

THE COMPLETE *DARK SHADOWS*
(OF MY CHILDHOOD)

BOOK 1

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The Complete Dark Shadows (of My Childhood) Book 1
by Tony Trigilio

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1.

*Night is drawing nearer and nearer to Collinwood.
Another man has come—a stranger who is not a stranger.*

Everyone pushes Willie Loomis around,
like a scarecrow, and he only makes it worse

busting Barnabas Collins from his casket.
That's Barnabas, looking as if he were

alive, posing next to his ancient portrait
at the foot of the stairs. Barnabas Collins,

source of my childhood nightmares, rolls
the "r" in "Victoria" with a lilt, a graceful excess,

prim and courtly and swallowing blood.

Over drinks at The Blue Whale, Burke spends
half an episode apologizing to Carolyn,

who walks out when the samba music starts.
Two great houses in Collinwood, Barnabas

compares one to the pyramids of Egypt:
"The plaster walls were made from crushed

clamshells and horsehair." Joe, distracted
at The Blue Whale, keeps seeing that little calf

drained of his blood (but doesn't seem to notice
the half-shell ashtrays). Don't bring Willie

back to Collinwood to apologize to Carolyn,
Jason, unless you want him to faint when he

sees the 207-year-old vampire's portrait.

Watching three straight episodes with Liz
but Barnabas doesn't appear, and tonight

Jason said "Willie" 33 times (if the writers
don't start giving Barnabas more scenes,

how can I expect her to understand I slept
with my shoulders hunched to ward off

vampires as a child?). Yet another scene
begins with Roger pouring sherry from

the parlor decanter; swishing his lowball glass,
he calls Jason and Willie “sea tramps.”

Who on earth writes Victoria’s tortured
introductions: here comes a dawn that

“slowly creeps toward Collinwood”
and a man (Willie?) who “emerges from

the darkest pit the night can know”—
who, through the mists, “brings with him

the torments of the night into the day.”

“I’ll lose everything if I stick with you, kid,”
Jason says with a straight face to Willie,

who disappears into the cemetery at night
and lies in bed tossing and sighing all day

like a nineteenth-century neurasthenic.
Stroking the wolf’s-head cane he used

to shatter my bedroom window
in a recurring nightmare, Barnabas jokes

with Maggie about night-time loneliness
and apologizes for striking up a conversation:

flirting, you’re doing it wrong, old man.

Standing before a wavy portrait of a man
holding a baby or hugging himself—

each time I rewind, it’s something different—
Barnabas asks Maggie’s father, Sam,

to paint him by candlelight after sundown

. . . and they can start right now, tonight.

Episode 223, in which Little David,
the psychic child, fumbles his lines

four times in one scene and Elizabeth
Stoddard calls a painting a photograph.

Why is David so scared of the Old House
—he faced down his mother’s ghost there,

after all, in a circle of flame, long before
Barnabas rose from the grave.

Maggie doesn’t have to make sense
all the time, especially when she dreams

she opened a coffin on a misty plain
and found herself, dead, inside

(“Serenity is my favorite emotion,” Barnabas
confesses to Sam over drinks at The Blue Whale,

after quitting tonight’s portrait-sitting early).

Those things in that room in the basement—
the locked room—don’t mention them

again, Carolyn. Don’t trust a doctor
who says, “I’ve taken some blood tests

and I’ll run tests on them to see
what the corpuscles are up to.”

Maggie wanders off into the graveyard
on Eagle Hill the way the elderly

walk away from nursing homes
and stumble into traffic.

The episode impossible to fit into
one sentence: howling dogs getting closer

and the doctor asks Maggie if she stuck
a pin in her neck right before he begins

the only blood-transfusion house call
in the history of American soap opera.

Maybe Maggie's just a sleepwalker.

Victoria tells it the only way she knows,
another dark and tragic introduction:

“out of the tempestuous blackness
comes a horror that can't be explained”

(blame scriptwriter Malcolm Marmorstein,
who did 15 episodes of *Peyton Place*

the next year, 1968, and in 1993 wrote
and directed *Love Bites*, which starred

Adam Ant as vampire Zachary Simms).

I understand, Maggie—I, too, expected
Barnabas would break into my bedroom

in the middle of the night. My jugular
was yours in close-up, moist bite marks

throbbing double-time. “That room
the nurse had left open just a crack,”

the doctor says, pointing to the window
where Maggie disappeared, “was wide open.”

Poor Willie, everyone's sado-masochistic
toy, beaten by Barnabas with his wolf's-

head cane and, now, slapped bloody
by Jason who claims, “I'm prepared

to go all the way, my boy.”

Wearing Josette's wedding dress—
the love of Barnabas's eighteenth-

century life—Maggie walks down
the staircase in time with the catatonic

music box in her left hand. Willie pretends
he's maître d': remembers to call Maggie

“Josette,” adjusts the candlesticks
originally part of Josette's dowry

(bought in France, where a silversmith
made them from Josette's own design—

“You always had impeccable taste,”
Barnabas says, then asks her to play

that wretched music box again.)

Roger, put down your third glass of sherry
and hire a psychic governess for your son—

Little David sitting next to Barnabas,
his clairvoyant antennae unable to detect

this is a dead man who sleeps all day
in a coffin. This must be how I spent

Memorial Day, 1967: watching Episode 241
with my mother (later, many nightmares

of Barnabas's reproving and predatory
glare at Little David). I agree, Burke,

it's not a skirmish between corpuscles;
when you examine a blood sample “under

a microphone,” it's not mysterious at all.

Watching an episode with Liz, Michael, Trish,
winter vacation in San Diego, the four of us

sharing weed-spiked Rice Krispies Treats
and chocolate covered almonds, unraveling

the mysterious Theremin in the *Dark Shadows*
theme music—“It’s like the first synthesizer,”

Michael says, imitating the instrument’s
science-fiction whistle; “it’s in the Beach Boys,

‘Good Vibrations,’ and Radiohead uses it, too.”
I promised them Mrs. Stoddard would botch

her lines, but her performance was flawless
(tonight, though, she blundered again,

an episode I saw alone, back in Chicago).

“I guess some of the most beautiful sights
I’ve ever seen have been microscopic views

of hideous malignancies,” says Dr. Woodard,
who nevertheless is terrified of Maggie’s blood.

An entire episode without a vampire—
at least I got to see Roger toss back

two more glasses of sherry. Signs that Sam
is an artist: rolls up only one of his shirt sleeves,

smokes a pipe whose bowl is carved to look
like Ben Franklin, forgets to eat, paints

a vampire in the middle of the night,
can’t control his temper, paces his studio

with brush in hand (and he’s a purist—
Burke invites Sam to dinner and promises,

“We can knock your pet hate, pop art”).

David (Trinidad, not Little David, the psychic child), sent an Amazon link this morning

for *Dark Shadows: The Complete Original Series*,
1,225 episodes (I will compose one sentence

for each), priced \$539.99—he’s written
300 *Peyton Place* haiku over three years,

understands I’ll find a way to afford it—
and I noticed a customer review anticipating

a “soon-to-be-released” *Dark Shadows* film
starring Johnny Depp (who would require

several coats of Barnabas’s eye shadow just
to resemble a vampire); I worried all day

the film could rob my poem of relevance,
as if I’m writing star-fuck verse instead

of excavating childhood night terrors,
though I really tried to feel gratitude

for Depp: as David reminded me,
Dark Shadows: The Complete Original Series

exists only because of the new movie,
as a promo vehicle—in a coffin-shaped

DVD box I want, badly, to own, even if
the medium is obsolete by the time I write

this poem’s 1,225th and final sentence—
and after pre-ordering the complete series

tonight, I witnessed the most terrifying
episode thus far: down went the coffin lid

on screaming Maggie, the scene shot
first-person POV, an utterly psychotic way

for director Lela Swift to tell this story

(what compelled Swift, who also
directed the first and last episodes
of *Dark Shadows*, to decide that all of us
watching on 6/7/67, especially my mother
and me, her toddler son, should feel
as if Barnabas just buried us alive?).

There's something about that room
in the basement: keeping it under
lock and key for 18 years is bound
to invite a certain amount of curiosity—
especially for those of us who can't shake
the image from our heads of Maggie
buried alive for a night in the Collins tomb.
It's taken 40 episodes to hear the echo
of my mother's name, "Margaret," in Maggie,
who sits at the Victorian gothic mirror
in her bedroom prison, locked inside
by Barnabas, and tries fitfully to remember
who she is—"Maggie, yes, Maggie, that's
your name," she says, "that's *my* name,
I must remember that, 'Maggie' for 'Margaret,'
I am Maggie Evans"—the night after I dream
my mother, Margaret, now 10 years dead,
appeared in the kitchen of an abandoned
house where I squatted in Chicago's
Logan Square neighborhood, wanted
to hear about my new writing projects
as I made her a grilled cheese sandwich;

and if she were alive tonight, I'd ask:
back in 1967, when we watched this episode
together (10 days before my first birthday),
was she angry like I am now, in my living room,
that Maggie opened her shameless music box
once more and inflicted its merry-go-round
melody on us, over and over and over.