Zombies and Me

By Karen Green

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While, intellectually, I know that George Romero's oeuvre offers biting (sorry) commentary on social issues such as racial inequality and rampant consumerism—I just can't do zombie films. I have literally never been able to get through more than the first 10 minutes of Night of the Living Dead without having to turn off the TV and go cower in my bed with all the lights on. Same thing with 28 Days Later... I'm mostly okay with the old-fashioned zombie, the soulless servant of its Voodoo master—especially when it's wearing a fabulous, flowing negligee—but that's about it. The sole exception to my zombie-phobia is Shaun of the Dead, which I have watched countless times and even own on DVD. But otherwise, I... just can't do it.

Of course, as we all know, whether we've read Scott McCloud or not, reading a comic book is a different experience than watching a movie. I had not yet read McCloud when I watched the movie Sin City, for example, but I had a McCloud-esque epiphany during the seemingly-endless scene where Hartigan repeatedly smashes the head of the Yellow Bastard against the floor (time 5:44-6:03; nice work, Foley artists!). That scene would be, maybe, a single, soundless, frozen frame or two in the graphic novel, over which I could choose to linger for as long or short a time as I wished, rather than being held squeamishly captive. Comics put the control in the hands of the consumer; movies require that we relinquish it completely. As McCloud notes, in comics, much of the action occurs in the interstices, and we complete the snapshot captures of the action, letting our brains fill in the balance.

So, reading a zombie comic ought not to be as traumatizing an experience for me as watching a zombie film. And, for the most part, it's not. But it ain't easy.

As I've mentioned before, Jim Hanley's Universe is Columbia's comics vendor, and from time to time I'll go down there and walk the aisles with one of their staff, seeing what they like, what people are reading, what's new and interesting. A year or more ago, a guy named Jim (not Hanley) said to me, "You know, there's this one title that is really hot, but it probably wouldn't be appropriate for Columbia's collection; it's called The Walking Dead."
I took him at his word, and passed on it, but I kept coming across mentions—in blogs, in Diamond's sales figures, in *PW Comics Week* reports—of how well this title was doing. So, I picked up volume one, figuring I'd see what I thought.

As soon as I finished volume one, I donated it to the collection and placed an order for the rest of the series.

So, why does it belong in the library? I can tell you, there's not a lot in our library on zombies. There *is* a Library of Congress Subject Heading for zombies (with subheadings: my favorite *is* Zombies—Miscellanea) and I can tell you that most of our entries under that heading were purchased by me: this series, Jason's *The Living and the Dead*, and BOOM! Studios' *Zombie Tales*. Most of the rest of our entries are copies of Romero's work for the film studies program. But one of the reasons *The Walking Dead* belongs in our collection is expressed by its writer, Robert Kirkman, in the preface to the first volume. He notes, talking about film, that "[g]ood zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society…and our society's station in the world. They show us gore and violence and all that cool stuff, too…but there's always an undercurrent of social commentary and thoughtfulness." This is a goal of good fiction, too, and Kirkman, ably assisted by artists Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard, clearly is aiming for that target. Kirkman wastes no time on HOW the zombies arrived, cleverly dodging the question by having Rick Grimes, the protagonist—I hesitate to call him the hero—wake up from a coma *in medias res*, with the zombies already omnipresent. Once Grimes (miraculously) locates his family and joins up with a small band of survivors, there is little time to chat about the past; there is
far too much going on in the present. From time to time, shards of information are dropped about how, say, Atlanta finally fell (to the zombies, that is, unlike last time) or at what point the military stopped being effective, and the various survivors occasionally share stories about how they arrived, but the past truly is a foreign country, where things were done differently.

Adlard's art offers myriad marvelous examples of the unique storytelling techniques that comics offer. The page above is a montage that depicts a brutal battle between the human survivors and the zombie inhabitants of a place the humans wish to make a safe haven. I can only imagine how this would play out on screen—the ripping, the exploding, the noises, the vivid gore—and for how long. This page, however, is a perfect example of those frozen
moments that combine to tell a fully fleshed-out (sorry) story. I'm not saying that creators are under any obligation to make zombie lit more accessible to the queasy, such as myself, but it's not bad added-value.

Another classic technique of comics storytelling involves the characters looking out at the reader, expressing shock, dismay, or horror at something unseen in the lower righthand corner of the recto page, only to reveal the object of their view once the page is turned. A particularly chilling example shows Grimes and a couple of companions returning to their haven after some time away, only to be greeted by the scene below in which their safe home has been breached and overrun by the walking dead, reduced to almost indistinguishable size because of the sheer number that are depicted.

I mentioned in an interview that when I first read volume one, it reminded me of Blindness, a 1995 novel by the Nobel Prize-winning Portuguese novelist, José Saramago. Now, as much as I liked The Walking Dead, I'm not making any claims for it to be Nobel Prize-worthy; I'm merely saying that it evoked a similar reaction and addresses similar themes. In Blindness, a city is suddenly struck with an epidemic of sightlessness, although certain people appear to be immune. Unlike zombies, the blind still need to function like other humans, but are helpless. Those few who still can see, however, must hide their ability; in the land of the blind the one-eyed man may be king, but the fully-sighted man is an object of intense suspicion and hatred. As the blindness spreads like wildfire across the city, basic municipal services
like electricity and plumbing cease to function; the affected are initially penned in mental hospitals and guarded by soldiers. Saramago is quite graphic about the consequences of this chaos—I've long been haunted by his description of bare toes squishing through the excrement that is now lying everywhere—and many of the trials he describes are echoed in *The Walking Dead*.

But, above all, what both books do is pose a series of questions. In Kirkman's story, some of these are: what makes a leader—and what happens to "natural" leaders when they can't lead any more? What is the moral responsibility of the living towards the walking dead—as in the debate over whether Buffy the Vampire Slayer was actually a mass murderer, does the automatic destruction of any zombie constitute some kind of crime? (A kind-hearted farmer named Hershel has been confining the zombies that find their way to his door in a barn, awaiting the day that they can be cured.) What is the role of government in crisis (a timely question) and what does society become when that role has been well and truly abdicated? Do people change to adapt to extreme events, or do the events change the people? When do the ends justify the means? What does it take to make someone a survivor?

Among these questions are some beautiful touches, both narrative and artistic. As the small initial band of survivors tell their stories over dinner around a campfire, a single mother has to pause before speaking: her mouth is full. Adlard's depictions of the zombies at rest include the constant presence of small flies buzzing around their putrefying bodies. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish one character from another, especially given the rapid changes in the numbers of the survivors, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was a conscious choice: is everyone starting to resemble all the others they're tied to indefinitely? Then, just when you think the survivors have sunk as far from social norms as possible, they meet someone exponentially more depraved. Like Gulliver who, after living among the Houyhnhnms, finds ordinary humans to be Yahoos, the survivors are none of them as civilized as they fancy themselves.

The story hasn't ended yet, so I can't tell you if there's a resolution to any of these questions. I'm not sure if it matters. There's an afterword in volume two from Simon Pegg, written about the same time as the release of his own zombie film, in which he observes, "*The Walking Dead* brilliantly captures the simple truth that in the face of Armageddon, the little things remain unchanged. We still love and hate the same people. We still like the same bands, get the horn, remain frightened of heights and spiders. Kirkman cleverly focuses his narrative on the enduring minutiae of human existence and uses a full blown zombie apocalypse to bring it into sharp relief."

Yeah. What he said.

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