

The Nosferatu Conspiracy: Book Two: The Sommelier

Brian James Gage

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The Sommelier is a sprawling, enthralling horror novel about the supernatural elements hidden within history.

In Brian James Gage's horror novel *The Sommelier*, supernatural elements are hidden within the historical record of World War I.

In the midst of the first world war, Kaiser Wilhelm continues to pursue his goal of finding an elusive bottle said to contain the remnants of a legendary vampire, Vlad Dracul. He does so in secret, as those who consume the blood are prophesied to become immortal warlocks, siring the next generation of vampires. Wilhelm manipulates the global stage in his desperate ploy to acquire the bottle, even though the first stage of his Operation Nosferatu failed.

Never one to leave his future to fate, Wilhelm enacts the second stage of the operation regardless: he pairs with a death cult, hoping they can both form an alliance with Elizabeth Bathory, otherwise known as the Death Witch. Deep within a forest that's guarded by sentient fauna, Elizabeth has been imprisoned for centuries. The cult sends a purebred witch into the forest, hoping to unlock Elizabeth's prison and unleash her upon the world. Should they succeed, Wilhelm and his allies will amass an army of supernatural creatures.

The story brims with unsettling depictions of horrific supernatural beings. The Death Witch herself is terrible; her introduction sets the stage for the rest of the book. She's described by her impact on the environment (when they're around her, a murder of crows shrieks, and shadows slither) and the visceral reactions of her victims, who are drained of color as their joints rip and convulsions rock their bodies. Indeed, most of the book's scenes are the same level of uncomfortable and atmospheric as these details, even when their events are outwardly mundane.

Historical figures and real world events are well represented throughout, though they're tinged by paranormal elements in an intriguing way. Geopolitical realities are also repackaged in an affecting manner, as with a satirical analogy in which the race to control Dracula's blood is compared to conflicts over nuclear domination. Strong and stylistic, the prose handles such topics ably, even treating its gruesome developments with eager flourishes. Only tonal shifts in the dialogue impede the tale: there are anachronistic and rushed-sounding turns in some conversations.

Though this book is the second in a series, it functions well on its own. A concise summary of the previous book helps when it comes to sinking into its plot, and the considerable world building of the first novel carries over, too. Some of the mechanics of the world make for slow-going progress, but the action scenes are unyielding and compelling. They push the story toward its cliffhanger ending, which provides ample reason to continue reading into the next series entry.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (April 4, 2022)

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