

# A High-Stakes Debut

Elizabeth Kostova's *Dracula* novel drew an unheard-of \$2 million advance. Now for the twist: it was worth it.

BY MALCOLM JONES

**E**LIZABETH KOSTOVA is so squeamish that she has never read a Stephen King novel. It's not that she's afraid of scary stories; she just doesn't like gore. So when she began her novel about *Dracula*, "The Historian," she promised herself that "I would only spill a cup of blood in the whole book." She pauses to do a little silent calculating and then smiles. "I don't think I exceeded my limit by much." But if Kostova's debut novel is short on gore, it is far from bloodless. The corpses start mounting up early, and the chill factor is severe from start to finish. You don't have to read far to see why Little, Brown paid \$2 million for the manuscript, or why the rights have been sold in 28 languages, or why Sony Pictures bought film rights for \$1.5 million. Kostova knows how to get the most out of her cup of blood.

"The Historian" is a long book (642 pages), with no fewer than four stories going on at once. It starts in the '70s, when a 16-year-old girl discovers a strange book in her father's library, a book with blank pages except for the center spread, across which sprawls the image of a dragon. To explain how he came by the book, the father, a diplomat, tells his daughter a story that begins at an American university in the '50s. That story, which moves the action to Istanbul and then to the Balkans, soon involves another book with a dragon in it. Each story hides another, like nested Russian dolls. All of them lead to *Dracula*. It is a tale of such fiendish complication that while writing it, Kostova kept a chart on her wall tracing the narratives. But it is a testament to her skill that, as you're read-



**A CUP OF BLOOD AND THOU:** Kostova at home

## Who's Counting?

From *Bela* to *Buffy* to the novels of Anne Rice, vampires are the most lively of the undead.

**2.85 million** Number of Internet citations on a Google search for 'Dracula'

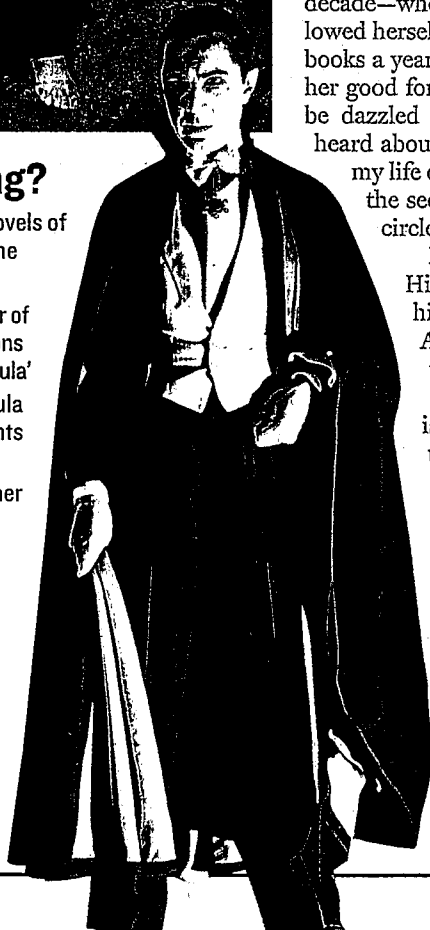
**167** Times that *Dracula* or his descendants have appeared in movies

**10** Times that Christopher Lee has played *Dracula* in movies

**7** Television series involving vampires

**1** Breakfast cereals inspired by *Dracula* (Count Chocula)

**0** Times that Bram Stoker's classic novel 'Dracula' has gone out of print since it first appeared in 1897



ing, the book never feels complicated. Instead, "The Historian" is good enough to make you swallow the editor's insistence in an interview that "The Da Vinci Code" was the last thing on her mind when she laid out the advance for this historical mystery.

Certainly no one can accuse Kostova of trying to cash in on the "Da Vinci" craze: she'd been laboring over her book for eight years when Dan Brown published his. "The Historian" is strikingly fresh and unformulaic, and considering how many times we've traveled through the Borgo Pass to Castle Dracula, that's saying a lot. Kostova's vampire is no campy Lugosi knockoff but a blend of the cunning, powerful count who debuts in Bram Stoker's 1897 classic novel and the actual *Dracula*, Vlad the Impaler, a 15th-century Romanian prince who was both a nationalist hero and a sadistic torturer. Blending history and myth, Kostova has fashioned a version so fresh that when a stake is finally driven through a heart, it inspires the tragic shock of something happening for the very first time.

After the hoopla over her book, it is startling to drive up to the modest house in Ann Arbor, Mich., that Kostova, 40, shares with her graduate-student husband. The minivan in the drive, the peace sign in the yard and the tidy, book-crammed house suggest the frugal college-town life that Kostova led for more than a decade—when money was so tight she allowed herself to buy only two or three new books a year. And while she's delighted by her good fortune, "I wasn't brought up to be dazzled by money or fame. When I heard about the advance, I wondered, 'Is my life over?' So I immediately started the second book to draw that magic circle around me again."

Kostova got the idea for "The Historian" 11 years ago, while hiking with her husband in the Appalachians: "A father is telling his daughter a story about *Dracula*—and *Dracula* is listening." She sat down on the top of a mountain and wrote out seven pages of notes. She also remembers exactly when she decided to become a novelist. "I was 14 and I read 'The Portrait of a Lady' by Henry James. I remember thinking that here was a book as big as life, and maybe bigger." Twenty-six years later, her dream has come true in a big way. And, as anyone who gets immersed in her first novel will attest, maybe bigger. ■