

LIZZIE SIDDAL

IN LOVE AND DEATH

for The Midnight Society



presented by

KIRA BUTLER

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INTRODUCTION

Being in the market of writing dark fiction, it follows that much of my time is spent mired in the shadowy stuff. What you have in front of you is the results of my efforts researching, documenting, and dallying in everything from the arcane to the supernatural.

I've been writing fiction for several years, and have acted as a contributor for a number of online publications in the same timespan. Where possible, articles have been researched and referenced with citations.

You're holding a sampling of the the fun stuff that fuels my practice that other institutions, organizations, communities, and blogs were kind enough to publish.

If you'd like to work with me, make a suggestion for future articles, or alert me that the world is ending and I ought to backup my hard drive, feel free to send a note.

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IN LOVE AND DEATH: LIZZIE SIDDAL

for The Midnight Society

This story happens by lamplight, under a copse of trees and at the top of a steep hill, predictably under the cover of night when only the most nefarious deeds are done. It's October and the ground is frosted, but there are men at work with spades and shovels, digging into the soil with some ardour, awaiting that telltale sound of metal striking a coffin.

If you've ever dug up a grave yourself, I'm certain you'd know it: the timber of the strike changes as the wood buckles, and then splinters. It's an extra bit of give beneath the tool — the result of the grave being undisturbed, underground, for several years. Seven, to be precise.

The men stop digging when it happens, and furtively under his breath, the one holding the lantern says, "Keep going. We need to open 'er up."*

Some say one of the men present to oversee the deed was Bram Stoker, the future author of the seminal vampire tale, *Dracula*, though in later years, it would be debunked that he was even in London at the time. It is often suggested that Dante Gabriel Rossetti was graveside as well, but neither was that the case though it was Rossetti who agreed to the exhumation of his dearly departed.

Today we are speaking in particular of the grave of Elizabeth Siddal — a poet, an artist, a model, and muse to her husband, with whom she shared a decade-long tumultuous love affair that eventually culminated in the loss of their child (stillborn), postpartum depression from which she found no recovery, and her eventual suicide by laudanum overdose on this day, February 11, 1862.

Perhaps you've seen her likeness in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood: Wal-



ter Deverell, William Holman Hunt, or John Everett Millais who painted her as Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet in 1851-52.

Today, we're not talking about is the tragedy of Lizzie's life, which is often overshadowed by illness and depression, her husband's dalliances with other women, or her untimely ends at the age of thirty two — though it paints a somber picture of the woman who is sometimes overshadowed by the characters she was used to portray in art. What we are addressing today in remembrance is that love stories, sometimes the best of them, often end tragically and only to have immortality conferred to them by other means...

We are talking about a man obsessed, compelled to believe after experiencing a seven-year long artistic block, that Lizzie was his muse. At her burial, in a gesture of tenderness and contrition for his misdeeds, Rossetti had buried a book of his poems with his dead wife.

The time between her death and exhumation was fraught for Rossetti; you could call it a "dry spell," or maybe even that he was experiencing a creative block. His habits and collection practices became increasingly more eccentric, but most importantly: he wasn't producing any work.

Rossetti was offered the opportunity to retrieve the poems sometime in 1868 by his friend and agent Charles Augustus Howell, but declined.

A year passed before he made the request of Howell to retrieve the book of poems from his wife's grave, when, upon deciding he needed a few more pieces to round out his next collection for publication, only those that were buried with Lizzie would suffice. He sent Howell, alongside two workmen, and a doctor to disinfect the manuscript as necessary, to dig up Lizzie's coffin. Being a friend of the Home Secretary who allowed permission for the exhumation to take place, Rossetti instructed those parties present to keep it a secret.

Curious, however, is the frequent mention of Bram Stoker's involvement though he was never actually accounted for. Part of the reason for this originated with the alleged state in which they found Lizzie's body when they opened her coffin:

After seven years, her glorious red hair had continued to grow, filling the coffin, while the body of the long-lost muse had remained remarkably in-tact; as well-preserved and beautiful as she had been in life.

There are a few problems with this account, apart from the fact that it's totally bogus: A fo-



rensic tidbit for you as we conclude this article — it's often noted that while a corpse's hair and fingernails appear to continue growing after death, it's actually the recession of skin as fluids are leeches from the body into its nethermost parts that accounts for the appearance of further growth. To fill an entire coffin, though? Nah.

It also serves to note that Lizzie was never considered a stunner in her time — rather, she was often selected as a model to depict characters more realistically because she was “plain” — a stylistic decision of the Pre-Raphaelite painters to move away from the Neoclassical style of their contemporaries who frequently painted too-perfect, robust, fleshy creatures to symmetrical perfection.

What this does suggest is that perhaps Mr. Stoker heard of this supposed “secret” endeavour that occurred in the darkest part of night that October, and the story — as ghastly as it was — inspired him to write Lucy Westenra as she was: an immortal creature in her grave, disinterred and perfectly preserved as she was in life, now in death.

Of course, everyone heard about the shady affair eventually. This was Victorian London, where in the echelons of creative society, gossip is fodder for the trade of secrets over tea.

They took the book of poetry back, sealed Lizzie up, and replaced the stone on the grave — but her memory endures, and perhaps, in that suspended immortality where we find her in pictures, and in artwork, there is something to be said about the once-beloved muse who is slighted, even in death:

The book of poems Dante Gabriel Rossetti received two-weeks later from the doctor after disinfecting it was sodden, partly decayed, the writing smeared, and eaten through by worms in places, rendering many of the pages illegible.

* Phrasing for dramatic effect. I'm not really sure if words were exchanged at all during the digging, but I imagine if there were, they were not pleasant.



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ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

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<http://midnightsocietytales.com/2017/02/11/in-love-and-death-lizzie-siddal/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kira Butler writes speculative fiction for adults, new adults, and young adult readers. She especially appreciates dark urban fantasy and low key horror, and likes to write about everything in between. She lives in Montreal, where she is working towards the completion of her first young adult horror novel.



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