



# The Vorrh

*B. Catling*

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Prepare to lose yourself in the heady, mythical expanse of *The Vorrh*, a daring debut that Alan Moore has called “a phosphorescent masterpiece” and “the current century's first landmark work of fantasy.”

Next to the colonial town of Essenwald sits the Vorrh, a vast—perhaps endless—forest. It is a place of demons and angels, of warriors and priests. Sentient and magical, the Vorrh bends time and wipes memory. Legend has it that the Garden of Eden still exists at its heart. Now, a renegade English soldier aims to be the first human to traverse its expanse. Armed with only a strange bow, he begins his journey, but some fear the consequences of his mission, and a native marksman has been chosen to stop him. Around them swirl a remarkable cast of characters, including a Cyclops raised by robots and a young girl with tragic curiosity, as well as historical figures, such as writer Raymond Roussel and photographer Edward Muybridge. While fact and fiction blend, the hunter will become the hunted, and everyone's fate hangs in the balance under the will of the Vorrh.

## The Vorrh Details

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Author : B. Catling

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# From Reader Review The Vorrh for online ebook

## Chris says

I started a bare-bones blog to force myself to write better/longer reviews: <http://scryingorb.wordpress.com/>

Alan Moore *loves* this book. His praise is all over the front and back covers and it begins with a few page introduction where he raves about how fantastic the Vorrh is — how it is the best fantasy novel of this century thus far, how it enlivens a stale genre full of wizards and dragons, how superbly written it is, etc etc. These sort of introductions are always problematic, especially for unproven novels, as they heighten expectations and when they don't live up to them, you feel let down rather than surprised a book you never heard of was actually pretty good. The Vorrh isn't bad, but it's not nearly as excellent or groundbreaking as Moore claims and fantasy hasn't been merely about wizards and dragons in a very long time though it is frustratingly limited at times.

The Vorrh is a massive, primal forest in Africa (unfortunately described as a single monolithic entity and not a large multi-culture continent here) that apparently originates in Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* and may or may not contain the Garden of Eden amongst other things. The novel itself follows several disparate threads / characters that slowly begin to converge within the titular forest during the middle and last thirds of the novel, though they do not come fully together and some threads barely meet at all.

I don't mind this sort of structure, a great plot is not essential, and some of my favorite novels follow it. It does require two things however:

1. An author who is a skilled craftsperson at the prose-level. They can write.
2. Compelling and interesting characters that the reader enjoys following even if the overarching plot is sparse.

For the first requirement, Catling largely succeeds. His writing isn't quite the caliber Alan Moore describes, but it is still better-than-genre-average and he does creeping horror *very* well. The best parts of the book include a side-story involving stillborn babies and the doctor who first diagnosed anorexia. The descriptions of The Vorrh itself are also stellar. Additionally, the book has that difficult to analyze page-turner quality. I read it pretty quick for a big, bulky 500 page novel.

The problem comes with number 2. None of the characters are particularly likeable. Some of this is by design. The real life photographer Edward Muybridge is the best character, and also a total prick. But for the most part, none of them are very compelling. The cyclops, Ishmael, is the worst. He is bland as all hell, and his storyline is boring for a significant chunk of the book. The rest are largely forgettable and some of the fates they meet are sort of bewildering (not in the good way) or shrug-worthy.

On top of that, the women are all miserable characters and all the noteworthy ones have sex with the main male characters. And having sex with them is *why* they are important to the plot. In fact, the only real point-of-view women in the novel have sex with *same* male character. And the only black woman (remember this takes place in Africa...) who gets any characterization at all is both mute and like, savagely sexual.

So ultimately, it has its moments and isn't terribly written but I'd only recommend it with major reservations. It's part of a trilogy and I am not sure if I would read future installments.

Thanks to Green Apple Books in San Francisco for stocking this. Even if I did not love it, it was interesting and somewhat unique and it's good to support independent presses.

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### Alex Sarll says

A weird and astonishing fantasy of Africa. The strange and sprawling cast of protagonists includes a native policeman drawn back into the service of the colonial authorities against whom he once led a bloody revolt, a bowman whose bow's name we know before we know his, a cyclops raised by bakelite robots - and those are just the fictional figures. Mixing with them on equal terms are the historically verified, such as proto-surrealist Raymond Roussel (from whose *Impressions of Africa* the Vorrh's name comes), and photographer and prick Eadweard Muybridge. The links between their stories are initially unclear, and sometimes remain so, but all revolve around the vast forest of the Vorrh, a presence which can bleach men's (or even angels') minds, and distort not only weather patterns, but time. And on the edge, for reasons briefly explained but which ultimately share the necessity of dream-logic, stands one middle-European city, with its burghers and carnivals.

Alan Moore's introduction sites *The Vorrh* combatively against the fantasy mainstream and yes, it's a long way from the generic pseudo-mediaeval post-Tolkien sagas. But it's not quite as anomalous as all that. The use of a lush metropolis as the focus for a fantasy addressing colonialism reminded me of KJ Bishop's *Etched City*, and the overwhelming power of the forest recalled Robert Holdstock's early Mythago books, before he fell into formula. And Moore must be aware of the latter at least, because he referenced them alongside this (at the time unpublished) in the conclusion of *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Century*. Conversely, I didn't think the comparison to David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* which Moore makes really holds water - both books are outlandish, brutal, oddly dreamlike, but Catling comes across throughout as a visionary artist, whereas at times Lindsay reads more like a nutter typing out his magnum opus in the library and reading it aloud as he does so.

Regardless of its peers and antecedents, though, I agree with Moore on this much: *The Vorrh* is a truly remarkable book, and one which shows that it is still possible after all this time to write a truly original novel. We need more like it, by which I of course mean, totally unlike it.

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### Genevieve says

The *Heart of Darkness* meets Borges meets something that might have crawled out of Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Brian Catling's *The Vorrh*—or as editor Tim O'Connell likes to put it, “VVVOOORRRRRHHH”—is an intoxicating novel that defies easy summary. A slippery, twisty book, it always seemed to be squirming out of reach. The blurb that accompanies it is woefully inadequate, though of no fault to the blurber, because how can a book like this be summed up in a few lines? (I'd love to hear about how Catling pitched this to his publishers...) I don't think I've read a book like this in a while. Words like 'genius' and 'sheer madness' and 'Jungian' get jumbled like marbles in my mouth when I try to describe this book for friends.

The easiest way to start talking about *The Vorrh* is to ask, 'What is the Vorrh?' The Vorrh is an ancient, dense forest set in the heart of the African continent, most likely the Congo, and rumored to enclose the

Garden of Eden. Catling took the name from Raymond Roussel's tract, *Impressions of Africa*, which, from what I can tell, was mostly a madcap travelogue of sorts that helped foster the boilerplate Western notion of Africa as an alien place filled with exotic horrors and savagery. (Now, does Catling, an English white man, perpetuate that? I don't think so, but I'll get to that...) Catling freights the Vorrh with its own mythos: It is eternal and endless. It bends time; it cannibalizes the memories of anyone who encroaches too long. The forest is regarded with reverence and fear by both locals and colonials. Nestled next to the Vorrh is Essenwald, a colonial cut-out built to resemble a typical European city, down to the last stone. As the city expands, there are logging trips into parts of the Vorrh to gather lumber and local materials for the building projects, an ironic and very operant metaphor for the idea of colonial incursion. In and around the Vorrh and the city of Essenwald, we meet several characters, Europeans and Africans alike, all transformed or effaced by violence and the clash of cultures in some way, and all drawn to make ill-advised treks into the Vorrh.

Structurally, the novel is essentially a series of image-laden set pieces and disparate storylines. Some stories converge, a few quite violently in the mysterious forest; others circle around the perimeter and lurk. This disjointedness can be maddening. Those readers who like their narratives neat and tidy might be put off, but be patient; eventually things start to coalesce, and what you'll be rewarded with is a wickedly labyrinthine masterpiece.

Populating this surreal-tinged universe are people from real life and history: Edward Muybridge, Sarah Winchester, Sir William Withey Gull, even Raymond Roussel himself (though not exactly by that name) all make their uncanny appearances. There are also fantastical characters: a melancholy cyclops named Ishmael, sentient bakelite robots, and various monstrous (e.g., the anthropophagi) and ethereal beings (the Erstwhile). There are warriors, medicine men, assassins, and hunters. There are charmed weapons of incredible heft and symbolism: one is a bow carved from the remains of a mystic woman, the Bowman's lover; another is a Lee-Enfield rifle protected by charms.

Waves of the macabre and grotesque come up frequently here, but Catling uses them in ways that are far from repellant. Two examples. In the opening scene, an act of vivisection and mutilation becomes transmuted into a solemn, tender tribute of love. It's a depiction of love so deep and profound that it boggles the senses and challenges our modern, sanitized notions of love. To my own perplexity, the scene brought to mind that Neruda sonnet that everyone is so fond of quoting about loving something as dark things should be loved—but with more blood and viscera. It also evokes the reverent butchery in Tibetan sky burials.

In a scene later in the book, an eye, still alive but separated from its body, is consumed by insects:

"The fluid and movement attracted the attentions of other watchers, bringing the hungry curiosity of a stream of black ants to the rock. Without hesitation they continued the dissection that Tsungali had started. He watched the eye being nibbled and ferried away, its muscles still alive and contracting as the insects held it aloft like a great prize, dragging it backwards along the glistening black chain of their frantic bodies. A few minutes later, there was nothing left—even the stain was fought over and diminished by the porous stone and the cooking sun."

I got goosebumps when I read that. (I've lived in the tropics and know how the forest can eat you alive!) Taken alone, without context, the passage may seem overly graphic, though you can't deny its effect! And in any case, Catling doesn't use imagery like this gratuitously; images like this fit with the various leitmotifs centered around vision and sight throughout the book (think the Cyclops, Muybridge and his brand of photography, references to inner eyes and occult visions, blindness, and so on). In this strange world, it makes narrative sense that clarity and sight would be consumed.

For me, the most difficult parts were the depictions of sexual frenzy, often nightmarish, and often streaked

with violence or mute suffering. (Kristen Roupenian discusses this more in her review.) These parts will probably be the most unsettling for readers. For what it's worth, Catling has gone on record to say that the trodden-upon female characters in the book are part of a larger set piece that eventually sees them exceeding their male counterparts in the next two books (yes, *The Vorrh* is part of a planned trilogy). If this is a chronicle of oppression being inverted or displaced, then it makes sense that a baseline needs to be first established.

More cynical readings of *The Vorrh* may dismiss the surreal tropes as another kind of broad cultural brushstroke pilloried by Binyavanga Wainaina in *Granta*. But I personally think Catling is operating on a completely different level here. It's a critique of colonialism and the violence and distortion of identity/self in both the oppressor and oppressed, but it's also a kind of alternate history where all bets are off. But critical theory aside, what takes center stage is how Catling maneuvers through the fantasy tropes. The fantastical so deeply permeates the narrative reality of the book that you are constantly wondering, 'Am I awake? Am I dreaming this?' In the words of Alan Moore, it "leaves the reader filthy with its seeds and spores, encouraging new growth and threatening a great reforestation of the imagination."

Catling is a published poet and that sensibility very much informs the prose style of the novel, where pedestrian, ordinary things constantly get illuminated and flushed with new life. Consider this line, a description of dusk, which another reviewer here also flagged as Catling-prose exemplar:

"Outside, the swallows were changing to bats, to measure the space of the sky with sound instead of sight."

So expect a lot of lovely, lush language in *The Vorrh*. Catling is so good at evoking the uncanny with imagery, taking something that's ordinary or familiar and making it strange.

Overall, this is a spectacular book, like a flicker of light that makes other books seem bland and monochromatic. I give it the highest possible rating because it dares to explore; it's primal and potent. I'd recommend this if you've been secretly yearning for something to jolt you out of your reading doldrums, something that will crack open your subconscious and blur the borders between prose and poetry...and dreams.

"VVVOOORRRRRHHH," people.

[Disclaimer: I received an ARC copy of this book from the publisher through the Goodreads First Reads Program in exchange for an honest review.]

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### **Rachel (Kalanadi) says**

Ummm. That was a trip. Maybe not a good trip, but not a boring one.

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### **Tim Hicks says**

"B. Catling is a poet, sculptor, painter and performance artist." Hmm. Henceforth I may stick to books by authors.

Terry Gilliam and Tom Waits liked this book. Jeff Vandermeer says it "reads like a long-lost classic of Decadent or Symbolist literature." No doubt someone else says Catling's sensibilities are informed by a contempt for post-something, deconstructionalism and a desire to bring a new structure to fantasy unencumbered by such things as a coherent plot.

There are large chunks here that appear to be part of a real book in which someone is telling you a story. Then I guess the acid kicks in and Castaneda goes with J. G. Ballard and Sam Delany to the Heart of Darkness.

Eadweard Muybridge is here for no reason I can see except that perverts are always useful when you need a kinky sex scene because the plot has derailed. And why waste the research? Maybe he was meant to be in another book that fell through.

This book may have ended well. I'll never know, because I bailed after 300-some pages.

If you took four 300-level classes in philosophy, and speak of "lit'racher" and "the dance" (terpsichore, not pro sports), you might enjoy this. If you didn't, you might call it some of the rude words I'm thinking.

But I've read better far-out fantasy than this.

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## **Bradley says**

I think I was really prepping myself up for this one just a little too much. I wanted to expect lyrical language, and I did get a lot of lyrical language, and I wanted to expect some rather interesting ideas and concepts put together in a poetic way, all the while getting immersed in fantasy and science fiction and a truly heaping helping of the dark stuff, enough to consider the novel as a true horror.

What I did get was quite a few truly beautiful and evocative scenes of robots in a time and memory bending endless forest, an adventure with a bow made of a violently killed woman, lots of exploration in the real world during the early days of photography, socialites, mind-doctors, and a truly enormous amount of graphic and violent sex, sex, sex, and strangely enough, it's mostly the women being violent.

So why not give it a higher rating just for all the interesting ideas and the near-juxtaposition and crossovers between the magical cyborg forest and a modern european town?

Because the story was only able to grab me fitfully. Sometimes, I was fully engaged, and other times, I was just catching myself wondering why I was sitting through these odd photography sex-bondage scenes or watching a truly horrific torture, and while I then reminded myself that this is considered a horror, I then wondered what all the other story bits were doing to improve or engage me in the horror sense.

And then I realized that it's all my fault with cultural expectations that equate love without amazing torture. That true love doesn't necessarily require slow vivisections. Silly me, the yokel.

Like I said, it was hard to connect. It really was beautiful on many levels, to be sure, but it was more like a passing ship in the night followed by the screams of tortured men and the twang of a magical bow. Alas.

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## Ryan Middlebrook says

There is a dark place in the world.

Essentially this place has been captured by Brian Catling in his novel *The Vorrh*, an alternative history of a soul sucking forest in the midst of Africa in the early 20th century. I finished this somewhat plotless book that reads more as a descent into madness than a traditional novel while questioning myself the whole time, “Why are you going on?” In the end, I probably shouldn’t have, and you probably shouldn’t either.

There seems to be a lot to explain as to why I would not recommend you reading a book that for most purposes was well written and, at least if you believe the reviews, well received. I’ll try my hand at some key points.

Have you ever had a friend that thinks that he is so clever when he turns a phrase? Maybe like a non-sequitur or a simple play on words that gives his sentence an unintended, but to him, serendipitous meaning. Now imagine having to read a book full of these crafted sentences. Sure maybe one in five come off with some power, but honestly, it becomes a slog rather than the occasional moments of delight like they can be. The author is trying too hard to get a little nod of the hat with each phrase. Some may see this as lyrical, but hundreds of pages worth makes you long for the spartan description of Hemingway.

Now let’s talk about description or world-building or character development or anything else besides, say, a plot. This is what Mr. Catling offers to you in this tome – which is supposedly the first of a trilogy. I couldn’t tell you what the next volume could be about because I’m not sure I could tell you what the story of this one is. There are a bunch of fleshed-out characters and the world of *The Vorrh* is elaborately assembled with such dark intention that makes the reader ready to escape. A story, such as it is, more or less develops just because the characters kind of bump into each other – not because there is any direction to the tale. Several long “side” stories have virtually no relation to the main characters or the *Vorrh* at all. It’s almost as if separate stories were just cobbled into this novel because they exhibited the same mood as the others and it would thicken the book. I love world-building and character development, but there seems to be a sad tendency – especially in the fantasy genre – to substitute worlds with stories. I’m sorry, but give me an O. Henry short story every day that has a plot than 500 pages of an immaculate world with no point. It is like many modern authors are trying to be Tolkein but missing the point.

Finally I need to mention the evil. *The Vorrh* is a dark place. It turns everyone that goes into it a hollow shell of a person. Make no mistake: this is the intention of this book to those who read it. Every single character is a dark, twisted caricature of a person. There are no heroes, no good guys, no noble purposes. The one character who should be a bright spot is a woman who receives back her sight after being born blind. In such a gloomy, oppressive world, surely this one would find joy in her sight. Almost purposefully as soon as the reader thinks this, the author spends the time to show the ugliness of the sight of flowers in this character’s mind. The gift of sight is actually a curse – for really to all the people that inhabit this world, life is a curse. I rarely psychoanalyze authors, but Mr. Catling has presented a worldview that sees corruption and evil in all things. I don’t know if I know anyone who I think would like this book, and if I did, I would be scared to give it to them because it might sink them beyond hope.

I usually don’t bring up the Bible in non-Christian works, but the author has taken perverse pleasure at bringing up many illustrations of it and making them horrible. In *Phillipians*, Paul says “whatever is true,



whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” I cannot think of a better antithesis to that statement than this book. It is a mire of thought. Avoid it.

2 stars out of 10

Red Eagle's Legacy

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### **James Chatham says**

[4.5 stars]

I can say with all certainty that I've never read anything like this before. It's like a mosaic of strangeness - a group of narratives surrounding the Vorrh, a forest in an unknown location on Earth. The way most of these narratives slowly come together and intertwine is intelligent, and the sense of discovery throughout the novel is wonderful. The writing is simply outstanding: at times it reminds me of China Miéville in the way that Catling has this large vocabulary and isn't afraid to use verbosity when it suits the novel, but he also knows when to use restraint. This is a difficult book to review, but suffice it to say that it is an amazing and very much unique novel that places Catling firmly on the New Weird map.

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### **Sam Leeves says**

Every so often, a book comes along that defies genre. 'No Country for Old Men' is more than a thriller or a western. 'The Big Sleep' is more than a crime novel. And what exactly is 'The Catcher in the Rye'? Brian Catling's masterful 'The Vorrh' is another such book. This is not just another Fantasy. There are remnants of the Western in there, Adventure, Crime, Romance. And still, it transcends these genres as well. It is simply 'The Vorrh' and is a much better book because of that.

Of course, due to the supernatural themes and the slight eccentricities of some of the characters, it will inevitably go down as a Fantasy novel. This isn't entirely wrong, nor is it a black mark against the book, indeed, it's a genre that hold some weight. 'The Vorrh' is, however, a new breed of Fantasy. Catling creates a world of wonder and imbues it with Cormac McCarthy-esque violence and a tension that is entirely it's own. Again, it is simply 'The Vorrh'.

I enjoyed the book greatly, from the richness of the language to the idiosyncrasies of the alternate world that had been created. There were times I feared that there were a few too many characters, but, as I read on, I realised just how necessary they all were. There were a few characters I would have liked to have seen slightly more of, but, again I soon realised, that that would have ruined the mystery surrounding them.

Put simply, 'The Vorrh' is a book that is hard to define owing mainly to its stark originality. If you're looking for a book where the language is rich and the storytelling is masterful, look no further. And, in this world where there are a few too many shades of grey, who isn't looking for that?

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## Jeff Raymond says

Closer to a 2.5.

I finished reading this close to two weeks ago and I'm only writing a review now. This is emblematic of my frustration with *The Vorrh*, a book that came with a lot of buzz in some circles and, in the first 80 or so pages, really established something I thought I was falling in love with.

This is, at its heart, a sort of Weird fantasy tale. There's a small town bordering a forest that is believed to be magical or haunted or dangerous or some combination of all of those things. One man seeks to explore the Vorrh, others are trying to stop him, and just the strange character of the town in general ends up dominating everything.

It's a book that suffers from the same thing we see a lot of the New Weird doing (even if this is not explicitly categorized as such), in that the setting and mood of the book overwhelmingly take precedence over the plot, and what ends up happening is that the construction of the story takes a back seat over the worldbuilding aspects. What was constructed deserved a better tale to go with it, and it became repeatedly difficult to care about anything that was going on.

Just a definite disappointment. Some readers might find some interesting stuff here, and if you're into significant worldbuilding this might be one to look up, but otherwise...

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## Violet wells says

In my teens a novel I loved was Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*. I've never reread it for fear of spoiling my memory of the magic it weaved into my imagination. It was like the perfect transition from the otherworldly bewitchments of children's books to the more sober worlds of adult literature. *The Vorrh* is an imaginatively bizarre romp of a novel in the spirit of *Gormenghast* with a generous dose of the glorious controlled insanity of Thomas Pynchon thrown in.

The characters in the Vorrh include a one-eyed cyclops with three Bakelite robot guardians, a male wanderer armed with a sentient bow and arrow made of the body parts of a beloved female mentor, a blind woman miraculously healed by a sexual union, a pioneer photographer who is commissioned to photograph the ghost of a beloved husband. The Vorrh itself is a sentient forest on the outskirts of a generic European city in an unspecified time of history - it's often in Victorian in atmosphere. Somewhere at its heart is the Garden of Eden. It's rumoured Adam and angels still wander there.

A frequent problem whenever a writer lets his imagination run wild is architecture tends to play second fiddle and this is true here. Structure is its weakest feature, seeming rather prosaic and half-baked in relation to the imaginative blitzkrieg of the imagery. Perhaps this is why I can't pretend I understood what it all added up to. But on the whole I had a lot of wild fun reading it.

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## **Rick says**

Man... I could probably write a 5-page essay on this one. Given how narratively dense the book is, though, I imagine I wouldn't be the only one. I fluttered back and forth between wanting to give this 4 stars or 5. Ultimately I chose 5. Here's why:

This is by far one of the most imaginatively wild novels I've read. Ever. There is so much going on in "The Vorrh" that it's kind of impossible to describe. It's set in post-WWI colonial Africa, but it's also set in mid-to-late 1800s England and America. It's an adventure novel, but it's also a strange, Victorian romance. It's a mystery. It's historical fiction, but it's definitely fantasy. It's allegorical... maybe? It's certainly unlike any fantasy I've ever read. There aren't any dragons, and there aren't wizards in any form you'd recognize, but the supernatural forces of the Vorrh are present throughout the book, even if you don't really grasp what they are or how they're propelling this wide cast of strange, fascinating characters. This book is jam-packed with imagination, and if you don't kind of let yourself go with the flow, it'll probably be a jarring read for some. Let yourself go with the flow. I don't know how it will make you feel, but the story will be worth it. This story fires the imagination, even as it leaves you bug-eyed with jealousy at some of the stuff Catling's created here.

It reminded me a lot of some of Gene Wolfe's stories, or maybe Samuel Delany's. I mean that as a compliment, because those are two great, great writers. But the book is dense. It is not a quick read.

The reason I almost gave this 4 stars was that because in spite of how marvelous the story is, the prose can sometimes be very, very convoluted. For the first 100 pages or so, every sentence seems loaded with so much metaphor and simile and personification and flowery adjectives that it really made me want to sit down with Mr. Catling and be like, Hey, this is great, but let's edit this just a WEE BIT, ok? The writing is not bad, by any far stretch. But as I read the book I could kind of tell that this was a first novel, mainly in how the story evolved over time, and how the pacing picks up. Like I said, the first 100 pages were a bit of a slog, even as he introduced these crazy, fascinating characters set in this familiar yet totally fantastical world. But after those 100 pages, the prose eased up a bit on the ostentation, and the story really took off. And it's a hell of a ride, even when you're not sure what's going on or why things are happening.

I can't imagine everyone will love this book. And I imagine I'll need to read it again, or sit down with others who've read it and discuss before I really have a full grasp of what happened. Heaven and Hell, angels and demons and Adam and Eve... I imagine I might have missed some of the stuff happening "behind the scenes". But Catling's imagination really is a marvel to behold. His writing is wonderful (once you get past the grandiloquence), and there are so many scenes and chapters that will leave you with goosebumps. There are scenes that will make you laugh, scenes that will terrify you. It's a bit of a trek, for sure, but the journey is well worth it.

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## **Antonomasia says**

Feb 2014

*The Vorrh* is an unusual and remarkable historical fantasy though perhaps it's coming to it after reading a lot of classics that makes it not *quite* as mindblowing as some reviews say. The vast cast of characters with interlocking stories, some of whom don't meet in person, tallies with current trends in literary fiction. The glorious surfeit of adjectives and adverbs recalls the too-richness of decadent literature but (and I speak as

someone who's too fond of those myself) the clause rhythms occasionally become samey and Catling could perhaps have varied this a bit more with metaphors and other means of description. Still, there are gems of that ilk: *Outside, the swallows were changing to bats, to measure the space of the sky with sound instead of sight.* Damned interesting way to say "night was falling".

Decadence, Surrealism (the title, the name of a vast African forest, comes from Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* and Roussel is himself a character) and late-Victorian / early twentieth century imperialism in its sinister authority and boys' own colonial adventures form the background. There is a kind of steampunk/dieselpunk here, but it's unusual, skewed, not the stuff of cliché: animate, liquid-filled Bakelite androids for instance. There is sex and gore and body-horror. The romance of intrepid adventure and transgressive love. And the profundity of people's struggles with damaged bodies and brains. (Including the notorious photographic pioneer Eadweard Muybridge who wrestles and succeeds with some aspects of self-control following brain injury but can no longer be entirely master of himself and his now—angry temperament.) Fantasy motifs are here including a legendary bow and magical healing, but tropes are rarely created and progressed in the expected ways. This is not only a weird alternative history but an alternative and novel way of doing fantasy, both beautiful and nightmarish.

Sometimes episodes in the fictitious African colony of Essenwald feel too European; they are set among colonial settlers, but more mentions of climate and of animals we know of as sub-Saharan African, besides the strange mythical beings, would create a stronger sense of geographic place. It's a play on colonials' determination to remain European, but I wonder if the presentation makes it too easy for the reader to lose sight of the location and therefore the author's point. It's also possible that not having read Roussel, I'm not appreciating the tribute aspect in the writing.

Character roles are fairly true to those of class, gender and race for the time and those who have strong views on the subject should note that *The Vorrh* is often – though not exclusively – a story of the colonisers more than of the colonised. (Coming from the literary fiction perspective, this is so unusual in an ambitious newly published book as to have come round to being a novelty. I can't comment on serious contemporary fantasy as I usually stick to the humorous stuff which tends to have a lot of time for the underdog.) The close-third person narrative is taken on by many characters in turn but some readers will find it notably unfortunate that the inner thoughts of a black woman only take up one and a half pages in the whole novel – whilst a black man and two upper-class white women have voices as strong in the narrative as various white men. There is certainly critique of colonialism here, though plotted in the form of stylised, surrealist repetition and occasional subversion, rather than the currently-usual realist rewriting from the perspective of the colonised. (I can see both sides on this sort of thing and would like to be able to write in such a way that's giving the right information to those who care, and also acknowledges those who are tired of hearing about it and don't think art should have to follow narrowly prescriptive rules – but that's probably impossible.)

*The Vorrh* is only the first in a projected trilogy; there were times, especially around pp.3-400, when I wasn't sure I would want to do this again but towards the end there was obviously so much still to happen that I became eager to know what would happen next and how some characters and the author's approach to the subject would develop.

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August 2013, was up to c. p.200

Beautiful language and description. Sometimes I parse reflexively and note that there are too many adjectives – but they work regardless. So rich and luscious and decadent. (I overuse adjectives too.) Its fin de siècle decadence is gorgeous though sometimes I forget the story is in Africa because the style is one that

automatically makes me imagine a European setting. (Not least because I first started *The Vorrh* after reading a modern African novel...And the European style itself could arguably indicate something about the colonial era it's all set in.)

Eventually I realised why I'd got so irked by a few criticisms of the book. There's the usual thing where I simply read plenty of interesting characters as people first and genders some way down the list. (It annoys me when people who may see that as the ideal to reach, try and impose petty representation politics which actually impedes a relatively ungendered view.)

And I see a negative judgement of the idea that a character had sex with another character, when they do have a life other than as a blow-up doll, to be essentially puritanical rather than right-on.

(These politics of representation I see a lot of on Goodreads, usually from Americans, take things too much the other way and impose their own hegemony, arguing for a type of politically approved cliché in which certain categories of characters must behave in prescribed ways.)

And most of all in *The Vorrh*, about the Bowman and Este. The second scene of the book was electric and one of the most moving things I've read in a long long time. (And that thought I can see alienating a few people already.) The scene provided an illustration of love of such depth and viscosity that it's almost useless in modern sensible existence, something I only ever found it possible to put vague form to, always unspoken, using metaphors from ancient world religions or ideas of Frida Kahlo-esque pictures I had not the skill to make. But these did not contain anything like the connection and reciprocity found here. The mutual wanting-to is almost everything that matters in that scene... they are each other's religion and neither is dictating. As I read it they were simply people who were connected that way and I imagined either being either sex, or some other again, race etc irrelevant, for it went way beyond anything of that sort.

Back down to earth as it were, this is a book which I have put off finishing a few times because I think it would seem a waste for me to read it when I'm not feeling somewhere near-ish to my best. Yet it's also (especially after reading *Heart of Darkness* as background) enthralling.

I find myself concerned on the book's behalf that it doesn't take the political stuff seriously enough to rank alongside classics, but perhaps that's because it's a long time since I've read much fantasy. (It doesn't toe the conventional party line on a few of matters, and that's my theory as to why it didn't make the Booker longlist. Presuming it was submitted that is - being with a small publisher it would have been their best candidate, not having dozens of rivals as would, say, a novel published by Jonathan Cape. From what I've read of it so far, this year's Booker list is really rather PC, perhaps forgetting that real diversity also includes something that doesn't follow all the rules to the letter. Though I too would have balked at pushing forward a book - Christopher Priest's *The Adjacent*, a more frequently mentioned SFF candidate - which contains a futuristic totalitarian Islamic Republic of Great Britain.) I do nitpick at a lot of books but *The Vorrh* is one which I'd love to see more people appreciating without nitpicking because it is (so far) incredible enough to transcend that. (Incidentally, as Raymond Roussel was no more than a name to me, I had needed a recommendation to see beyond the title. Vogon poetry and vore were the ideas it brought to mind, neither exactly appetising.)

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January 2014, after reading various blogs and papers about critical race theory

Whilst I've now read quite a lot more relevant material, I still find that discussions don't have room for people who disagree including when they are from its own group or from a mixed background. There is a lot of discussion of negative stereotypes which are simply unfamiliar to me in the first place, some because they are more characteristic of American media. (Which I would rather not have known of at all in case they affect how I see anyone.) Also I think I've missed out on the stereotyping of Africa in adult literature

because, having always had an attraction to stories about colder places, I have read very little about it in fiction since children's classics. My ideas about African countries come largely from news, documentaries, politics courses and so on, mentioning individual country names and characteristics and is largely factually-based, possibly with an overemphasis on poverty and people wearing second-hand western clothes, rather than the sort of thing some people complain of regarding this book, which for me is very different and unfamiliar.

At the same time I can't deny *The Vorrh* contains elements of this. I guess that what I argue for is less monolithic criticism from and of either side in these nebulous contemporary representation issues as regards single art works, whilst being decent to the people I meet in real life, and against institutionalised racism. (I just don't think fictional people should be taken as particularly relevant to the people you meet in real life - I was a kid who grew up thinking they were and fiction gave me no bloody idea of how to be or how anyone else would be once I left home. The types of people you find in books are often unlike those you meet at work and so forth, even when they are not specifically SFF.)

Yet here, the opening scene could be interpreted as a metaphor critical of colonialism. It's not that simple.

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## **Bryan Alexander says**

Reading *The Vorrh* ...

Reading *The Vorrh* reminds me of the first time I read Gene Wolfe. Catling offers a very similar combination of mystery, allusion, tricky plots, some beautiful sentences, unpredictability, touches of horror, and a powerful sense of meaning just beneath the surface. *The Vorrh* is like *Shadow of the Torturer* in that it's a standalone book which is also, apparently, the start of a series. This is also my way of offering very high praise.

If the Hugo awards matter ever again, this is now my second nomination for the year's best novel.

It's the kind of book you reread parts of while reading, and which you begin again immediately upon finishing.

It's not a comfortable, friendly book. The narrative(s) isn't (aren't) built that way. *The Vorrh* doesn't offer much in the way of characters you empathize with. Instead it's a challenge, a lunge in unexpected directions, energetically doing work on multiple levels not all of which the reader can grasp right away.

I've been reading parts of this novel out loud, partly from pleasure, and also so dig more deeply into passages. It's that kind of book.

Alan Moore compares it to *Voyage to Arcturus*, and that makes sense to me.

...before I go further with impressions and comparisons, I'll introduce what the book is actually about. Then I'll head into spoilers.

*The Vorrh* doesn't have a single plot, but multiple storylines that intersect around a fantastic African forest of great antiquity, the titular Vorrh, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We follow a French writer who visits the forest, several Europeans living in a colonial city at the forest's edge, a local ex-soldier, the great Scots photographer Muybridge, and several local shamans and/or medical doctors, not to mention

mysterious slaves, William Gull, a cyclops, monsters, robotic teaching puppets, a growing population of ghosts, a disembodied assassin, and, most importantly, a woman turned into a bow. Their stories dodge back and forth in time, especially as identities change or disappear.

A note on genre: as you might gather from the preceding, *The Vorrh* is a fantasy, or a work of magic realism. We see realistic details alongside objects and forces drawn from myth and imagination. The forest seems to exist somewhere all across North Africa, stretching down along the eastern coast, yet also near the Mediterranean. As with, say, the works of Tim Powers, this novel works fantastic elements into the nitty gritty of daily life. It also reads like surrealist art and fiction, with genuinely strange scenes and ideas: a cyclops going to a carnival, after being taught from mysterious crates by helpful puppets.

*The Vorrh* is also an adventure novel, with several characters engaged on epic quests, and including gunfire, ambushes, betrayals, curses, sex scenes, torture, and rebellion. \*And\* it's alternate history, positing a colonial enterprise that didn't exist, and including historical personages, such as Roussel, Gull and Muybridge. Additionally, steampunk fans may find some fun machines.

A note on style: Catling has a flair for surprising word choice and lovely phrases, with touches of sardonic wit.

Este had foreseen her death while working in our garden, an uncapping of momentum in the afternoon sun. (Kindle location 131)

He stepped over a gurgling drain and emptied the bullets out of the gun; they fell like brass comets into the speeding firmament below. (4291)

Cyrena Lohr combed the city and caught three names, which now wriggled in her teeth. (2589)

"I want to be forgotten for who I am, not judged for how I have been made." (5934)

For so it is among those who shed lives every few years: They keep their deflated interior causeways, hold them running parallel with their current usable ones; ghost arteries, sleeping shrunken next to those that pump life. Hushed lymphatics, like quiet ivy alongside the speeding juice of now. Nerve trees like bone coral, hugging the whisper of bellowing communications.(338)

...a great stench of hope rose... (3686)

The camera was a collector not of light, but of time, and the time it cherished most was in the anticipation of death. (1609)

She had found [a book] confused and obscure. No doubt it was art, for she knew him to be a man of dangerous appetites and total selfishness.(2001)

She had a smouldering attractiveness that hid beneath a face that melted uncontrollably between the ages of eight and eighty-one. (5507)

A note on references: *The Vorrh* opens with a flourish of entertaining allusions. Frobenius is there to make us think of German colonialism in Africa. Conrad brings up the European enterprise more generally. *Zen and*

*the Art of Archery* teases us about the bow.

Once the book gets going, Catling quietly builds up a larger referential world. The Bible is a touchstone throughout, sometimes literally. Flann O'Brien is namechecked once (2525) , to my delight.

A note on politics: *The Vorrh* soaks in Europe's colonialist past, and runs all kinds of risks in doing so. European characters exploit and literally enslave the locals. Catling, not from Africa, narrates from local points of view. The entire enterprise risks something like Orientalism by creating a fantasy world in a far-off, exploitable land for colonial people to explore.

But Catling pulls it off, I think. The Europeans don't fare that well, overall, resembling less Stanley and more Mungo Park. For example, (view spoiler) And the Vorrh isn't really feminized. Kij Johnson goes further, arguing that "what this book is *not*, is about Africa".

Do I recommend *The Vorrh*? Do I ever. But with cautions. It's challenging, not often giving readers comfortable ways in. The plots sprawl and their actions often suspend themselves. Reading enough of this novel brings about a kind of trance effect, not unlike watching a Tarkovsky film. This ain't Dragonlance.

So read it. This may be the greatest fantasy of the decade.  
Here's one good review.

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## **Ariel says**

Reads like an old white dude's psychoanalytic sessions.

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