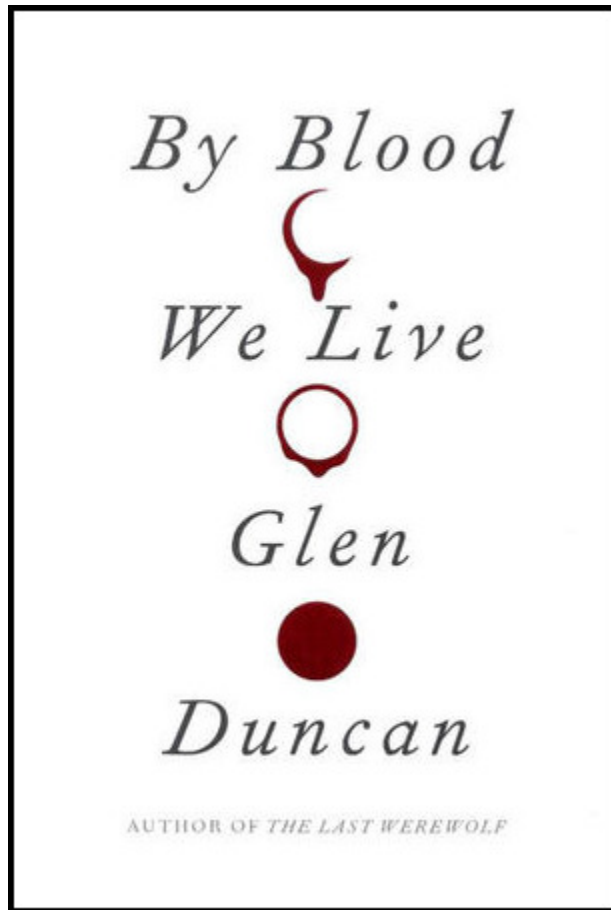


# 'Blood' caters to true believers

Posted: Sunday, January 18, 2015 1:00 am

*"By Blood We Live," by Glen Duncan. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. 357 pages, \$25.95.*



She regained her human form quicker than he did his," Glen Duncan writes near the beginning of "By Blood We Live," his latest novel about werewolves and vampires. "Hers was seamless CGI, his clumsy stop-motion. I watched her skeleton's fluid shrinkage, the impossible resizing of muscle and skin, the human head resolved out of the lupine's compressed implosions. Her shins were wet with dew. The last phase of the transformation turned her face-down in the ferns."

If you are still with me, chances are you enjoy the dark themes this remarkably imaginative author deals with in most of his more recent literary offerings. Personally, I tend to prefer nonfiction – although I am not averse to expanding my horizons when the opportunity comes along. Such is the case with the present volume. "By Blood We Live" is actually the third installment in a trilogy of tales by Duncan that began with "The Last Werewolf" in 2011 and continued with "Talulla Rising" in 2012. This is his 10th book.

As those who have an interest in these kinds of legends already know, werewolves and vampires traditionally do not care very much for one another, which gives the love story that inevitably emerges even more poignancy and philosophical significance. Without giving away any plot twists, Remshi and Talulla eventually combine forces in an effort to ensure the survival of their species, thus fulfilling an ancient prophesy that factors into the intrigue in an inspired and thought-provoking way.

The core premise revolves around Remshi, a 20,000-year-old vampire who becomes increasingly obsessed with Talulla, a werewolf he remembers vaguely from ancient times. Talulla, for her part, is comfortably settled into a life with Walker, who is also a werewolf. To the outside world, they seem to have a rather normal relationship, although their monthly transformation and the endless search for human flesh do create interesting moments.

Although the interplay between Remshi and Talulla forms the architecture on which the narrative is built, Duncan also manages to weave several other subplots into this surprisingly entertaining

yarn. For example, while he is obsessing over Talulla, he is simultaneously pursuing Justine, a vicious newly turned vampire bent on revenge. And in the meantime, Talulla is being stalked relentlessly by Militi Christi, a Vatican-based cult whose mission is to rid the world of werewolves and vampires. Yes, this adventure has a lot going on between the opening salvo and the closing crescendo.

One facet of this particular work I found engaging was Duncan's superb command of the English language. His phrasing can be lavish and seductive; he has a gift for bringing a scene to life in such a visceral manner that the reader can almost feel what is happening as the passage is being read. This can be either a good or a bad attribute, depending on one's tolerance for realism in a literary work. Witness the following: "I turned to see the werewolf forcing herself backwards off the snapped tree limb that had pierced her just beneath the ribs and come through slightly to the right of her spine. With a moan, she collapsed on her back then rolled onto her side, gasping. I went to her as if in fluid obedience to an inevitable choreography."

For a still more graphic taste of what I mean, reflect on this description of one of Remshi's conquests (and this is still very PG by Duncan's standards): "He nodded, eyes bugging from the choking. He was a long-bodied fellow with a big head of thick, matted black hair like a large fur hat. I put my finger to my lips – breathe, but do it quietly – then released the pressure on his windpipe. Much gurning and wincing as he struggled to keep the noise of recovering from near-strangulation down. The flint had already drawn a little blood from his neck. He swallowed and gasped, gasped and swallowed. I gave him a moment. He smelled of river water and cured skins and some animal fat they rubbed into their hair."

In the midst of all the mayhem, Duncan's offbeat sense of humor shines through at the most unexpected moments. The main characters all seem to be familiar with the work of Anne Rice, who is famous for her vampire exploits. At one point, Duncan describes the "appropriate" way to subdue a human victim. "You don't let the heart stop," Remshi explains. "Anne Rice got that right." In fact, after reading "By Blood We Live" I'm left with the distinct impression that Duncan would like to be known for werewolves in the same way Rice is associated with vampires. I guess a little mythical rivalry might be good for sales – and perhaps movie rights.

Duncan is a British writer who studied philosophy and literature at Lancaster University and the University of Exeter. Since I was not familiar with the author or his previous work before taking on this assignment, I decided to do a little research on him. Without a doubt, he is one of the more interesting and unique individuals I've run across recently. For instance, from an interview he gave to the Huffington Post a few months ago, I learned his favorite word is "trounce," he prefers print to e-books, he likes C.S. Lewis, and his least favorite sentence from a book is "A horse is at least human, for God's sake," from J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye."

If you like this sort of blood-and-gore fantasy writing, and by all accounts the genre has a huge following, then "By Blood We Live" is probably right down your alley. Think "Twilight" on steroids. If, on the other hand, vampires and werewolves are not your cup of tea, you'll probably want to sit this one out. Duncan tends to cater only to the true believers.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.