
Why the obsession with zombies?

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What is a zombie anyway?

According to pop culture, a zombie is a reanimated corpse with an insatiable hunger for human flesh. A human can also be 'zombified' by a single bite carrying the deadly zombie virus. While they drip and ooze with open sores and rotting flesh, zombies are remarkably resilient. Their only mission in their undead life is to feed. They have no means of communication with each other or with humans, other than a kind of hissing grunting roar. They are, in short, unbelievably disgusting and of course they're not real... or are they?

Where zombies began

In Haiti, zombie folklore has been around since the 1600s. It originated with West African slaves brought in to work the sugar fields. The 'life' of a zombie emulated the reality of being enslaved. And zombies still exist in the voodoo religion practiced in West Africa and throughout Haiti, the Caribbean, Brazil and the American South.

Zombies are a thing in voodoo religion

Although most voodoo followers now think zombies are a myth, there are still those who maintain they are real, and that a bokor – a voodoo practitioner, a kind of witchdoctor if you like– can resuscitate the dead into zombies.

It is fact that a deadly neurotoxin found in pufferfish and some other marine species – tetrodotoxin – can cause symptoms (in non-lethal doses) such as mental confusion, staggering about and trouble breathing.

A closer-to-lethal dose of tetrodotoxin can induce coma and paralysis. Theoretically, this could cause someone to seem dead, be buried, and then revived.

Three cases of people being buried and then reappearing years later have been reported in the world's leading medical magazine The Lancet. All three were Haitian.

Zombies making it onto the big screen

Just as Frankenstein and Dracula appeared on the big screen for the first time in the 1930s, a film called White Zombie was released in 1932. But it was only in 1968, with The Night of the Living Dead by George Romero, that zombies attained cult status. After that, even Scooby Doo had a ding-dong with zombies in Scooby Doo on Zombie Island. Then, of course, TV followed suit. No show has scared more TV viewers than the apocalyptic zombie feeding frenzies in the popular The Walking Dead.

Why our obsession with zombies?

Angela Videgar, a Stanford academic, suggested that humanity's collective mind was so affected by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II that people began to imagine their deaths on a vast scale. Of course, survival of the fittest is a strong theme in all fiction – not just zombie tales.

How to stay alive during the Zombie Apocalypse

Rather hilariously, America's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention actually created a 'Zombie Preparedness' website. This encouraged people to be equipped for catastrophe and offered tips on how to stay alive during the

Zombie Apocalypse. The site has apparently been a big success. It may have been a clever ruse to draw in readers who would otherwise not realise the value of real preparedness for disaster. It gave practical advice about laying in water, food, medical supplies and other essentials in preparation for any sudden calamities such as hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods and cyclones or, less likely, mobs of the ravenous undead.

The common themes in zombie fiction

- a) Initial contact with zombies is extremely traumatising. The resultant shock, panic, denial and general chaos means that survivors take a long time to get their acts together.
- b) Authorities' response is slower than the speed at which zombies are multiplying so that the plague goes beyond any ability to contain it.
- c) Small groups of survivors must fend for themselves, but the characters' reactions of fear and self-preservation are counter-productive, hence leading to long-lasting TV series.

The Zombie Institute for Theoretical Studies

This really exists, at the University of Glasgow. It is headed by a fictitious character named Dr Austin, who is the face of ZITS. The ZITS team uses real science to explain what could be expected during an actual zombie apocalypse, and to disprove common beliefs about the apocalypse as usually published in popular media.

The Institute has published a book, *Zombie Science IZ*, and are known to give amusing lectures. *Game of Thrones* – zombies or not-zombies?

And finally, the most interesting and frightening zombies of all. The Army of the Dead. The White Walkers. Are they zombies? Perhaps not. They don't tick all the right boxes, in spite of being dead and wanting to kill everyone. The White Walkers are an ancient race of formerly human ice creatures who, after remaining mythical for thousands of years, reappeared. Their leader, the terrifying Night King, whose glacier blue eyes freeze you to the sofa, is able to turn anything dead into a 'wight', the slave race of the White Walkers, with a touch of his cold, dead hand. The approach of his chilling army is signalled by sharp drops in temperature and icy storms.

Unlike the staggering, bumping-into-each-other, mindless, grunting zombies we know from elsewhere, who can barely walk, White Walkers are excellent riders (of undead horses). And White Walkers do have a language – it is Skroth, which sounds like ice breaking. Finally, they can withstand anything, even fire, except a weapon made of dragonglass or Valyrian steel.

Ordinary zombies just require being hit on the head really hard until their tiny brains die, and any weapon will work. If the White Walkers could be described as zombies, they'd be a much better class of zombie than we've had till now. Since Season Eight of *Game of Thrones* is still being viewed by many of us, we'll say no more. Winter is still Coming for some of us.

And now, all zombie fans, here's a new movie to look out for. The first trailer has been released for Jim Jarmusch's horror comedy *The Dead Don't Die*. It may just be a bunch of celebs fighting zombies, but it has, to quote the branding, "the greatest zombie cast ever disassembled". No, disassembled is not a typo. The all-star cast features Selena Gomez, Bill Murray, Steve Buscemi, Tilda Swinton, Iggy Pop and Tom Waits, to name a few.

Zombies are here to stay

Since the cult film *The Night of the Living Dead*, zombies have only grown in popularity. So put out the popcorn and prepare to be grunted at. If you can't stand the slobbering gore, the patent stupidity of the humans and the repetitive theme, then there's still that centuries-old option to fall back on. A good book.