

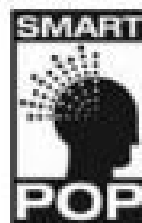
Ardour

14 WRITERS ON THE ANITA BLAKE, VAMPIRE HUNTER SERIES



Edited by Laurell K. Hamilton

With Leah Wilson



An Imprint of BenBella Books, Inc.

Dallas, TX

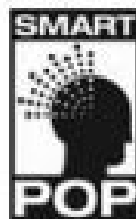
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I remember the May 2000 Nebula Awards in New York that Nick Mamatas writes about. There was signing at a Barnes & Noble for the Nebula nominees (the Nebula is a literary award for the Science Fiction Writers of America [SFWA]). I was indeed one of the writers who was also appearing and not a nominee.

Most book signings are bleak. You sit at a little table with your books and people avoid your gaze as if meeting it means they must buy something, or they think you work for the store. I got that a little early on. It's one of the reasons I stopped wearing the skirt suits or business casual. I got tired of being asked, "Where are the baseball card books?" I did years of signings like that, and then came the signing.

My agent, Merrilee Heifetz of Writer's House, had showed up to give me moral support. I appreciated that. She alone knew that there were other things on my mind that weekend than networking. The nominees were reading from their works and the rest of us stood to one side quietly listening. Then the first group of women came up the escalator and spotted my name tag. They did the squeal-scream. I admit it scared me. Then they were so excited to see me. It was wonderful, but the other writers were reading, so I did my best to quiet them and assure them I'd sign books after the other writers were done. The second or third time I got that double-take on my name tag, and had to talk to fans while the other writers were still reading, I took my name tag off and gave it to Merrilee to hide. That helped a little, but it was too late, I had been spotted. When time came for the official book signing, Barnes & Noble had to give me a table and a chair of my own to one side, sort of segregated from the other authors, because my line was as big as everyone else's combined. It was the kind of crowd that you want for a signing and never get. It was gratifying and embarrassing. Yay, I was a success. Boo, I worried it would make the other writers feel bad. I had a signing years ago when no one knew who I was, and got to sit by Margaret Weiss when *Dragonlance* was a very big deal. I signed maybe two books; her line was gigantic. So I'd been on the other end of the event.

What no one but my agent and my editor at the time knew was that my marriage was over. I was dating again after a decade and change. I had broken up with my current boyfriend just before I got on the plane to New York. The attention of the fans was only part of the change that weekend. At the Nebula dinner, publishers, editors, and other professionals in our business were all over me in a good, happy way. Suddenly I was everyone's golden girl. It had only taken about a decade of writing and publishing to get there.

—*Laurell*

Giving the Devil Her Due

Why *Guilty Pleasures* Isn't One

NICK MAMATAS

I have a deep respect for Laurell K. Hamilton, which never fails to surprise people. My own fiction on the “slipstream” edge of the genre, as likely to be published in an underground zine or mainstream literary journal as it is in a genre magazine. My few books have been published by independent presses, some run out of the publishers’ apartments, others well-known for their lists of titles about overthrowing the government. Hamilton, of course, is one of the most popular and mainstream fantasy and horror writers. Surely I should be in the back of a café somewhere, in a black turtleneck and a beret, cursing my own fate and shaking my fist at Hamilton. It’s what more than a few of my friends preoccupy themselves with. But I’m not—I think Hamilton, especially in her early books, did some significant work. The Anita Blake series earned its popularity by doing something very little fantasy and horror did in the 1990s: it took women seriously.

This revelation came to me years ago. In May 2000, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) held their annual Nebula award show and conference in New York City. As part of the weekend, SFWA put on a reading and signing event at the large Barnes & Noble in Union Square. Nebula nominees were invited to read for all of ninety seconds apiece, Grandmaster Brian Aldiss gave a talk, and SFWA members attending the awards showed up. The ads for the event were simple enough: the Nebula nominees got top billing, and there was a long list of writers “also appearing” at the event and available for autographs.

Like most events with lots of writers and relatively few fans, the bookstore smelled of acrid desperation and sounded like a cattle auction. Why so few fans? It’s common knowledge that the readership for science fiction and fantasy is “graying”—older men and women still read the stuff, but kids these days are going for anime and video games. The Nebulas, while prestigious in science fiction circles, aren’t exactly the Oscars, either. The nominees took their places at the tables the bookstore set up for them, and the “also appearing” writers prowled alone or in small packs, waving bookmarks and cover flats, hoping that someone might recognize them or want a signature. Few people did, for much the same reason few people approach the crazy man who spends his day at the Port Authority passing out leaflets and shouting about sperm, *The Book of Revelation*, and gravity. It’s just creepy.

Then Laurell K. Hamilton showed up. She was very popular, despite being just another writer who was “also appearing.” Popular enough that Barnes & Noble employees had to come up with a table and a chair for her, because Laurell K. Hamilton had a *line*, one as long as the Nebula nominees *en masse* had. Rather than the usual suspects of New York’s science fiction fandom and the occasional aspirant

writer (guilty!), the people in Hamilton's line were quite different. They were women. They were people of color. They had traveled from as far as the Bronx, and sometimes mothers and daughters had even come together. They brought presents for Hamilton—you know, roses and whatnot. They had tons of well-loved and often reread paperbacks with cracked spines for her to sign. Hamilton fans were all smiles, while the people getting signatures from the Nebula nominees tended to have the eager blank look often sported by the professional fan or the resigned mugs of an eBay "power seller" looking for a score.

Science fiction and fantasy people—writers, editors, publishers, Big Name Fans, you name it—had spent years bemoaning declining readership. It's too old, it's not being replenished by kids, there's not enough stuff that appeals to women and to people of color. Hamilton changed all that, even before she became a bestselling author. A look at *Guilty Pleasures*, the first of the Anita Blake novels, can help us understand the level of Hamilton's achievement. With Blake and the universe she inhabits—one in which vampires have Supreme Court protections—Hamilton accomplished the seemingly impossible: she created a new subgenre, urban fantasy-adventure with a female lead, and built a new audience for it. Here is how she did it.

1. Hamilton Realized That Female Readers Want a Kick-Ass Heroine They Can Identify With

Anita Blake has few female antecedents in popular literature. If anything, Blake is a character straight out of Robert Howard, except that she has a vulnerability and an honesty that few "badasses" do. Here she is reminiscing in *Guilty Pleasures* about being attacked by a vampire, one she is confronting again:

My screams. His hand forcing my head back. Him rearing to strike. Helpless. . . . He lapped up my blood like a cat with cream. I lay under his weight listening to him lap up my blood. . . . I was beginning not to hurt, not to be afraid. I was beginning to die.

Who saves Anita? Anita does, with holy water that had fallen from her bag. She doesn't kill the vampire, but scars him for eternity. And Anita wears plenty of scars, too, displaying them like badges of honor to her enemy. In 1993, this was powerful stuff. It may be difficult, in these post-*Buffy* times to remember quite how revolutionary Anita was just seventeen years ago. In virtually any other novel of the period, Anita's boyfriend—or even worse, a man she loathed but whom she could not help but be attracted to—would have saved her. The fangs on her neck would have been a recurring theme throughout the novel, indeed perhaps even throughout the series, as the author revealed in the rape survivor-like vulnerability of the "heroine." Hamilton didn't play that way, and was not afraid to show us Blake's fear and her bravery, her interest in justice and her own interior darkness.

2. Hamilton Didn't Shy Away From, or Romanticize, the Sex

Sex is a part of life, but if one reads romance novels, sex is either too dirty to contemplate or too comical to enjoy: purple-helmeted warriors of love and all that. In science fiction and fantasy, the situation was even worse—the genres were essentially celibate. Outliers such as Anne Rice, who had long before left the genre and has simply become a Bestselling Author, had plenty of sexuality, but much of it was inhuman or involved no women. Hamilton, through Blake's eyes, had a sense of sex and the physical details of the body that readers wanted. Here's a great scene from *Guilty Pleasures*:

She pulled down the silky bra to expose the upper mound of her breast. There was a perfect set of bite marks in the pale flesh. . . . I thought he was going to ask for help, but she kissed him, sloppy and deep, like she was drinking him from the mouth down. His hands began to lift the silk folds of her skirt. Her thighs were incredibly white, like beached whales.

Perhaps this was the first time in the history of dark fantasy that the words “breast” and “perfect” were used in close proximity to one another without perfect being used to describe the breast in question. Kisses are sloppy and thighs like beached whales—not lines to use on one's lover in bed!—yet there is a strong sensuality in the books anyway. Vampires are both superhuman and subhuman, objects of desire and creepy monsters. In that way, they are much like human beings—in the whirl of sex, even flaws and rolls of fat take on an attractive mien. While not often appreciated for this, Hamilton's early books are both highly sexual and realistic. Rather than appealing to the high Romantic notions of the vampire popularized by Rice, Hamilton performed a little nucleic exchange between the woman in the novel, the vampire story, and the noir mystery. Sex was as fun as it was dirty in Hamilton's narrative universe, and after more than a decade of treacle and misdirection, readers were ready for a heroine who couldn't say “make love” with a straight face.

Interestingly enough, in *Guilty Pleasures*, Blake herself doesn't have sex. The tag line of the 1995 paperback even reads, “I don't date vampires, I kill them.” However, the world remains a sensuously sexualized one. The abject—the idea of simultaneous attraction and revulsion—is in play, and that notion is essential to good vampire stories. Turn the vampires into shambling subhuman monsters, and you may as well be watching a zombie film. Make them Fabio-style romance heroes with pirate sleeves and six-pack abs, and there's no terror in the monster. Hamilton struck a middle ground in *Guilty Pleasures* in an intriguing way, with a heavily sexualized setting and a non-sexual protagonist.

3. Blake Has Real Problems

Popular fiction is full of what writer and teacher Stace Budzko calls “Cowboy problems.” The everyday issues and problems we all face simply don't show up amidst all the world-saving and bad-guy-shooting that paperbacks occupy themselves with. Indeed, this strange divorce from real life is part of why books chock full of death, beatings, torture, war, privation, and horrors are “escapes” for their readers.

Anita Blake has real problems, though. After raising a zombie, she runs for it and falls on her ass. “Hose are not made for running in,” she notes. Of course the zombie isn't the real problem; the lack of traction in the pantyhose is. The taste of realism, and Blake's matter-of-fact remark, help us actually believe in the fantastical problem of being chased by a zombie. And here's a problem that everyone has faced one weekend morning or other:

The alarm shrieked through my sleep. It sounded like a car alarm, hideously loud. I smashed my palm on the buttons. Mercifully, it shut off. I blinked at the clock through half-slit eyes. Nine a.m. Damn. I had forgotten to unset the alarm. I had time to get dressed and make church. I did not want to get up. I did not want to go to church. Surely, God would forgive me just this once.

There is a near-inevitable scene in fantasy books, and more than a few crime novels, where someone “gears up.” A wise old figure hands out the magical devices, or offers up sufficient money, outfits, and limos to make a private dick look like he’s made good. Not Anita. She spends the early novels slogging through a world where she is outclassed in virtually every way. While she has significant internal resources and some vampire-related powers she suffered to gain, she is also an ordinary woman of ordinary means, a small-time player punching way out of her weight class. It’s how we all feel sometimes, in this world of pointy-haired managers and rich Hollywood types who can get away with behavior that would see us disowned, arrested, or even just beaten down on the street. No maids, no gadgets, no perfect life disrupted by the supernatural—Anita was a bit of a mess to begin with, adding a level of verisimilitude not seen in previous heroines, or even in many of the subsequent urban fantasy novels in the Blake mode. No less of an authority on the fantastic than Italo Calvino explained it best: “Fantasy is like jam. . . . You have to spread it on a solid piece of bread. If not, it remains a shapeless thing . . . out of which you can’t make anything.” Blake’s quotidian problems are the crust on which the fantasy lays, and what makes the fantasy feel realistic enough to work. Most contemporary urban fantasy has not learned this lesson.

4. Male Characters Are Somewhat Idealized, but Have to Work to Keep Up with the Female Lead

Movies, TV shows, and novels often portray women as making themselves over in order to attract an inaccessible man, a “Prince Charming.” Indeed, there is a whole category of romance novel known as the “makeover novel.” Anita Blake, on the other hand, ain’t down with makeovers. She’s tough, and she makes the men work for her, or triumphs over them. Sometimes this happens in small ways. Coming across a woman in “sheer black stockings held up by garter belts” and a bra/panty set in royal purple walking along in five-inch spiked heels, inspires Anita to declare:

“I’m overdressed.”

“Maybe not for long,” [Phillip] breathed into my hair.

“Don’t bet your life on it.” I stared up at him as I said it and watched his face crumble in confusion.

Phillip recovers a moment later, and Anita worries about what she has gotten herself into. But she does triumph, and not only in the end. In a standard fantasy novel, there might be some of this sort of repartee in the early chapters, but only to signal to the reader that by the end of the book the heroine will be in the hero’s bed and ready for a life of non-threatening monogamous domestic-sexual bliss. Attractive and sexually available men weren’t allowed to lose to women in popular fiction, not for long anyway. Even if a woman triumphed over a man intellectually, economically, or rhetorically in a scene or two, by the end of the book the female lead would be humbled and ready to submit to the

male lead. Hamilton changed that. Blake calls the shots with her relationships in *Guilty Pleasures* and continues to remain the ultimately dominant partner across much of the series.

Despite the fact that women buy the majority of books published in the United States, it is easy for publishers, editors, and writers to not take women seriously. “Women’s fiction,” romance, and other genres—whether read primarily by men or by women—are disreputable, designed to be disposable. The mass market paperback market is treated like a dumping ground for books fit only to be bought on a whim at supermarkets and airports. This is pretty easy to see from *Guilty Pleasures*—the original cover art in the paperback was downright cartoonish, looking more like an R. L. Stine book than a hard-boiled novel. Blake is not even the size of the male character’s nose, and the logo for the series is strongly reminiscent of Batman’s chest emblem. There’s even an entirely inexplicable back cover blurb from Andre Norton, assuring the reader that while *Guilty Pleasures* is “a departure from the usual type of vampire tale,” the book is still full of “chills and fun.” Yes. Chills, fun, and a revolution in popular fiction.

The women’s mass market is not where publishers expect to find new audiences or, for that matter, new genres. Yet Laurell K. Hamilton did exactly that in 1993 with the publication of *Guilty Pleasures*. While the “serious” writers of the genre spent much of the last decade fuming at those dumpling audiences and their taste for kiddie books like Harry Potter or video games, Hamilton showed that fantasy could reach a new and powerful audience of women. All it took was a new and powerful woman character: Anita Blake.



Nick Mamatas is the author of two novels—*Move Under Ground* and *Under My Roof*—and over fifty short stories, some of which have recently been collected in *You Might Sleep*. . . . His fiction has been nominated for the Bram Stoker and International Horror Guild awards and as editor of the online magazine *Clarkesworld*, Nick has been nominated for both the Hugo and World Fantasy awards.

When I started writing Anita Blake over a decade ago I was a devout Episcopalian, married to the man I lost my virginity to, and whose virginity I took as well. If I had enough self-control to wait then why would I settle for a man who couldn’t be as strong (or that was my thinking at the time)? I totally bought the white-picket-fence soulmate ideal. I was puzzled by people asking me why Anita didn’t have sex in the early books. (Yes, once I got flack for keeping Anita out of people’s beds. I just can’t win on this subject.) Anita didn’t have sex because I believed sincerely that you should wait for marriage.

Then a funny thing happened, my soulmate and I turned out to be not so compatible. I had question

that my priest couldn't answer for me. I'd bought the promise of Prince Charming—though I do consider myself Princess Charming rather than the maiden to be rescued, that was never my gig—and the prince turned out to be a nice guy, and I was a nice girl, but two nice people don't always make a good marriage. Two bad people make a worse one, but oddly both types of marriages often end in the same place: divorce.

One of the problems from the beginning for my ex and I was sex. We were virgins so we didn't know what we liked in the bedroom, but the idea that we'd grow together and find our way to happiness didn't quite work out. Sometimes you find that one half of the couple likes meat and potatoes and the other half likes something a little more exotic. Then what? You're married, you've promised to be monogamous, and you don't like the same kind of sex. Because it is different from person to person, and anyone who tells you different is doing it wrong, or badly. Every lover is a new country to explore and he or she can bring out things in you that you never even dreamed could be inside you.

But back to that whole monogamy thing. I lasted over a decade, to my separation when my first husband suggested we both date other people. It was hard to write about Anita finally sleeping with Jean-Claude when my own sex life was not so good, but it was much harder to write about her falling in love with Richard Zeeman, werewolf and all-around Boy Scout. Writing about her love being fresh and new in that way that makes you think anything is possible while the love of my life was ending was one of the most painful things I'd ever done. *Blue Moon*, where Anita finally admits how she feels about Richard, was a very difficult write for me. By the time *Obsidian Butterfly* came out and hit the *New York Times* list, the first of my books to do that, I was either divorced, or on my way, and was out of my house, in a small apartment with my daughter, and on my own for the first time in my adult life. I was also dating for the first time since college and that was interesting. Times had changed and men seemed to assume that a first date with a nice dinner was a guarantee of sex. I actually told one guy who was being less than subtle, "Sure I'll have dinner with you as long as you understand that the price of dinner is not the price of my virtue." He lost one point for not understanding what I said, and all his points for not wanting the date then. I wanted to have sex, good sex, but somehow I didn't feel that most of the men wanting to take me out were going to be good. I wanted good, and wasn't settling for less.

I would finally find it. I would finally not be able to say that I'd only been with one man, or even with two. I began to figure out what I wanted, and what good meant to me in the bedroom and on any other flat surface that would hold the weight. Most tables will not, just a caution. I still haven't done everything I write about, sorry to disappoint, but unlike Anita I haven't yet met that many men I like and trust yet. I am married again, but we lived together for six months first at my insistence. I was not going to make the same mistake twice. I knew exactly what I was getting this time, no unpleasant surprises. He knew what he was getting into, I made sure of that. I didn't want any buyer's remorse on my second marriage.

While I was rebuilding my life I was still writing Anita. If my first marriage had worked would Anita have stayed a "good girl"? Would she have gone off into the sunset with Richard and the series gone down a more traditional "romance" path? I don't know. I know that it continues to amaze me that being a woman who likes sex and writes about a woman who likes and enjoys sex still shocks people in the United States. Europe, not so much—they have more problems with the violence—but in the good ol' US of A I am still asked to defend my choices as a woman and as a writer.

I love that Heather Swain compared Anita to Bertha from *Jane Eyre*, and Britney Spears. I wouldn't have thought of that comparison myself, but I like even more her point that where both the other women lose power through becoming sexual beings, Anita gains power. My grandmother wouldn't let me bring Jonathon home to meet her before we married. I was a fallen woman to her. Not really. But I knew I hadn't fallen, I'd escaped, not my first marriage but the box that I'd tried to fit myself inside for that marriage. Escaped the expectations of what made a woman "good," and what made her a "bad" girl. Ever notice that you're a "good woman," but a "bad girl"? Because the moment you own your sexuality, society still tries to make you less. You're not a woman anymore, you're just a girl. The idea seems to be that you'll grow up, learn the error of your ways, and then you'll be a woman again, a good one. Well, I have grown up, and so has Anita, and we're both just fine the way we are, being not good women, but good people.

—Laurell

Girls Gone Wild

Britney, Bertha, and Anita Blake (How a Southern Virgin, a Fallen Angel, and an Abstinent Vampire Slayer Became Depraved Women)

HEATHER SWAIN

A good story demands transformation, and for Protestant America's buck, not much beats virtuous Christian girls tumbling into depravation. The mother/whore, the fallen angel, the good girl gone bad rivets readers to the page. When the preacher's daughter winds up the pregnant homecoming queen (for that matter, the vice-presidential nominee's knocked-up teen stands hand in hand with her hunk beau at the Republican National Convention), only the most enlightened don't snicker behind curled fingers. Even though most modern women think of themselves as liberated and in control of their bodies and libidos, society still has a penchant for demonizing those of the fairer sex who slide down the slope from virgin to sexualized woman. The sweeter the girl and the farther her fall, the better. It's enough to make a girl ask, Can't I just like sex?

The fall of a good woman is a tale that's kept the printing presses churning for centuries, yet there's always a deeper story. If you look past all those flaky flashers on the *Girls Gone Wild* infomercials, you just might find a narrative about the precarious balance of power, sex, and gender politics that has followed women from the Old Testament to *US Weekly* and everything in between—including the Anita Blake series by Laurell K. Hamilton.

At the beginning of Hamilton's series, Anita Blake is a twenty-seven-year-old celibate Christian with a strict moral code about how to use her abilities as a necromancer. Despite her prickly attitude, Anita is a champion for the little guy, even if that guy happens to be a monster sometimes. As she reminds readers over and over again, no matter how much it may rankle her, non-humans have rights in her world. In her work animators frequently cross the line and use their abilities for ill-gotten gain, but Anita balks. She has no problem raising the dead for a profit or killing someone (or something) but only if there's a good reason. And for Anita, that reason is often that if she doesn't, someone innocent will get hurt.

We know that Anita was engaged a few years back but got burned when her fiancé's mother turned out to be a closet racist who didn't want a half-Mexican daughter-in-law. The relationship ended badly, and Anita swore off sex before marriage. While her Christian beliefs inform much of her moral code, Biblical doctrine isn't the underpinning for Anita's stance on premarital sex. Her Christianity has more to do with demarcating herself from the monsters that she kills. Anita believes in an afterlife that holds more promise than earthly immortality and the only way to get to the afterlife is through death. But—as anyone who's read beyond book ten, *Narcissus in Chains*, knows—eventually all

that changes and Anita Blake ends up as far from celibate or married (or Heaven, for that matter) as Britney Spears is.

There are cultural doomsayers who like to believe women such as Anita and the popularity of the stories about them are a problem of the modern age, but that's nostalgia for you. Some of the stodgy classics that high schoolers slog through today were the most scandalous literature of their era. Critics dismissed Jane Austen as fluff, accused the Brontës of being coarse, and Simone de Beauvoir may well have written porn for all the flack she took.

One of the most enduring depraved women in English literature is Bertha Mason, from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*.

By the time plain Jane shows up as the governess for Edward Rochester's illegitimate French war orphan Adele, she has learned to temper her inner raging woman. This is in stark contrast to Rochester's wife Bertha—his brown sugar mama, who beguiled him with her seductive Creole charm then became a raving lunatic when he brought her back from Jamaica to the civilized world of merry old England where women were expected to submissively devote themselves to their husband's every need. Not (unbeknownst to Jane) Bertha spends her days locked in an attic, guarded by a drunken maid, Grace Poole, who is equally pissed at the world but chooses to drown her sorrows in a pint of ale rather than go mad.

One could read *Jane Eyre* as a warning to women who refuse to acquiesce to their husband's power. Rochester claims Bertha is "intemperate and unchaste," a "lunatic" both "cunning and malignant." He further explains away Bertha's condition as hereditary. Seems her mother and grandmother lost the marbles back in Jamaica. But I'm not buying it. Once Jane and Rochester reveal their love for one another, Bertha acts far too lucidly for a lunatic, no matter how cunning. After Rochester proposes to Jane, Bertha escapes the attic and enters Jane's bedroom, where she places Jane's wedding veil on her own head, then flings it to the ground and tramples it. Whether this is Bertha's way of warning Jane to stay away from Edward because he's bad news for women or a warning for Jane to steer clear of Bertha's man (she is still Edward's wife, after all) is anybody's guess. Either way, Bertha's behavior hardly seems maniacal. Rochester brushes off the incident by blaming poor, drunken Grace Poole.

(It's amusing to imagine at this point that literary worlds could collide. What if Anita were plopped down into *Jane Eyre* as Jane herself? First off, Bertha probably would've had her ass whooped for trampling the veil, and secondly, I doubt Anita/Jane would have taken Rochester's crap. She'd have had him in some judo hold until he admitted the truth. But this is not the case. If anything, Anita has much more in common with Bertha.)

Bertha's brother is the one who stops Jane and Rochester's wedding, by revealing the existence of Bertha. Seems polygamy was frowned upon in England then as now. However, even after the wedding is called off, Rochester tries to persuade Jane to become his mistress (thus tempting her through the door of depravity). To woo Jane, Rochester says she is just what he's been searching for—"the antipodes of Creole." Nice guy—sexist and racist, to boot.

An alternate reading posits that Brontë used Bertha Mason to illustrate what happens when women repress their rage for too long. Bertha's not the only angry woman in the novel, but she's the one who lost it all by becoming volatile. Bertha's volatility flew in the face of the prevailing Victorian notion of the good wife popularized by Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem "Angel in the House," which extolled the virtues of a wife who was meek, self-sacrificing, and pure. Bertha was none of those things, pl

she was mad as hell. As the feminist scholar Jane Anderson points out, “to be an angry woman in nineteenth-century England is next-door to insanity.”¹ Rochester believes Bertha is crazy, but he also links her condition to her lack of chastity. Seems there’s no room in Victorian England for a woman who gets mad and likes to fuck. Anita wouldn’t have stood a chance back then. They’d have locked her up and called her crazy.

Like most female novelists of her day, Brontë wrote under a pen name, Currer Bell, to disguise her gender. Reviews of *Jane Eyre* were quite favorable when critics believed a man had written it. But when Currer was revealed to be Charlotte, the criticism turned ugly. A reviewer for the *Rambler* skewered Brontë for her “relapse into that class of ideas, expressions, and circumstances, which is most connected with the grosser and more animal portion of our nature.” In other words, she had the audacity and poor taste to allude to sex. Not only could women not like to *do it* without mental illness to blame, they couldn’t even write about women who might.

Since Anita Blake is an incarnation of the late twentieth-century, Hamilton probably didn’t think she’d have to worry about such priggish reviewers. And at first, sex wasn’t an issue because Anita remains celibate for six books. Not even the super hot Master of the City, vampire Jean-Claude, causes Anita to swoon—which is saying something because Jean-Claude oozes sex. This is not unlike Jane refusing to become Rochester’s mistress. Both Jane and Anita base their refusals on morality. For Jane, her Christian beliefs dictate that sex outside of marriage is a sin. For Anita, her desire to attain Christian afterlife stops her from bedding a vampire. Anita, unlike Jane, might not believe she’d go to Hell for premarital sex, but she does worry that once she crosses the line from human to monster, she might lose her ability to die and therefore lose her place in Heaven.

Rochester is Brontë’s Byronic Man—the kind of guy Lord Byron’s ex-lover Lady Caroline Lamb described as “mad, bad and dangerous to know.” And Jane is madly in love with him, but she won’t compromise her hard-earned virtue. Anita feels similarly about Jean-Claude, although instead of love she feels pure lust. Maybe Jane and Anita could have a support group for Women Who Run with Wolves . . . and Vampires . . . and Werewolves, too.

Later, when Anita falls in love with hunky, thoughtful Richard (who just happens to be a werewolf), she keeps her pants on. It’s one thing for her to turn down a vampire. She knows that getting involved with Jean-Claude necessarily means she’ll wind up his human servant and then it’s bye-bye afterlife. But for Anita to turn down the man she loves unless they’re married is some seriously Victorian thinking. Richard doesn’t mind, though; he simply asks Anita to marry him. And Anita says yes. *At first*. Until she says no, that is, and eventually gets involved with both Jean-Claude and Richard. And the tumble begins!

Creating stories about women’s chastity and the lack thereof isn’t only the province of novelists. A whole genre of fiction is devoted to rewriting the sexual history of female celebrities. Real life offers plenty of good girls gone bad to captivate mass audiences. How else would the paparazzi stay in business? Every era has its Jezebels; the twenty-first century simply has more media outlets to cover degradation. And Britney Spears has been covered in every one of them.

As Vanessa Grigoriadis points out in her 2008 *Rolling Stone* article “The Tragedy of Britney Spears,” Britney was “created as a virgin to be deflowered before us, for our amusement.” Once Britney left Disney’s *Mickey Mouse Club*, she signed on with manager Larry Rudolph, who promoted seventeen-year-old Britney as a Southern good girl with just a hint of Lolita thrown in to titillate. The

version of Britney's life claimed that she was a virgin and planned on saving herself for marriage even as she dated teen heartthrob Justin Timberlake. Spears' mother, Lynn, debunked that myth years later in her tell-all book, *Through the Storm*, in which she claimed Britney lost her virginity fourteen to her high school boyfriend and that she routinely slept with Timberlake. This from her own mother!

Britney has more in common with Bertha Mason and Anita Blake than you might think. Some speculate the reasons for Britney's unchaste behavior (both in and out of the sack) could be hereditary. Her grandmother was thought to have been mentally ill, as evidenced by shooting herself on the grave of her dead son, pulling the trigger of a shotgun with her big toe. Anita has her own issues of maternal heredity, probably gaining her innate powers of necromancy from her mother's mother, who was a voodoo queen. But there could also be an alternate reading to the Britney Spears story. Like Bertha, Britney is raging against a world that tried to pin her into a tightly circumscribed role. As Grigoriadis says, Britney "doesn't want anything to do with the person the world thought she was." Her current image as a paparazzi-baiting, drug-abusing, head-shaving, midriff-baring sex kitten is about as far from a good Southern girl as Britney could get. And like Bertha, in the process of losing her mind, Britney lost nearly everything else in her life—her marriage to Kevin Federline failed, she lost custody of her children, and she's gone in and out of rehab.

Anita is no stranger to rage either, but in her case wrath is a job skill. Anita is able to channel her anger into something productive—killing monsters. Plus, she's the only one of these three women who's licensed to carry a gun. Being a pissy woman who's allowed to shoot bad guys—without punishment—is one of the reasons Anita is so fun to read. Bertha eventually exacts her revenge on Rochester by setting fire to his estate, but while Rochester loses his sight and one hand while fighting the fire, Bertha dies engulfed in the hell-like blaze. Britney's rage is the most impotent of the three because it hurts nobody but herself (and possibly her children, who've, at least for now, lost their mother).

Also like Britney, Anita was set up for her big fall. By making Anita Christian to distinguish her from the monsters, Hamilton allows her to plummet from grace when she finally becomes Jean-Claude's lover. Britney's damnation may not be eternal (there's always next year's VMA Awards) but by accepting Jean-Claude's marks, Anita gives up the one thing she held dear: her chance at a Christian afterlife. But unlike Britney and Bertha, Anita has an out and that out is power.

Where neither Bertha nor Britney could find a toe hold in the world that shaped them and their rage, Anita takes control. She enters a triumvirate with Richard and Jean-Claude in which the vampire, animal servant, and human servant are linked and share power. In turn, Anita becomes Jean-Claude's human servant (thus accepting potential immortality) so the messy doctrine of eternal life via Christianity is out of the way. This doesn't mean that Anita no longer considers herself a Christian, just that she doesn't consider all the sex she's having to be immoral because she's no longer concerned about mortality and an afterlife in a Christian Heaven. In other words, Anita has chosen to play by new rules.

As a consequence of joining forces with Jean-Claude, Anita is infected with the *ardeur*. If mental illness is what drove Bertha and Britney over the edge, the *ardeur* is what makes Anita change from a celibate to swinger, and unlike insanity (in Bertha and Britney's cases), this gives her more power, not less. In order to keep the *ardeur* in check, Anita must have several lovers or the *ardeur* will drain her, possibly killing her. She leaves Richard and shacks up with two wereleopards, plus takes on many

other lovers to feed her need—sex every six hours. At this point, Anita has to fuck to live.

Here's where Anita's story trumps Bertha and Britney's. When Hamilton gives Anita a reason to go hog wild with sex, she allows the line between human and monster to blur. Anita gains empathy for the creatures she hunts because she's able to see her own will to survive a difficult and unjust world reflected in their lives. Anita says herself, "One of my favorite things about hanging out with the monsters is the healing. Straight humans seemed to get killed on me a lot. Monsters survived. Let me hear it for the monsters" (*Cerulean Sins*). Not only does Anita accept that monsters may have something over humans, but physically she now harbors strains of lycanthrope which may eventually lead to her becoming a shapeshifter. Not only does Anita change from a celibate woman to a highly sexualized being, but her very nature shifts. The fall is complete, but unlike her literary and real-life predecessors, Anita's tumble doesn't undo her. It only makes her stronger.

Gender politics, sex, and power have long been linked in literature and in life, but few characters have had as much fun with them as Anita Blake. In the end, Anita didn't need a man to rescue her from depravity. Hamilton said herself that she set out to write a strong female protagonist who got to do the things men usually get to do in hard-boiled detective novels: kill people without remorse and have lots of sex. Without someone giving them the same permission to live life like a man, Bertha and Britney both crashed and burned, but Anita embraces her depravity as a form of power and has a hell of a good time on her way down.

When Hamilton started the Anita Blake series, she felt there remained a prevailing notion in society that women should not be comfortable, let alone bold, about their sexuality and desire. But over the course of sixteen novels, Hamilton questioned that presumption and slowly shifted Anita into a woman who was both comfortable and bold.

This move has won Anita Blake millions of fans (as evidenced by the number of weeks she lounged around the *New York Times* best-seller list over the past fifteen years). Britney has retained her wild popularity in spite of, or perhaps because of, her ups and downs, but her "fans" seem to find pity in and fascination for her plight. They laud her accomplishments, but also stand in line to watch her stumble. Bertha's most enduring readers tend to be feminist scholars who look for historical clues about the changing nature of womanhood via literature. Anita fans are different.

Hamilton has taken a fair amount of flack (from critics and fans) for turning Anita books into soft-core monster porn, yet she retains a huge devout group of fans who don't simply read about Anita exploits, they look to her for life lessons. She's a rare female character who's dangerous and can also take care of herself. She rarely relies on a man to save her tail, but if it turns out that way, she returns the favor in kind later. Although we don't live in world of vampires and werebeasts, real women face their own demons, and according to Hamilton some female fans have left abusive relationships because they said they knew Anita wouldn't take treatment like that.

So this begs the question: is Anita another fallen woman whose popularity hinges on our collective love for watching women tumble? Not in my book. Hamilton wrote new rules for the female protagonist. She could be tough, she could be sexy, she could even be bitchy. She could do whatever she needed to protect herself and make herself happy. I think Anita continues to appeal because, far from falling, she soars.



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First, I hate ambiguity. It's one of my least favorite things. Most of the time, I would rather have a firm no than a maybe. A no means I can move on, a maybe traps me in that gray area between yes and no. That being one of my personality traits, it was inevitable that the dance of *will Anita sleep with, or kill, Jean-Claude?* was going to be answered. I actually set it up to kill him at the end of book three *Circus of the Damned*, but when the moment came Anita would have missed him, and so would I. The kiss-me-kill-me paradigm can only interest me so long and then I want a choice. People seem to think that Anita not choosing one of the men is ambiguity, but it's not. The choice Anita made was not to pick a single man to be monogamous with, and I'm still taking heat for that particular choice. It certainly wasn't the original plan, but if your first plan doesn't work, make a new one, and keep doing that until something works.

Second, one of the reasons that Anita Blake came on the scene guns blazing and gender roles be damned was that I didn't know how to be a girl. My grandmother raised me to be the boy. It was more important how much I could lift and how hard I could work than what I looked like. What I could do mattered more than how I appeared. I was never, ever told that I should be a soft, feminine, nurturing passive recipient of any male action. I was raised on stories of my grandfather abusing my grandmother for the twenty years of their marriage. My own biological father had left my mother and they were divorced by the time I was six months old. Men were no good, according to my grandmother, and I didn't need one. I found as I got older it was more fair to say that not all people are good, regardless of their gender, and that though I didn't need a man in a traditional role in my life I did want a man in my life if he could be a true life partner. I always wanted a partner, an equal. Even though my first husband and I divorced he never treated me as less-than because I was a woman except for a memorable lapse when some male friends convinced him he needed to be the head of the household. I soon let him know that if I couldn't be equal, I wanted nothing to do with him. He backedpedaled and never brought it up again. Some things you do not compromise on and being an equal in my marriage was one of them.

Growing up I saw a lot of things. I saw that soft women were victims. I saw that seemingly strong women fell in love and lost their gumption and folded into some feminine ideal that made them victims. Nurturing is good, but I demanded my first husband help with our daughter, and when he had another lapse during my pregnancy with her I told him this: "If you force me to raise our baby I'll be a single parent, I will be." I meant it, he knew it, and he has been a devoted father ever since.

I did not even know that there was an entire girl culture I was clueless about until just a year or so ago, when other women were trying to convince me that I should feel intimidated by a new friend who happened to be tall, blond, blue-eyed, voluptuous, and gorgeous. I didn't understand why I was supposed to be intimidated by my friend. One female business associate explained, patiently, that I should be jealous, or competitive, with my friend. I asked, "Why? She's my friend. The rain is wet and she's beautiful. Why should that bother me?" She never could explain it to me, but later that business trip she showed me: by sandbagging me before an important business dinner. I did the guy thing, and asked her if I needed to dress up for the event. She assured me that business clothes were fine.

When I arrived at the event, I was the only woman there not dressed to kill. Cocktail dresses

more, full make-up, professionally styled hair—the works. The woman herself was in a semi-formal sequined number with her hair done up on top of her head in elaborate curls. In that moment, I got it. I'd intimidated her because I was attractive by her standards and she'd feared that if I dressed up I'd look better than she did. I got that she'd lied to me so I wouldn't look as dressed up. I was the most casually dressed woman there. Did it bother me? Yes, because I hate being lied to. Did it make me feel less of a woman by wearing something that wasn't as frilly? No. I wasn't competing with anyone at the business function. I was there for business, not to see who could be queen bitch. But this one incident explained a lifetime of mystery regarding other women, and before that other girls, to me, had been on the receiving end of things like this my whole life and never understood that most of the other women were playing by this secret game, one that I had never been told existed.

I'm only competitive with myself and with people I see as true competition in business. But not in the cutthroat way, only, *How is that writer doing better than me? What are they doing that I'm not?* Who's making more money? Find out how. More prestige? Find out how. I've always looked around and found the writers doing better than me in some way and tried to find out their business plan and do my own version of it. I play to win the big picture, not the small squabbles, but I also play like I believe a woman is "supposed" to play if she really were the kinder sex. I like to see everyone succeed. I'm helpful if I can be. I have never knowingly undercut another woman personally, or in business, just because she was a woman and I felt she might look better than me in a dress. That kind of thinking hurts not only the woman who's being picked on, but even more the woman doing it. The female business associate who was so intimidated by me lost a chance to be my friend, and I try to be a really good friend.

I'm still very good friends with my tall, gorgeous, blond, blue-eyed friend. She and I get along just fine.

—Laurell

Ambiguous Anita

LILITH SAINTCROW

One doesn't have to precisely *blame* Laurell K. Hamilton for the explosion of paranormal romance and kickass-chick urban fantasy currently filling bookstore shelves. Hamilton started out, a decade or so ago in *Guilty Pleasures*, with the same type of urban-fantasy-with-a-touch-of-noir that has been a small, important subsection of fantasy ever since someone first decided to cross a detective story with something supernatural. From Wilkie Collins and Bram Stoker (*Dracula* is, after all, a detective story as well as a psychosexual morality play) to Charles de Lint and Simon Green, the supernatural detective is alive and well—for which I am profoundly grateful.

What separated Anita Blake, Vampire Executioner, from the common run of schlock and fantasy was two things: Anita's gender and Anita's ambiguity. I don't think I'm far wrong in stating that Anita was one of the very first "kickass" female characters in urban fantasy, a template for all those ladies with tramp-stamp tattoos and tight clothing hanging out on so many covers nowadays. However, she was not *the* first, and her popularity has its roots in a different dynamic: the fact that Anita Blake is one of the first female protagonists with the noir hallmark of moral and ethical ambiguity guiding her actions.

The phenomenon I refer to as "ambiguous Anita" only shows up in the first five books of the series. By the sixth she is embroiled in a process of becoming a more standard female character, whose primary concern is her interpersonal relationships with the monsters she is embroiled with sexually. This is where Anita loses significant amounts of her noir-ish features: ethical/moral flexibility, dilemmas with no clear "winning" outcome, and a significant amount of cruelty and ruthlessness on a culture is exceedingly uncomfortable with females displaying. Until that sixth book, Anita is a character who wouldn't be out of place in a souped-up Sam Spade world, with all its undercurrents of cruelty, perversion, weariness (not to mention situational ethics driven by need instead of love), and violence.

Let's not forget the violence. It's important to keep in mind that the critical defining factor of ambiguous Anita is her attitude toward violence—or more specifically, her lack of guilt over applying extreme sanctions to "monsters."

But let's not get ahead of ourselves, dear reader.

When discussing Anita and "strong female characters," Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* often comes up. There is a critical difference between Buffy and Anita, and it's not just the age divide. Buffy Summers, for all her strength, power, and snappy dialogue, is basically a *passive recipient* of talent that forces her to fight darkness. The Buffy cycle derives most of its narrative drive from constantly exploiting the tension between those powers and Buffy's oft-expressed and central desire to be a "normal" teenager instead of a reluctant freak. While this may be an excellent vehicle for

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