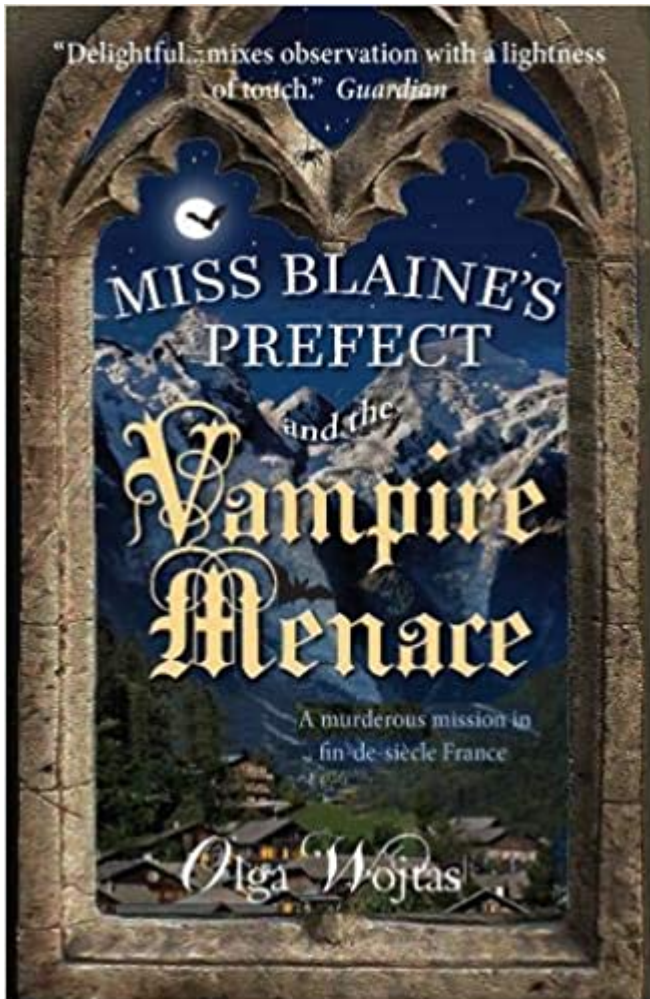


# Book Review: Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Vampire Menace

We first met Ms Shona McMonagle in *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar*, Edinburgh author Olga Wojtas's debut novel.

Shona, now a librarian in Morningside, that most respectable and genteel of Edinburgh suburbs, is a proud alumna of Marcia Blaine's School for Girls.

This fictional establishment is, of course, famous for its appearance in Muriel Spark's celebrated tour de force *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, in which the eponymous heroine selects her coterie of *crème de la crème* girls and sets out to educate them according to her own, highly unauthorised, curriculum. It was based on the real James Gillespie's School for Girls, which Spark attended.



In *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar* we learned that not everyone was impressed with Spark's novel. Shona was very cross about the aspersions Spark casts on her esteemed alma mater, and Miss Blaine herself was furious – so much so that she came back to life to make sure that every copy of that scurrilous publication was expunged from public view. Her visit to the library had, however, an additional motive, and soon Shona was having her first taste of time travel, as her late headmistress sent her hurtling back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia on a mission to save a hapless heroine from certain death.

And now Miss Blaine is back.

Unfortunately the first thing she sees as she approaches Shona's desk is a new edition of *That Book*, which has slipped its way in when Shona is a little hungover.

*“..you must know even Homer nods.” “I do” she snapped...“he nods off only for a couple of minutes – you, girl, are a positive Rip Van Winkle.”’*

Immense fury ensues, cutting insults are hurled in Shona’s direction.

*‘I remember a time when librarianship was an honourable profession’*

Miss B is only pacified by a cup of tea, several Bourbon biscuits, and the dispatching of her wayward ex-pupil on another mission. And this is how Shona finds herself lying in a wooden coffin in fin-de-siècle France (the year 1900 to be precise, as Shona inevitably is), wearing a head torch that was definitely not part of her outfit when she left for work that morning.

Why she is there, and what she is required to do, are things she must now discover as soon as possible, for Miss Blaine provides little guidance, and allows just one week for her minion to complete her mission.

Shona is given to going on about her many skills. She can speak numerous languages.

*‘all of the Scottish dialects apart from Glaswegian.’*

She bags Munros, is an expert in martial arts, knows everything there is to know about history and the arts, and can turn out a mean chickpea and sweetcorn burger, despite having access to neither chickpeas nor sweetcorn in Sans-Soleil, the aptly named village of permanent gloom in which she has landed. She considers herself quick-witted, and indeed on many occasions she is, saving herself and others from many potential disasters. But there is one thing that Shona lacks; she persistently fails to see what is staring her in the face,

and is constantly getting misled and sidetracked in her attempts to find out just who needs her help, and why.

Nevertheless, Shona is feisty, persistent and wears Doc Martens under her fin de siècle skirt; she is a sympathetic character whom it would be hard not to like. We are rooting for her as she muddles her way through this community of insular villagers, suspicious authority figures, smart children who yearn for the return of their old teacher, a wizened old inn-keeper, and an 'English milord' who lives in a new castle modelled on his old one at Slains (Aberdeenshire) and is rarely seen outside, but who welcomes Shona to his home with tea and delicious shortbread.



Slains Castle (image: Undiscovered Scotland)

The town's mayor, and one of its few well intentioned officers, introduces her to the voluptuous Madeleine, a bad-tempered, tormented soul whose husband, the former police officer, has disappeared. While the teacher, the cheesemonger-who-is-also-the-undertaker, the judge and the new policeman all allege that Sylvain has met a grisly end in the forest, Madeleine is convinced he is alive and determined to find out what has happened to him. When Shona is forced upon her as a lodger, Madeleine is not amused.

Neither woman is prepared to tell the other what she is up to, and many arguments ensue, but in the end the two join forces, and eventually – with the help of a young Mary Garden, celebrated opera singer and no-nonsense Aberdonian.



Mary Garden PHOTO Wikimedia Commons

*'Ee kin tak e quine oot o Aiberdeen but ee canna tak Aiberdeen oot o e quine.'*

and a certain Claude Debussy (whose womanising is almost as remarkable as his music) – solve the village's secrets. Why

are there cows but no milk? Why are the children made to crush wild boars with their bare hands? What is the appalling smell in the village graveyard? And just why is that English milord so tired?

Along the way we are treated to Shona's very Edinburgh view of everything, the wildly inaccurate conclusions she draws from the facts before her (so much for Miss Blaine's dictum – "Never assume.

*'(Miss Blaine) had recruited me for time-travelling missions so that I could help to make the world a better place.'*

To ASSUME makes an ass out of You and Me'''), her anti-Glasgow prejudice, her determination to find a way back into her old headmistress's good books, and her unshakable optimism and good humour. For, as Shona knows,

And in the end this is what Shona does, as the strands of the plot are cleverly brought together in a final denouement, the village is launched on a new and exciting path, and Shona is returned to Morningside equipped with a wheel of cheese, and the knowledge that she now has yet another title (author: one Bram Stoker) to remove from the library shelves.



Olga Wojtas (image: Antonia Reeve)

The premise of *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Vampire Menace* may be far-fetched, but it works perfectly. Wojtas has honed her skills still further since Shona's first excursion; the jokes are funnier, the wit is wittier, the pace is pacier, and each member of the supporting cast is well developed and differentiated. Even the school pupils come to life, from the 'wee scone' who has, for nefarious reasons, been banned from participating in Cheese Day, to the well-read Cart Woman's daughter, a child considerably sharper than Miss Blaine's Prefect herself.

And (when Shona finally works out its identity), the vegetarian vampire is a pure delight.



*Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Vampire Menace* and *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar*, both by Olga Wojtas, are published by Contraband, an imprint of [Saraband](#).