the mark on her forehead never goes away, but her blind husband cannot see it.

THE COURTSHIP OF MR LYON

The Courtship of Mr Lyon works off ideas from Beauty and the Beast, which first appeared in the form we know it in France, in the 18th century. Again we are in a world where cars and telephones exist, but which still registers as old-fashioned. A girl waits at home, in winter, for her father, who is driving home; but his car has stuck fast in the snow. He is out of petrol – he is dead broke, as a meeting with his lawyers has just told him.

But he has broken down outside a beautiful manor house with wrought iron gates; when he enters them they close behind him. No human being welcomes him, however, only a little dog – which leads him into the house, where there is food and drink and a telephone to call the local

garage to repair his car – the bill, says the mechanic, to be paid by his invisible host. All is well until, on leaving, he plucks a rose, growing magically in the snow, for his daughter, Beauty, waiting at home. Then his host, angry at having been stolen from, appears and insists he bring his daughter back to the house. This is the Beast, who looks like a lion but speaks like a man.

Beauty comes to the house with trepidation; but the Beast treats her kindly – while he restores her father's fortunes too. So Beauty asks to visit her father, promising she will return to the Beast “before the winter is over”.

She goes to London – to a glittering life of wealth, and forgets about the Beast. Spring is about to arrive. One evening she hears a scrabbling of claws outside her door: it is the little dog who greeted her father, but now matted and thin, frantic to bring her back to the Beast. Beauty knows that Beast is dying and hurries back to Beast's house with the little dog.

When she returns she finds him in a little plain attic room; he tells her he is dying. She falls upon him, weeping, kissing him and begging him not to die – where upon he is transformed into a handsome man – and the two of them live in the house with the little dog.

THE TIGER'S BRIDE

The Tiger's Bride is a different spin on the same story of Beauty and the Beast. This time the narrator is a young woman travelling from Russia with her father, a nobleman, who has squandered his fortune and now, arriving in a country described only as being in the south, wagers his daughter on a game of cards with "La Bestia", the Beast. The Beast in this story looks like a man but only because he is in a man's costume: he wears a long coat and gloves and a human mask. He cannot speak intelligibly; his valet speaks for him.

Her father loses the card game – and the narrator is taken away in the Beast's carriage to his decaying palazzo, all the while recalling stories told to her by her nursemaid about a "tiger-man" once seen in London. On arrival, the valet informs her that the Beast has only one desire: and that is to see her naked. She refuses. She is given a room, almost a cell, and a servant – who is not human, but an automaton replica of herself.

The Beast takes her hunting with him on horseback, knowing she will not run away because she is "a woman of honour". They ride to the riverside – where the Beast takes off his cloaking garments and reveals himself to be a tiger. Awed by the sight of him, she finally does as he asks, and stands naked before him. When they return to the house she is brought to a much finer, more opulent

room – and she is told that she will be allowed to leave. Instead, however, she goes to see the Beast, who waits for her as his tiger-self, and when she arrives begins to lick her all over – and it seems as if she is being transformed into a tiger, too.

PUSS-IN-BOOTS

Puss-in-Boots is another story first found in a version by Charles Perrault; Carter's is high comedy, its narrator an Italianate ginger tomcat who is a loyal servant to his libidinous master. A cat – even one in boots – is easily able to slip into the bedrooms of young girls to bring them love notes and the like, so he is very useful. And then his master falls not in lust, but in love – with a woman who, unlike all the others, is kept highly guarded. She is the beautiful wife of an old man, Signor Panteleone, who ensures an old hag is always at her side to watch her; she is only allowed from the house to go to Mass, where Puss's master sits behind her in a pew and pines.

So Puss, with his own companion – a clever tabby cat – hatches a plot in which his master will disguise himself as a rat-catcher; the tabby will plant the rats in the lady's boudoir. The plan works – and the young man and his lady fall into each other's arms and make passionate love – and he is paid 100 ducats for his "rat-catching" services by

the hag! But he is resolved to live with her forever – and so one morning the tabby cat slides under the old husband’s foot as he leaves for his office, causing him to fall and break his neck; now the young man poses as a doctor and pronounces him dead. The old hag thinks something is amiss – but a purse of gold keeps her quiet, as does the fact that she’s given money in Panteleone’s will. And so the young man and the new widow are married and live happily – as do Puss-in-Boots and his tabby cat.

THE ERL-KING

The Erl-King is a title most associated with the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; his famous poem, *Erkönig*, appeared in 1782 and was famously set to music by Franz Schubert in 1815. Carter’s story, which has a dreamlike quality, is narrated by an unnamed girl who goes into the wood despite her knowledge that “Erl-King will do you grievous harm”. As she tells her story she moves between first person, second person (“you”) and third person techniques.

It seems she goes to find him: his “bird-haunted solitude”, his house and garden in the middle of the forest, are described in great detail. When she is there Erl-King strips her naked and they become lovers, though their love-making is elliptically described. A violin without strings hangs in Erl-

King’s house, soundlessly; at the end of the story he lays his head in her lap; she combs out his hair – and then strangles him. She frees his caged birds and they transform into the women they were before Erl-King captured them; with his hair she strings the violin, and it plays without a hand touching it.

THE SNOW CHILD

The Snow Child is the shortest story in the book. Its opening bears similarities to the opening of the Grimms’ story, Snow White, in which a queen hopes for a child as red as blood, as white as snow and black as wood; but otherwise it is very different. In this story a Count and a Countess are riding in winter, and the Count wishes aloud for a girl as white as snow, as red as a hole filled with blood and black as a raven; she appears before him as he speaks, naked.

The Count puts her on the front of his saddle; the Countess is jealous, and drops her glove in the snow, ordering the girl to pick it up. The Count won’t allow it; the Countess’s rich furs spring from her shoulders to clothe the girl. The same thing happens with the Countess’s diamond brooch – so the Countess is naked and the girl is clothed. But when the Countess asks for a rose, he allows the girl to pick it. She catches her finger on a thorn –

and dies. The Count has sex with the dead girl's body and it melts away; the Countess's clothes return to her body. The Count hands her the rose the Snow Child picked; it pricks the Countess as he hands it to her.

THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE

The Lady of the House of Love belongs to the genre of vampire literature, which had its roots in the 18th century; the most famous example is Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). In this story, narrated in the third person, the queen of the vampires, "Countess Nosferatu", sits alone in her castle, a victim of her appetites – which she despises. "Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder." She turns her pack of Tarot cards over and over, and they always show the same: La Papesse (The High Priestess), La Mort (Death) and La Tour Abolie (The Tower). On moonless nights she goes into the garden, heavily scented with roses, and catches small animals and sucks their blood. During the day she lies in her coffin. Sometimes local boys and men come to the fountain outside her house to wash; she leads them to her bedroom and kills them. Her governess disposes of their clothes and bones.

Then a young officer in the British Army, on a

holiday tour of the Carpathian mountains, comes near her castle. The time is revealed to be just before the start of the First World War; he is travelling by bicycle, "the most rational mode of transport in the world". Like the local boys and men, he washes the dust of his travels off in the fountain, and is brought into the castle by the governess and led to the countess.

Something about the young soldier unnerves her; she drops her Tarot cards; when he stoops to help gather them, the card of The Lovers is revealed. He thinks she is strange and sick but beautiful; she wears dark glasses to protect her eyes from the light. When she leads him into her chamber she drops her dark glasses and they break; gathering the pieces she cuts her hand and bleeds. The soldier kisses the wound – and then knows nothing more until he awakes in the light, and sees her dead in her boudoir, sitting up at the table. He leaves the castle, and is presumably safe – but when he returns to his regiment, he smells the scent of Nosferatu's roses in the barracks; and the next day is sent, along with his fellow soldiers, to the front in France.

THE WEREWOLF

The Werewolf is the first of three lycanthropic tales that finish the volume; this one, like the one