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## Why Zombies? A Defense of the Z Word

by [Robin A. Rothman](#) on March 25, 2013



When it comes to zombies, I will not apologize.

In darker, future times, that statement might take on a different, more ominous meaning. For now I simply mean that I won't apologize for my cultural obsession with zombies, the stacks of books and movies about them that clutter my home, that this is my third time in three months writing on the subject here, or that this probably won't be the last time I do so. Allow me to explain why.

### Vampires vs. Zombies - or How the Zombie (Fan) is Misunderstood

Beyond the built-in genre-based bias from which all horror typically suffers, zombies have developed a reductive reputation -- one from which their horror

cousins, vampires, seem immune.

To state the obvious, vampires historically have been portrayed as cunning, mysterious, sexy creatures. They're cold-blooded killers, yet from the works of [Polidori](#) and [Bram Stoker](#) to [Ann Rice](#) and [Stephanie Meyer](#), bloodsuckers have made the ladies' swoon.

Zombies, by comparison, are typically portrayed as grunting, ravenous, simple creatures. That's fair. But those who don't watch these kinds of films or read these kinds of books seem to apply the creatures' traits to their fans. And that's not fair. "You've made a plan for the zombie apocalypse? How [eyeroll] cute." (We'll get back to that.) Non-fans merely see a barrage of violence resulting in lots and lots of splatter repeated from one story to the next. But to see no more than the gore is to miss what's really going on, on many levels.

First and foremost, unlike vampires, zombies typically are not characters. They're part of the setting; they're often creatively concocted and masterfully manufactured (particularly in the visual sense), but they're nonetheless mere catalysts whose sole narrative purpose is to propel the real characters and the real plot. Once one accepts that basic but crucial premise, the value of the rest of the story can click.

### What Zombie Stories are Really About

Credit where it's due, the modern zombie is actually a direct descendant of the vampire. Just as [Bram Stoker](#) is considered the godfather of the modern vampire, so film director [George Romero](#) established our basic understanding of and generally accepted "rules" for zombies. Romero, by his own admission, ripped off Richard Matheson's vampire novel [I Am Legend](#). It always comes back to books!

So what are these "rules"? There's the general stuff: how zombies are made, how they move, how to stop them. But again, it's not really about the zombies. Romero released the movie *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, during the Vietnam War. In a way, every zombie story since has been, to some extent, a guiltless war story. Amid the zombie hordes, we follow the everyman hero as he faces an enemy that is beyond human and therefore beyond reason or redemption. Likewise these stories have been, like some of the greatest literature, social commentary -- a vehicle by which to confront our own ethics and morals. Just beyond the immediacy of a zombie attack lies the real threat: mankind. Even the more lighthearted and increasingly popular field of [zombie romance](#) forces us to consider: "When civilization as we know it ends, how do we hold onto our very humanity?"

But those are just the narrative novels. Among the most popular (not to mention clever) zombie books on the market today are field guides and how-to manuals. Often these books are tagged as parody and are purchased as gag gifts. There's nothing wrong with having a laugh, but there's more to these books than you'd expect, as well.

### The Government is Ready: Are You?

The debates between zombie fans can get heated, to put it mildly. They're like epic logic problems, infinite tautologies meant to solve the mystery of how to simply survive. And to a non-geek it can sound pretty silly. "You've made a plan for the zombie apocalypse? How [eyeroll] cute." But take a good look at the thought process and the preparation involved in deciding such things as whether to evacuate or stand your ground, what your weapon of choice is and what you'll need, bare minimum, to live after the fall, and the real-world applications are fairly impressive.

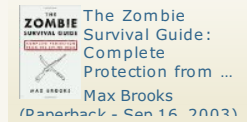
If you plan to evacuate, you'll know escape routes from your home in an emergency. If you plan to stay, you've figured out how to fortify your home (and you're probably saving a ton in utility bills as a result). If you've thought through how you'd take out a moaning, toothy brain-craver to the point that the baseball bat or katana is within arm's reach, you've also got an edge against that burglar downstairs. If you've got a backpack stashed with survival supplies, you won't be the pathetically empty-handed shopper who can't even find a flashlight for sale the day before a natural disaster hits.

Abhinav Agarwal's bookshelf pictured above ([Share yours](#))

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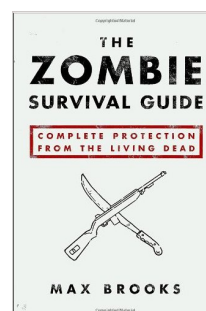
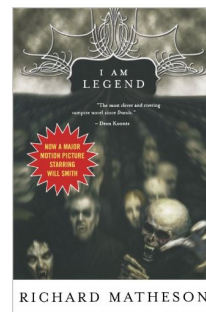
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Scoff all you want, the U.S. government is on my side. The Director of the CDC's Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, Dr. Ali Khan, is quoted on the organization's [zombie preparedness site](#) as saying "If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack."

### The Point of No Return

At the time of this writing, spring has just begun. Another TV season of *The Walking Dead* is coming to an end. *World War Z* is on the cinematic horizon (not to mention *R.I.P.D.*, *Night of the Living Dead: Origins 3D* and *The 4th Reich*), a [Zombieland pilot](#) is on its way to Amazon, and it was only a month or so ago that *Warm Bodies* was hot at the box office, winning its opening weekend.

The floodgates have been opened and there's no going back. Like vampires, zombies have permeated the mainstream. Relegating zombie stories to Halloween now would be as ridiculous (and almost as dangerous) as restricting chocolate eating to February.

There's no longer a bad time to enjoy the undead in any medium and there are hundreds upon hundreds of zombie books available for readers of all different interests: survival guides, romance, parody, humor, drama and, of course, horror.

If you're not a zombie fan and you've read this far, guess what: you're infected. We've collected a few of our favorite zombie stories in our [Essential Zombie Books store](#). It'll help you to adapt to your new life.

But if you're already like I am about zombies, then ... well, first of all, please shoot me a comment here and let's talk source materials, virus origins, strategem, and weapons of choice! But secondly, you've probably got your own favorite books on the subject. Let me know what they are and why.

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Peter Jason Payne on May 27, 2013 at 07:11 PM

This is a great post. You explained your take on zombies while realizing that there other POVs. I like the In the Flesh zombies (have you seen that BBC show yet?) I never got past the first episode and its script (yep, I read the script) but I did enjoy it. Now that Warm Bodies is a rental I might see it.

To me, the zombie trope is about affirming the "natural order." I'm into posthumanist and transhumanist stuff (sci fi turned reality), and zombies are the complete opposite. Instead of rising above nature, like characters often do in science fiction, zombie stories tend to wallow in the grisly, gore of death and human mortality.

What I enjoy are sci fi zombie tales that merge the traditional zombie plot with transhuman/posthuman themes. Resident Evil, anyone?

Caro Cole on March 27, 2013 at 06:18 AM

Zombie stories are survival stories. They imagine small bands of survivors - average, flawed human beings - thrown together by circumstance and forced to learn to rely on one another (or not, which is just as interesting). The trappings and controls of a civilized society dissolve - healthcare, transportation, energy, communications, law enforcement and protection. Everything about the circumstances is extreme. Families and communities are shattered - left without without leaders, caretakers, the specialists who know how to produce basic necessities (food, clothing, medicine), and build and fix the "things" that characterize an advanced civilization. As those things start to decay, the survivors are pushed closer and closer to a modern stone age.

Unlike pandemic scenarios where the unseen virus is a thing outside, in the zombie apocalypse, the people you know and love - and possibly yourself - become the scourge.

What happens to humanity under such circumstances? When you take away the controls of civilization, and impose this constant horrific threat, how do humans react? What happens to community, and the roles assigned to its members in world where all that matters is what you can do or provide for the others, and not what you would choose for yourself, or who you were before? As competition for shrinking resources increases, what happens to the notion of a moral code? The consequences to the survivors are often as horrifying as the zombies.

That is what makes zombie lore so fascinating. the zombie apocalypse brings out the most elemental aspects of being human.

Robin A. Rothman on March 26, 2013 at 05:56 AM

Odo, That's totally fair. I'm gonna go back in there and make it less absolute. There are, indeed, some stories that focus on the zombies and give those zombies distinct personalities and character arcs. I was focusing my mind on traditional zombie stories, but with zombie romance on the rise...

Dee M. on March 26, 2013 at 05:27 AM

@Dawn I totally agree. At this point, I'm thinking that the "zombifying" virus has evolved into an intelligent form wanting to further spread its reach through making its host "attack" other living beings.

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"First and foremost, unlike vampires, zombies are not characters."

I couldn't disagree more. Stony Mayhall, the main protagonist of *Raising Stony Mayhall* by Daryl Gregory, is one of the most fascinating characters I've ever read about. And he (it?) is a zombie.

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Dawn on March 25, 2013 at 03:58 PM

I hear you! I also wondered why they need to eat, but I figure it's more like the need to attack. Like with rabies, the virus makes the victim compelled to attack anything it sees, or order to spread the virus to new hosts. The eating part does take things further, which taps into our human fear of being eaten. We are used to eating whatever animal we like, but not being eaten ourselves. Thus, the success of *Jaws*, similar horror movies, and now *Zombies*.

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ET on March 25, 2013 at 01:49 PM

I am a fan of zombie films and novels. That said, I can't get over the gaping logical flaw to "traditional" zombies. Traditional zombies are the "walking dead;" literally animated corpses incapable of cognitive thought, reason or emotion, but capable of feeling a need to feed (hunger pains?) and seek out flesh. Yet they have no feeling of other pain whatsoever, including the decay of themselves. You can tear their arms off and they won't flinch. But yet they feel the need to eat?? There is no logical explanation how a human body that is dependent on blood flow to operate its muscles and joints can be animated if the heart is no longer beating, or the body suffers such egregious wounds that there is simply no longer blood in the body. None of it makes sense. The impossibility of it always leaves me with this feeling of "come on!" in the back of my head whenever I watch it. At least vampires try to come up with plausible explanations for how they exist (save for Dracula turning into a wolf or a bat, etc.).

The only "zombies" to date in mainstream movies that make sense are the "rage zombies" from the *28 Days Later/28 Weeks Later* storyline. They are still living humans. Their inability to feel pain is due to the rage virus, yet they can die the ways any human can die (not just with head trauma).

That said, I have my rage zombie survival plan. Because, hey, those rage zombies are far more scary than a stumbling animated corpse.

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