

BETTER OFF DEAD



# Better Off Dead

THE EVOLUTION OF THE  
ZOMBIE AS POST-HUMAN

*Edited by*

DEBORAH CHRISTIE AND SARAH JULIET LAURO

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction	
SARAH JULIET LAURO AND DEBORAH CHRISTIE	I
<i>And the Dead Shall Rise</i>	
Part introduction by Kevin Boon	5
1. “They are not men . . . they are dead bodies”: From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again	
CHERA KEE	9
2. “We are the mirror of your fears”: Haitian Identity and Zombification	
FRANCK DEGOUL (TRANSLATED BY ELISABETH M. LORE)	24
3. Undead Radio: Zombies and the Living Dead on 1930s and 1940s Radio Drama	
RICHARD HAND	39
4. The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age	
KEVIN BOON	50
<i>And the Dead Shall Walk</i>	
Part introduction by Deborah Christie	61
5. A Dead New World: Richard Matheson and the Modern Zombie	
DEBORAH CHRISTIE	67
6. Nuclear Death and Radical Hope in <i>Dawn of the Dead</i> and <i>On the Beach</i>	
NICK MUNTEAN	81

7.	Lucio Fulci and the Decaying Definition of Zombie Narratives	
	STEVEN ZANI AND KEVIN MEAUX	98
8.	Imitations of Life: Zombies and the Suburban Gothic	
	BERNICE MURPHY	116
9.	All Dark Inside: Dehumanization and Zombification in Postmodern Cinema	
	SORCHA NÍ FHLAINN	139
	<i>And the Dead Shall Inherit the Earth</i>	
	Part introduction by Peter Dendle	159
10.	Slacker Bites Back: <i>Shaun of the Dead</i> Finds New Life for Deadbeats	
	LYNN PIFER	163
11.	Zombie Movies and the “Millennial Generation”	
	PETER DENDLE	175
12.	“Off the page and into your brains!”: New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses	
	MARGO COLLINS AND ELSON BOND	187
13.	Playing Dead: Zombies Invade Performance Art . . . and Your Neighborhood	
	SARAH JULIET LAURO	205
	Afterword: Zombie (R)evolution	
	SARAH JULIET LAURO	231
	<i>Notes</i>	237
	<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	277
	<i>List of Contributors</i>	285
	<i>Index</i>	289

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Patrick McCarthy, the English department, and the library staff at the University of Miami for providing me with the resources and encouragement to see this project through to completion. Much like my coeditor, I have to acknowledge the amazing support of my husband and my children, who have frequently had to do without me because of this collection. I could not do what I do without their support, and I would not be who I am without their love.

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Death is not the end . . . in fact, in this collection, it is quite literally the beginning.

## INTRODUCTION

*Sarah Juliet Lauro and Deborah Christie*

That the zombie is ubiquitous in popular culture cannot be disputed: From popular literature and comic books to video games and performance art, in smartphone applications and in homemade films, zombies are all around us. Though horror film has been of interest to scholars for decades, some critics have heralded a resurgence of the zombie in popular culture and, subsequently, inaugurated a new boom of scholarly investigation of this fearsome figure of living death.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we can say with certainty that the zombie is more popular now than ever before; it has even seemed to have crashed the boundaries of narrative and stepped into real life. Newspapers are full of stories of large-scale games of zombie tag, of zombie proms, of zombie warnings posted on road signs by cheeky hackers: this transgression from the screen to the street is but one of the many types of “zombie evolution” we discuss herein.<sup>2</sup> Assembling this collection in the year marking the bicentennial of Charles Darwin’s birth, and the sesquicentennial of his publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859)—the seminal text describing the principle of evolution and postulating that humans and apes descended from a common ancestor—we felt that our project was haunted by the zeitgeist, for this collection charts the evolution of the zombie, establishing how this myth has developed along with human civilization. With an eye toward the future (and perhaps a tongue

in cheek), we question whether the zombie resembles our prehistoric past, acts as a mirror reflecting our present anxieties, or suggests whether the future will house a more evolved post-humanity or merely the graves of a failed civilization.

We structured our collection around a basic rising—or evolving—principle. The book consists of three parts, representing the three most recognizable stages of twentieth- and twenty-first-century zombie configurations: the classic mindless corpse, the relentless instinct-driven newly dead, and the millennial voracious and fast-moving predator. Our dissection of the zombie myth is concerned with it not only as a fictive monster on which we stamp our society's latest fears, but also as a model to which we have applied modes and methods of reading. This collection is a survey of the zombie's cinematic history, but also an investigation of the zombie from an interdisciplinary perspective, with an emphasis on deep analytical engagement with diverse kinds of narratives. Just as we approach the zombie from many different points of view, looking across history and across media, we also employ diverse theoretical perspectives. Our collection's deep engagement with narratives that reach beyond those found in film and literature to investigate zombies in art, life, and cyberspace reveals that the zombie has not just evolved within narratives—it has evolved in a way that transforms narrative. In this way, we feel our collection acknowledges the possibility that the zombie is post-human, and also illustrates that we are already living in the period of the post-zombie. Yet, for all this evolutionary progress, we acknowledge that any use of the word “post” is, as Neil Badmington writes, “forever tied up with what it is post-ing.”<sup>3</sup>

The zombie may therefore be an apt icon for the post-human in its frustrating antipathy: Just as the post-human will always assert what the human is by that which it supposes itself to be beyond, the zombie both is, and is not, dead and alive.<sup>4</sup> It was its complex sense of transformation, more than any other aspect of the “Millennial Zombie” (a category that Peter Dendle fleshes out in his essay here), that called for this collection. The zombie auteur George Romero, who was himself responsible for guiding the zombie from one iteration to another, has cast aspersions in a number of interviews as to whether the ravenous creatures in works like *28 Days Later* are “dead” enough to be legitimately called zombies. If the zombie has evolved so much over the course of the twentieth century that, at the beginning of the twenty-first, it is nearly unrecognizable, then surely there is a need to define exactly what we mean when we call something a zombie, to chart the evolution of this concept, and to map out the ways that this monster has been and will continue to be a useful theoretical