

Shadows From the Land Down Under

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The author, circa 1991-1992. 2 or 3 years old.

Some of my earliest memories of being alive are of *Dark Shadows*. For a long time I never knew what show it was, and I'm still not sure which babysitter showed it to me. I was no more than two or three years old.

I rediscovered the show in 2023, after a gap of more than thirty years, and I instantly remembered everything.

The memories are patchy: I was born in 1989, and these memories go further back than most everything else I've got.

I've dreamt of Collinwood and the Old House often since then, though I didn't know I was doing it. I just thought I was getting dreams about big spooky mansions like every normal kid does. Since rediscovering the show, however, I now firmly recognize that I've been exploring both houses on and off in my dreams ever since—particularly the stairwells, drawing rooms, and entrance halls.

To say my chance encounter had an effect on me would be an understatement.

Also I'm from Australia. We only ever aired 130 episodes in the first place, in 1972, and we never repeated them either. We didn't get cable over here until the late

'90s—this was earlier. And it wasn't the reboot: too many small, well-remembered details, including specific actors' faces. This was the genuine article.

No other Australian millennial seems to have memories like mine. As far as I know, this only happened to me.

How did it happen?

I have a lot of theories. Not knowing which is closest to the truth, my adult imagination has filled out each option equally. In the absence of one definitive scenario, it's as if you've lived a faintly-outlined version of all of them at once. Maybe I'll find out who showed it to me one day, but until then I'll just keep on generating new and distinct possible universes every time I think about it.

I've entertained far too many different scenarios in much too obsessive detail to mention everything here, so I'll just give you the current front-runner. These were video tapes brought home by the daughter of an old couple who used to mind me. The daughter lived and worked in the US, and the mother always used to watch PG movies about witches and magic. It might have been mixed up in there.

However it happened, the common thread across all of the theories is that there was one house I used to go to in my infancy where *Dark Shadows* was always magically on TV in the background. It feels like I went there a lot, and I think I remember multiple story arcs. At that age a handful of afternoons can feel like months, though, so who the hell knows.

What I remember

I've rewatched everything now, and the episodes from which I get the strongest sense of *déjà vu* are from *Parallel Time*, 1970.

I recall a serious build in anticipation leading up to Barnabas coming out of his chained-up coffin again, having been turned back into a vampire quite recently under circumstances which presently escape me. I'd gotten used to the show being one particular way by then, and to the usual faces. I gathered from the adults that someone important was coming, and my eyes were glued. I suspect what I'm remembering is the daughter, barely able to contain her excitement that the best character was about to come back—get ready, mum, get excited, here he comes, etc.

If you'll recall, when he finally gets out, Barnabas just sort of runs amok for a bit as a vampire in a parallel universe, om-nomming ladies of the night down by the docks with the gleeful abandon of someone who knows it doesn't really matter because he's not in his original universe anymore.

Memories of this come bundled with other affective details, too: there's a fuzzy blue warmth saturating everything, warm wood paneling, bright carpets.

This was a dapper, sophisticated, kindly sort of vampire who prefers talking his way out of trouble, only biting people as a last resort (except the aforementioned ladies, of course—those are freebies, and we hold nothing against him).

What I think I remember

Things get a little fuzzier after that, and it becomes harder to tell what I actually remember and what I only think I remember.

I think I remember the plot device of there being other realities and other times. Maybe it was explained to me, or maybe I picked it all up contextually in other things. I had a strong sense that something about the world Barnabas had appeared in, here, wasn't quite right, and that he didn't belong there.

Your vocabulary isn't huge when you're this young. If I couldn't follow the dialogue, I remember picking up the basics remarkably well compared to other adult affairs. The logic of *Dark Shadows* made sense to a child—or this child, at least.

The way things worked in the world of the show became the way things worked in real life, as far as I knew, and it stuck for a good long while. Sheer repetition drilled complex ideas into me. I came to an intuitive understanding of what a witch trial was, though heaven only knows which one of the countless ones of those I saw. Quentin's? I don't really know. I can tell you there was a lot of green, though. Does that help?

Somewhere along the way I figured out what a ghost was, and also what one meant: you have to die to be one. I also learned how every big house worth its salt must be full of secret passages. The show used to jump around in time a lot, and the same company of actors would play different people throughout the long and increasingly deranged history of Collinwood. I vividly recall thinking reincarnation was just a casual mechanism in everyday life. I took it for granted that my face had belonged to somebody else before me, and it'd reappear again on somebody else after I was gone. That, or maybe I thought it meant I could live forever.

I'd stand there all serious on my red plastic hippopotamus step-stool, staring at myself in the mirror. I'd think about who might have had my face before me, and what they might have been like. Thomas Hardy wrote a poem about this:

I am the family face
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

[...]
The eternal thing in man,
That heeds no call to die.¹

¹ Thomas Hardy, "Hereditry." In *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 407–408. I imagine this read in the voice of Louis Edmunds, much as all poetry would be if one were in paradise. I imagine it with his face as well.

Dark Shadows had this intuitive fairy-tale kind of logic to it: it made no less sense than there being a castle in the clouds in Jack and the Beanstalk. You only learn fairytales when you start to look at books, and my gut tells me I saw *Dark Shadows* even earlier than that. I loved going over to that house.

By the time I was four we'd moved away.

Brief historical interlude: *Dark Shadows* on TV in Australia

Even after I rediscovered it, I assumed for ages that I must have caught the show in reruns on daytime television after all the kids shows. Newspaper archives tell a different story.

I've only been able to find a few scant references from when the show originally aired here in 1972—they're all in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The first one announces *Dark Shadows* as a recent acquisition on the part of Channel Seven:

Dark Shadows (Tuesday, February 1, 3.30 pm) is the daytime soap opera which took New York by storm. It has now become a cult, with something like 6,300,000 viewers who watch it five days a week. It will be run here Mondays to Fridays.²

A whole lot of silence after that until May 7, when the show moved time slots:

Dark Shadows, now showing weekdays at 3.30 pm, will be switched to 11.30 am [...] on May 15.

Good news for housewives. And bad news for the school youngsters who've been rushing home to catch it.³

We catch a fleeting glimpse here of Australian school-children running home to catch *Dark Shadows* like you did in America. Moving to a time slot when those kids were still at school was obviously a bad idea. Ratings immediately declined, and by August the show had been dropped:

ATN Seven has been swamped with phone calls from women protesting against the dropping of its wierdie [sic] mid-morning serial, *Dark Shadows*.

The channel, which bought only 130 episodes from America, says it axed the show because of poor ratings.

² *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January 1972, p. 95. It's interesting how there's no mention that the show had already been canceled in the US—they're making out it's still on the air. I guess they figured Australians wouldn't know any better: they were right.

³ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 May 1972, p. 66.

But *Dark Shadows* is still rolling along merrily past the 1000-episode mark in New York, where it has become something of a cult. But not enough vampire-lovers among Sydney.[sic]⁴

Jim Pierson has been kind enough to confirm that the episodes Australia bought in the '70s began with the introduction of Barnabas—so Episode 210, or thereabouts.⁵ Presuming all 130 episodes got aired, this means the point at which it stopped here was on a cliffhanger—just before Barnabas kills Doctor Woodard.

Channel Seven aired the episodes they'd bought, and then didn't buy any more. My long-standing assumption had been that I must have caught that mysterious show with the gentleman vampire via reruns. This has been debunked—there weren't any.

Rediscovery

These increasingly inexplicable *Dark Shadows* memories lay mostly dormant for more than three decades.

Then I was scrolling YouTube aimlessly late one night in early 2023. Looking back over my view history, it appears as if the exact thumbnail that did it was probably this one:



Dark Shadows 980: Barnabas kills Sky Rumson

117K views • 5 years ago

sightsboy

Barnabas kills Sky. Julia chides him for being sloppy.

I remembered him instantly and perfectly—I didn't even have to watch the video. I recognized this dude right down to the distinctive way his long, straight-edged, semi-circular collar frames those oddly distinguished-looking jowls.

I recognized Barnabas as a very old, very dear friend. I felt like a little boy again for just a second, excited to see one of my favorite people. He was like a once-beloved, long-forgotten great-grand-uncle or something, now returned from mysterious supernatural voyages abroad with a limitless bag of mind-blowing stories: all 1,225 of them. I'd follow this dude to Hades itself—if I were Dante, he gets to be Virgil.

⁴ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 1972, p. 114. Again, the show was long-canceled by then: perhaps even TV columnists couldn't keep up with all the news from overseas back then?

⁵ Thanks to Guy Haines for his help here, and elsewhere, to David Selby for donating those boxes of his now out-of-print books to the fans late last year—what a gentleman—and to Mary O'Leary for putting a copy of *My Shadowed Past* (2010) aside for me at Guy's request. You're all legends.

I hardly have to convince you folks of how Jonathan Frid has this tremendous magnetic quality you rarely get in actors—even in very good ones. He’s like a soap-opera Alec Guinness. You can’t even really say exactly why you’re drawn to him and can’t look away—you just are.

More than that, even, Barnabas also kind of lowkey resembles the men in my father’s line: ovular faces with angular chins, deep brunette hair-color, and a certain way of smirking that can put you at ease and make off with your hubcaps at one and the same time. Grandpa died when I was eight, at the ripe old age of 93. Storytimes with Pardy always carried that same mercurial edge as Barnabas has. The smirking YouTube thumbnail instantaneously transformed itself into a wormhole back to my own remote past. The great Russian modernist Andrei Bely once described something awfully similar in a book of his:

The yellow-lilac center is—happiness; and the lightscript of lightning bolts is—my cherished hopes; they form—radiant chasuble beneath my eyelids; I would rub my eyes with my fists; and the radiant chasuble oscillates; along it roll the starlets and they unwind their tails of radiant sparkles—round the lilac center; and from the luminaries are laid out: images and the semblances of rooms; these are—the rooms of the cosmos; these are—mysterious rooms; this is—the church transposed to beneath my eyelids; Papa appears there for a second; he is running through the rooms toward me: he nods, like the memory of something; and he forms a passage—into another world: the yellow-lilac center races to meet me, moves around into a blue eye; a blue eye is—a nice eye: it blinks with lashes of sparkles; it—expands; and as a most immense blue circle it dashes to meet me; in a second:—

—I rush in that direction, into
these links of flying spirals and into the pulse rhythm (my own) of the
sparkles, where I—

—was before birth!..⁶

I picture Bely’s Papa as Jonathan Frid, here, swallowed by a glowing blue portal lined with lashes of sparkles—it looks like this one from Episode 1063.

⁶ Andrei Bely, *Kotik Letaev* [1919], trans. Gerald Janecek (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1971), pp. 82–83. All formatting is Bely’s.



On second inspection, Barnabas isn't just *in* the passageway: he *is* the passageway...

Wrapping up

Rediscovering *Dark Shadows* has helped me remember how I used to think. For Proust the trigger was a madeleine cake dipped in tea; for me it's *Dark Shadows*. Great writers all drift back to the nostalgic wellspring of early childhood at some point, presuming they live long enough. Collinwood lies at the very heart of this well of all stories in the universe—or it does from my point of view, at least. I haven't found anything else that sends me back further into my own past than this.

The more I rewatched, the more I kept recalling other things as well, and other faces. The strongest one other than Frid is Louis Edmunds. He has this striking, stone-jawed patriarch face I seem never to have forgotten—Laurence Olivier reminds me of this guy (and not the other way around). I may also remember flashes of Jerry Lacy's scary whack-job glare, Humbert Astredo's evil little grin and twirlable dickhead moustache, John Karlen's anxious warmth, and David Selby's preposterous sideburns.

Dark Shadows gave me a different kind of imagination to the other kids in the playground. It's the secret weapon I never knew I had, dropped on me from on high by some weird accident of history. There's a jaw-dropping passage in Rilke which pretty much describes exactly the same thing (and I like to imagine he wrote this about Collinwood):

In later times, I never saw that remarkable house again, for it passed into the possession of strangers after my grandfather's death. In the memories I have of it, shaped as they were by a child's understanding, it is not a building; to my mind, it consists of discrete parts: here a room, there a room, and here a stretch of passageway that does not connect these two rooms and is to be preserved in isolation, as a

fragment. In this way, it is all dispersed within me: the rooms, the staircases that descended with such elaborate ceremony, and other tight, spiral stairs like passages in the rocks; the staircases that ascended as though they must be used rarely, and others that passed through the veins; the rooms in the towers, the balconies hung on high, the unexpected galleries on to which one was thrust by a little door—all of these things are still within me, and will never cease to be in me. It is as though the image of this house had fallen into me from a measureless height and shattered on the bottom-most part of myself.⁷

This is how *Dark Shadows* sat in my mind for the next three decades, and how I thought about the mysterious house I saw it in.

These days I'm a graduate student reading literature at the University of Sydney. Over time I've accidentally come to specialize in weird time fiction of the mid-twentieth century, especially the late work of Vladimir Nabokov—1962 to 1977, or thereabouts. *Ada* (1969) and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) both have their parallel time plots, and parts of these play out astonishingly like they do in *Dark Shadows*. Despite nominally being about other things, both my Master's and my PhD are obsessed with these tropes. It feels like I've been urgently trying to make my way back to Parallel Time, 1970 my whole life. I wanted to go back there so much I started finding it in other things without even knowing I was doing it.

Like Rilke's remarkable house, *Dark Shadows* dropped itself onto me from a measureless height and shattered on the bottom-most part of myself, and I am better for it.



The author in 2024, on a visit to Seaview Terrace (aka Collinwood). 34 years old.⁸

⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* [1910], trans. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 17.

⁸ Special thanks to John, Dean, Greg, and Mark.

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