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Justin Cronin's vampire saga, 'The Passage,' reviewed by Ron Charles

By Ron Charles
Wednesday, June 9, 2010

THE PASSAGE

By Justin Cronin

Ballantine. 766 pp. \$27

Sorry, Bella. No sparkly underwear models flex their way through Justin Cronin's massive new vampire thriller. But just about everything else has been sucked into the great maw of "[The Passage](#)," this summer's most wildly hyped novel.

Cronin is the latest indication that no one, not even an English professor at Rice University who's written a couple of small literary



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Rice University who's written a couple of small literary novels, is safe from the count's bloody fangs. You'd think Cronin's degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop would repel vampires like a garlic necklace, but who can resist Dracula's mesmeric gaze, not to mention that [\\$3.75 million advance](#)? (Rumors of Marilynne Robinson's upcoming werewolf novel could not be confirmed at press time.)

Of course, you're skeptical. So was I. But by the third chapter, trash was piling up in our house because I was too scared to take out the garbage at night. It's a macabre pleasure to see what a really talented novelist can do with these old Transylvanian tropes. In the same way that "[Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell](#)" gave us a mature alternative to "[Harry Potter](#)," "The Passage" is for adults who've been bitten but can't swallow the teenybopper misogyny of Stephenie Meyer's "[Twilight](#)" series.

As a writer, though, Cronin is more Dr. Frankenstein than Dr. Van Helsing. "The Passage," the first volume of a planned trilogy, doesn't have any interest in pursuing ol' Count Dracula; it's all about stitching together the still-beating scraps of classic horror and science fiction, techno thrillers and apocalyptic terror. Although a clairvoyant nun plays a crucial role, Cronin has stripped away the lurid religious trappings of the vampire myth and gone with a contemporary biomedical framework. Imagine Michael Crichton crossbreeding Stephen King's "[The Stand](#)" and "[Salem's Lot](#)" in that lab at Jurassic Park, with rich infusions of Robert McCammon's "[Swan Song](#)," "Battlestar Galactica" and even Cormac McCarthy's "[The Road](#)."

A pastiche? *Please* -- Cronin is trading derivatives so fast and furious he should be regulated by the SEC. But who cares? It's alive!

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The story opens a few years in the future, when the war on terror has come home with frequent attacks on American shopping malls

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The story opens a few years in the future, when the war on terror has come home with frequent attacks on American shopping malls and subway stations. A secret government project wants to create a new breed of soldiers by reengineering a virus found in some nasty Bolivian bats. The last 12 test subjects are death row inmates -- murderers and rapists -- just the kind of people you'd want to endow with lightning speed, impenetrable exoskeletons and a rapacious thirst for human blood.

But relax, what could possibly go wrong? These are government experts. They've got,

like, double locks on the cages and everything. (I walk home a little faster now past the NIH biohazard lab in Bethesda.) As you might expect, "mistakes were made." Soon the entire country is overrun by indestructible, blood-sucking fiends -- like a presidential campaign *that never ends*.

The second part of the book picks up about 90 years later with an abrupt jump in locale and tone. From here on out, we follow the fate of a small community of descendants hanging on in a walled compound powered by antique technology. It's an engrossing if vampiric version of Alan Weisman's "[The World Without Us](#)": Nuclear plants melt down and explode, vegetation retakes the cities, and the Gulf of Mexico fills with oil from untended wells (like that could ever happen).

Cronin proves himself just as skillful with the dystopic future as he is with the techno-thriller that opens "The Passage." This second section sinks deep into the exotic customs of these beleaguered survivors. We meet a vibrant cast of citizen warriors, who have to ask themselves each day if it's worth fighting against the dying of the light. (If those wind-powered bulbs go out, the "virals" will swoop in.)

Their best fighter is a stoic bombshell named Alicia, who was raised by an old soldier to kill -- and could teach [Lara Croft](#) a few things about being hot and deadly. I was initially less impressed with Peter, the earnest young man who gradually becomes the center of this epic. He's about as sexy as a Sears shirt model, but there's something endearing about his modesty and determination, and eventually I saw the wisdom of placing this good-hearted everyman at the center of all these bizarre crises.

Fortunately, Cronin has a wry sense of humor that runs from macabre to silly. A passing reference to Jenna Bush as governor of Texas may be the scariest thing in these pages. Soldiers watching an old reel of Béla Lugosi's "Dracula" in a post-apocalyptic vampire wasteland is a particularly nice touch. And in the final pages of the novel, one of my favorite characters "lapsed into a kind of twilight," but not Stephenie Meyer's kind.

Yes, once in a while, Cronin can't resist sucking on a few supple cliches. A traumatized survivor obviously heading toward something terrible says, "I wonder if we are heading toward something terrible." There's a prostitute with a heart of gold, a little child holds the key to humanity's salvation, and some exhilarating chapters have needless cliffhangers grafted on to the last line, e.g., "Something was about to happen." Duh.

But once vampires start leaping from the treetops, you're not going to notice those little flaws. You'll be running too fast. Part of what makes these light-sensitive monsters so terrifying is that Cronin never lets us see them much or for long. For hundreds of pages, we remain like the harried survivors of this ravaged nation, peering into the darkness for those telltale orange eyes, the last thing we'll see before we experience the new sensation of being ripped from crotch to neck. It'll be interesting to see if [Ridley Scott](#), having reportedly paid \$1.75 million for the movie rights, can exercise such restraint. But even if he can't, late in the novel there's a climactic gladiator scene with Wild West overtones that will blow the top of your head off.

About halfway through the chewy center of "The Passage," I was whining that Cronin should have cut out a few hundred pages, but by the end, the only thing I wanted was to get my sweaty hands on the next two volumes. Till then, I'll be keeping the lights on.

Charles is The Washington Post's fiction editor. You can follow him on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/roncharles>.

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