

Saint-Germain Series Short Guide

Saint-Germain Series by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

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Characters

Saint-Germain is good to the extent that he has almost nothing with which to revile himself after four thousand years of life. He never kills, he fights for truth and justice, and he fights evil human males, usually in hand-to-hand combat, in order to right the wrongs they have inflicted or wish to inflict.

He has been referred to by critics as the Robin Hood of vampires and the Prince Charming of the darker arts. No one has yet referred to him as the Lone Vampire and his faithful companion, but the comparison is tempting. Some readers find this revisionist vampire novel form to be fascinating; others will not even pick it up, on the grounds that the vampire element has become sanitized to the point that there is no longer any horror or sense of lurking threat, and that the vampire level of self-acceptance is too high even to admit a sense of tragedy or an adequate sense of isolation. It is altogether inappropriate to imagine a need to drive a stake through Saint-Germain's tender heart, although one could easily conceive of a group of misled and narrow-minded human beings dedicated to just that end.

The evil opposition, is correspondingly, without redeeming qualities.

One reviewer complained that Saint Sebastien, for example, was so extreme a villain that the author "apparently felt she had to scrape the floor of a charnel house" to find someone bad enough to put up against a vampire as hero. Evil, however, is in the eyes of the beholder. A science fiction reviewer, less thin-skinned, found the Baron an example of "stark reality."

"He is one of those homicidal maniacs who [sic] we have become so familiar with today. Think of the Manson, or Texas mass murders, or the British moor murders in which children were tortured to death and their cries taperecorded."

The women are, for those who appear in the works of a "non-dogmatic feminist," as Yarbrow called herself in a 1977 Berkeley Barb interview, rather passive and helpless, with notable exceptions such as the valiant Warlord T'en Chih-yu in *The Path of the Eclipse*.

The nondogmatic form of feminism which Yarbrow espouses appears to include an acute awareness of the actual helplessness (and thus passivity) of women throughout the eras in history which she treats, and thus leads to an emphasis on their roles as victims.

The redoubtable woman, as an exception in history, is also in short supply in her historical novels. The author has defended the right to use unflattering portraits of women "if a female twit happens to be necessary to the plotline," which means that the dogmatic feminists are probably distressed at her, although none has reviewed her works and said as much.



In keeping with her feminist leanings, Yarbro presents a heroine who asserts her rights against social oppression, at a time when the new state religion of Christianity is driving out and repressing the old pagan ways.

In the Saint-Germain series, Atta Olivia Clemens was saved from her tomb by her lover, Saint-Germain, and vindicated by the Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus after he orders the public beheading of her vicious husband Justus as punishment for his brutality. Once free of the sexual dominance and violence of her husband (whom she tolerated only because he held her entire family's fate in his hands), Olivia was free to develop her true personality. In the trilogy she loves only liberated men, although Yarbro seems to prefer that they be males who are of a martial bent, perhaps the more to underscore their gentility and considerate treatment of women. The male romantic characters in each book are much like one another, whether they be knight or army officer or musketeer. These are women's fantasy books, and those heroes, who are not princes or counts, need uniforms.



Social Concerns

Yarbro's picture of society is clearly summarized in the most popular of her works, *Hotel Transylvania*, the first novel of the vampire series featuring the elegant and learned Count Ragozy Saint-Germain. The human beings, and especially the males among them, are the cause of the bloodshed and suffering throughout the novel, and by extension, since the series ranges, in order of publication, through Renaissance Florence, Nero's Rome, Jenghiz Khan's China, and Nazi Germany, with other stops added in each of the novels, they are the cause of suffering through all of history and on every continent. Compared to the slaughters that have been perpetrated by human beings, the vampires of the earth seem almost harmless, and that is in fact the situation in these works.

The Count, who has put his many centuries to good use academically, is more intelligent and sensitive than ninety per cent of the "normal" people he meets. There are always oppressed (or endangered) women who are in need of someone strong to rescue them from their (male) enemies. This is not always possible, but whether Saint-Germain fails or not (he usually does not), he manages to fall in love with the woman as a rule, and this love is reciprocated. Occasionally the woman becomes, as in the flagship novel and in *Blood Games* (1980), a vampire herself as a favor from the Count, so that she may remain devoted to him forever, even as he leaves to travel about with his ghoulish valet, Roger.

In *Hotel Transylvania* the damsel in distress is one Madelaine de Montalia, who is sought after eagerly by a group of Satanists led by the evil Baron Clotaire de Saint Sebastien because her father, in the waywardness of his youth, had promised his first-born child to the devil-worshippers, and they have never forgotten. Their intent is to make her the subject of a ghastly and painful sacrifice to Satan. Enter Saint-Germain, who loves and saves Madelaine at great risk to himself, permitting her to join the ranks of vampirism as a reward for her devotion.

In the third book of the Saint-Germain series, *Blood Games*, Olivia Clemens appears as the oppressed wife of an important man, who repeatedly brutalizes her and allows her to be raped by gladiators. Saint-Germain saves Olivia from this brutality, and they fall in love, demonstrating Yarbro's persistent theme that no vampire has ever wreaked as much havoc as mortal men. At Olivia's insistence, Saint-Germain makes her a vampire (not immortal, but with a very long life span). Olivia then flees Rome with her vampire bondsman, Niklos, when the Ostrogoths invade.

A Flame in Byzantium takes place five hundred years later. Olivia and Saint-Germain have settled in Constantinople during the reign of Justinian and Theodora. There, they discover that the city has been newly converted to Christianity. Conditions have become severely restrictive of women's rights. The city is infested with spies. Olivia's pagan Roman customs are seen as threatening, and her self-confident femininity causes her to become the victim of persecution.



As the Saint-Germain novels have made clear, water is particularly dreaded by vampires, though not nearly so much as fire. Sentenced to be drowned, she nearly dies, but is saved by Niklos.

A brief love affair with a mortal, Captain Drosos, ends sadly.

Techniques

Yarbro's Saint-Germain series falls easily into the category of historical romance, with the added interest of a vampire hero, or in the case of this subtrilogy, heroine. These books are unique among vampire novels in that the author uses the longevity of the central characters to take advantage of every historical setting that appeals to her. Her intent is to recreate the period and its particular brand of oppression in order that her protagonists may war against the establishment of that day and either help illustrate the brutality of men or to combat it. The vampirism becomes less important with each novel, and the ironic contrast between the view of vampires as terrifying and dangerous and the reality of how humans can massacre enormous numbers in short periods of time, becomes less significant.

A reviewer commented that *A Flame in Byzantium* is not a horror novel because "any horror stems not from vampirism but from human acts in an age of religious persecution." The reviewer felt that Olivia's vampirism was "a subplot in an excellent historical novel." Another critic, however, complained that fans of the occult would feel cheated, while lovers of historical fiction would consider Yarbro's work inadequate. "As history," said the Kirkus Review, "her novels are like tales heard over a car radio, vaguely entertaining but quickly forgotten."



Themes

The inhumanity of man to man (but especially, it seems, to woman) is dominant throughout the series. The way in which the point is made is for the author to describe in gruesome detail the depredations that have been visited upon the helpless and their defenders over all the centuries of what is referred to as civilization. Some reviewers have complained about the extent of the violence here and in other novels, and find the characters that Yarbrow seems to consider typical in every age to be actually unbelievable. Since the historical background of her novels seems to be an element which the author especially values, one assumes that the atrocities are all documented rather than the product of one overactive imagination.

Love is present in every novel in which Saint-Germain appears, and so, in one way or another, is sex. The Count is inconvenienced by sexual impotency, but he is considerate enough of the women whom he loves and from whom he usually obtains his modest wineglassful of blood every few days to guarantee them sexual gratification through his considerable manual and oral skills. This woman-centered sexuality, combined with humanitarian concern for the oppressed, makes Saint-Germain, scholar and scientist, not to mention handsome and rich, easily the most desirable male in the novel, mutant though he be.



Literary Precedents

The Saint-Germain series, like any vampire novel, ultimately is traceable to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but beyond that there is little here that will seem familiar to devotees of the traditional vampire-as-child-of-Satan-bloodthirstykiller stories, or even to those who have come to appreciate the more recent vampire stories in which the vampires are intensely aware of their isolation and loneliness, and sometimes even fear that they will eventually be damned for their inevitable murders of their victims. While an occasional nod is given to Saint-Germain's world-weariness and other common vampire traits like a fear of running water and a need to sleep on his native soil, the emphasis in these novels is definitely action on the field and in the bedroom, combined with political intrigue and lengthy descriptions of gore. Further, because Saint-Germain never stalks a prey with whom the reader identifies (although the evil antagonist may), suspense is held to a minimum. One reviewer, in fact, insisted that the sequels were really "prequels" since they all covered an era earlier in time than the original novel, and that it hurt suspense for the reader to know that Saint-Germain would survive his various crises in some way or another.

Yarbro loves to use letters in her novels. In *Hotel Transylvania* this epistolary technique is successful, with the letters helping to move the plot forward. In the more recent of the series, however, they become too lengthy and cumbersome, and begin to impede the forward momentum of the work. Reviewers have complained about the later novels as they did not about *Hotel Transylvania*, and by the fourth novel one was already commenting, "this series has run out of steam," in part because of the slow moving events.



Related Titles

The titles in the Saint-Germain series to date are *Hotel Transylvania* (1978); *The Palace* (1979); *Blood Games: A Novel of Historical Horror* (1980); *The Path of the Eclipse* (1981); *Tempting Fate* (1982); *The Saint-Germain Chronicles* (1983), (collection of four stories); *A Flame in Byzantium* (1987); *Crusader's Torch* (1988); *A Candle for D'Artagnan* (1989); *Out of the House of Life* (1990); and *Mansions of Darkness* (1996).

Crusader's Torch (1988) leaps ahead to the twelfth century, where Olivia is now eleven hundred years old. Living in Tyre, she wishes to return to Rome, but the city is suffering at the hands of the Crusaders, most notably Richard the Lion-hearted. The walls are falling, and there is fever in the aqueducts.

Olivia is forced to flee an invading army led by Saladin. Attacked at sea, she nearly dies swimming to Cyprus.

In this novel Olivia's inevitably illfated love for a mortal man centers upon a Hospitaller knight who gives her his "body and blood." Unfortunately, he has a rare disease. At the end of the novel, Olivia decides to take her chances in Rome.

While most critics ignored *Crusader's Torch*, a critic for *Science Fiction Chronicle* declared it a success. "This series," he wrote, "would have been successful even without the supernatural protagonists" that made it valuable to fans of the occult, because Yarbro excels at depicting history. He pronounced *Crusader's Torch* "a first rank novel by any standard."

A Candle for D'Artagnan (1989), finds Olivia a wealthy Roman widow living in the seventeenth century and now sixteen hundred years old. The plot revolves around papal intrigue, the deaths of the French Cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIII, and the regency of Louis XIV.

Yarbro has always used the theme of vampirism partly as a topic of interest in itself and partly as a means to carry her readers on an erratic course through history in which she dwells heavily upon the inhumanity of men, most particularly the cruelty of adult males to women. A subtheme is always sex/romance with Olivia, as it was with Saint-Germain. As a genuine, and not a "second-hand" vampire, Saint-Germain will live forever. In this new trilogy Yarbro has focused upon the life of a liberated woman, rather than upon the vampire who liberated her.

Thus the theme of feminism is given more explicit attention through the personality of the protagonist. The Olivia trilogy will also attract those who look for books with strong female protagonists. What it will not attract are fans who prefer literature that is not heavily propagandistic.

Olivia has been befriended by the pope and his cardinals, who send her on a special mission to Paris. There, she is to aid and observe Abbe Guilio Mazarini, a spy for the



Holy See, and to provide him with a place to hold meetings. Mazarini is in Paris at the invitation of Cardinal Richelieu, head churchman in France and a cohort of King Louis XIII. Olivia again falls in love with a mortal man, this time with d'Artagnan, musketeer and comrade of the musketeers from Dumas's novel *The Three Musketeers* (1844) — Isaac de Portau (Porthos), Armand de Sillegue d'Athos (Athos), and Herni d'Aramitz (Aramis). He becomes a vampire at her hands in order to spend more time with her, even though she warns him that they will never be immortal.

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