

The Horror of Werewolves: Then and Now



Then: A Bloodthirsty Monster

1 It was March 1765 in the French countryside. A boy named François and his older sister were walking down a road, when suddenly, a strange beast sprang from the shadows. François's sister screamed in horror as the beast attacked her little brother. By the time help arrived, the boy was dead, his body mutilated.

2 Nobody but the traumatized sister witnessed the crime. But villagers had no doubt what—or who—so savagely murdered François. It wasn't an animal. It wasn't a human. It was a werewolf.

A MYSTERIOUS BEAST

3 Between 1764 and 1767, a werewolf was blamed for the brutal slaughter of more than 80 people in a region of France called the Gévaudan (zhay-voh-DON). Preying mainly on women and children, the beast was said to decapitate its victims. All of Europe was fascinated—and petrified—by stories of its grisly conquests, and many tried to capture the beast. Once, a group of hunters thought they saw the creature in the woods. When they fired at it, their bullets were useless against its thick hide.

4 Today, the “Beast of the Gévaudan” is one of the most notorious werewolves of all time—and a popular character in French folklore. But the beast was not the first supposed werewolf to terrorize Europe. Stories of ferocious man-wolves have been around for thousands of years. According to most legends, werewolves are shapeshifters—humans cursed to turn into diabolical wolves during each full moon. Centuries ago, anyone suspected of being a werewolf was put to death.

OUR GREATEST FEARS

5 Jay Smith, author of *Monsters of the Gévaudan*, says werewolf legends are rooted in people's greatest fears. In the 18th century, wolves were an ever-present menace to people living in the European countryside. Lone travelers were always at risk for attack.

6 Similar creatures appear in the legends of many cultures. African folktales feature giant man-hyenas. Indian folktales tell of fearsome man-tigers. Native American legends describe “skinwalkers,” people who can transform into any animal they choose.

7 So what really happened on that March afternoon in the Gévaudan? There has been endless speculation. Was it a serial killer? Cannibals? A dinosaur that somehow survived extinction? These are a few of many theories.

- 8 In all likelihood, the killings were simply the work of a wolf or pack of wolves, says Smith. In the end, a large wolf was indeed captured and killed. But we may never know for sure who or what prowled those dark forests—and if it still lurks in the shadows.

Now: Were-Hunk

- 9 So it isn't exactly convenient to sprout claws, fangs, and facial hair every time there is a full moon. But for teen Scott McCall, becoming a werewolf was just about the greatest thing that ever happened to him. It cured his asthma, helped him get a date with the girl of his dreams, and turned him into a star player on the school lacrosse team. It also gave him some seriously awesome biceps.

- 10 This is the premise of MTV's hit show *Teen Wolf*. By the end of its first season in 2011, *Teen Wolf*, based on a 1985 movie, had attracted millions of viewers.

WISHFUL THINKING

- 11 *Teen Wolf* is inspired by one of the most recognizable creatures around. From the hunky Jacob in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels to kind Remus Lupin in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, werewolves seem to be as popular as vampires these days. (Sorry, Edward and Bella.)

- 12 Why? "It's wishful thinking," says Davis. "The idea of turning into an incredible monster with unbelievable strength resonates with any kid who wishes he had more power and freedom." Davis says that it's also their fearsome skill as predators that makes werewolves so entertaining.

- 13 People have been turning into wolves on-screen as far back as 1913, when the silent film *The Werewolf* delighted (and scared) moviegoers. Sometimes these werewolves are evil. Sometimes they are tragic heroes.

- 14 *Teen Wolf*'s Scott McCall, however, is a little different. For one thing, he's a pretty likable guy—hardly the monster of old lore. He also has the same anxieties as any other kid: grades, girls, sports. And unlike many other TV and movie werewolves, when he transforms, he still *looks* like a teenager.

WHAT'S NEXT?

- 15 So, let's see. Werewolves have joined vampires as entertainment superstars. Wizards, witches, centaurs, trolls, and giants have been well-represented in *Harry Potter*. What supernatural creature will we see next in the teen horror genre? Zombies?