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The Gen Z Zombie:
YA Takes On the Undead

By

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Chapter 1: The Monster You Know

They're coming.

You've locked the doors and nailed them shut. The windows have been boarded up. You run through the home's layout again in your mind—there should be no other way in or out. There are six people inside including yourself, and enough food to last for a little while.

The middle aged man you met in the street is still on edge and angry. You can't blame him since he watched his wife go. There's a young mother and her child, and they seem content to keep to themselves. The old woman hasn't spoken in half an hour. The only other person your age is also the only other person thinking clearly, but they're suspicious. What if someone got scratched? Or even worse, bit? There was an argument about whether or not to barricade, but ultimately, what other choice was there? You had to make a call and there were so many of them on the other side of that door.

You try to stay calm but you keep thinking about the cut on your forearm that you're now hiding from everyone else. It probably happened jumping the fence. It's fine. But you don't know for sure how it happened, which means no one else in the room can know. Before this all became real, you assumed you'd be the person to do the right thing—to admit if you'd been hurt and were putting the rest in danger, but now it's more complicated than all of that. There are people in the world you want to see again. There's a chance that more survived. Someone might have a plan to fix it all. You just need time to figure out what happens next here and now. All you can do is put as many walls between those on the outside and those hiding inside here with you.

Everyone knows a zombie story when they hear it, even if the word “zombie” is never used. Many have imagined themselves in the role of the survivor, staying alive against all odds as the world spins out of control. Bring up the monster in a friendly environment and you’re likely to hear any number of survival plans—where a person might go, who they would try to save first, and what would make them useful in this post-apocalyptic world.

We’ve been living in what many refer to as the “golden age” of zombies. Since the start of the 21st century, the zombie has served as an emotional outlet for the fear and paranoia felt in the U.S. as a result of the War on Terror. Like the swarms of the monsters in the movies, it seemed like there was a zombie in every direction you looked—on bookshelves, on TV and in theaters, streaming online, in video games, sold as action figures and plush toys, and some days, roaming the streets and parks in cosplay zombie pub crawls and marathon survival events. I personally have a zombie popsicle mold, for example.

The ubiquity of the monster inevitably led to some very reductive explanations of why these stories were so popular. In 2010, Chuck Klosterman wrote “My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead” for the *New York Times*. Referring to the popular TV show *The Walking Dead* (based on the graphic novel by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore), Klosterman argued that people were increasingly drawn to the zombie genre because the frightening, but largely predictable, nature of surviving a zombie apocalypse was not all that different from the monotony of life in the modern age. As he sees it, “Zombie killing is philosophically similar to reading and deleting 400 work e-mails on a Monday morning or filling out paperwork that only generates more

paperwork, or following Twitter gossip out of obligation, or performing tedious tasks in which the only true risk is being consumed by the avalanche.” Klosterman’s reasoning for this makes some sense, especially in connection to something like *The Walking Dead* which narrates the lives of the protagonists long after the zombies had been established as a constant threat. In the beginning, the hero, Rick Grimes (played by Andrew Lincoln) suffers through the initial shock of seeing his first zombie, but as the series goes on, the shock is gone. The threat of zombies is a constant that one can, in some way, become numb to. But Klosterman’s analysis overlooks the mortal dread that is still attached to the monster and that is generally absent from the desk jockey’s day job. If anything, comparing zombie survival to responding to a crush of emails dramatizes the threat of emails more than it dumbs down the plight of a zombie apocalypse survivor.

However, in terms of zombie history, Klosterman also argues that the success of the zombie relies on a stable identity and behavior. He writes, “Zombies are a commodity that has advanced slowly and without major evolution” (Klosterman). Like many who have casually contemplated the history of zombie stories, Klosterman is only able to make a distinction between the slow-moving zombies depicted in George A. Romero’s *Living Dead* films and the sprinters that appear in Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later*. This line of thinking makes the zombie out to be the monster equivalent of a fast-food cheeseburger—predictable, consistent, and ultimately unsatisfying.

In my studies under Dr. Sylvia Tomasch, I learned that in reality, the zombie is a rapidly altering creature with a notably short and problematic history. How the monster comes into being, how it behaves, and what it represents in the human psyche has shifted smoothly to fit the fears and concerns of a given era for over 100 years. These stories are

told through oral histories, books, graphic novels, radio plays, video games, and of course, film. The zombie even reaches out past the page and screen, ending up in real-life zombie marathons and zombie pub crawls. These carnivalesque events invite people to masquerade as either survivor or monster and disappear into the horde for a few hours at a time (Orpana 153). The zombie, in many ways, equalizes a deeply divided era, where all races, genders, creeds, and ages can be welcomed to the horde. Yet the attributes of these monsters are also firmly attached to their particular cultural and political epochs. They change as popular culture needs them to change, and yet from one execution to the next, they remain recognizable. The monster tends to maintain certain recognizable traits to draw in long-time enthusiasts, but the alterations enable fresh fan bases to engage with a monster in their own way, making their own cultural connections to the stories being told.

What Klosterman overlooks is that these monsters hold an important role in our society—one that goes beyond an analogy for overwhelming desk jobs or a commodified sense of fear. In an age of mass death, these monsters offer a common catharsis that is good for the human condition. In fact, as will be discussed, the zombie has helped inspire revolution, protest, and social and personal reexamination. Zombies appear in pop culture because we need them. Eight years after Klosterman wrote his piece, the zombie rages on, shifting along with our culture so that it can continue to supply the catharsis that audiences desire. While few would argue that the monster has become a mainstay in modern entertainment, still fewer can agree how the monster will alter next.

My analysis will look at the history of the zombie in American entertainment to set the groundwork concerning what the monster achieves with each generation, with a

focus on the 21st century. Like other scholars, I consider the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing War on Terror as a significant cultural precursor to what Kyle William Bishop refers to as the “Golden Age” (How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture 2) of zombie storytelling. That said, I also believe these “golden age” post-9/11 zombie stories were tuned to a particular audience: people who were aware of a time *before* the attacks and were then forced to cope with the changes in society that followed. Essentially, the audience for these post-9/11 stories is any age group that has conscious awareness of a time before the War on Terror and as such would include Millennials (people born between 1978 and 1996) and any older generation. As I will discuss later, this awareness of a time before and after 9/11 is essential to understanding the type of zombie stories that were released during the “golden age.”

But for younger audiences, there never was a *before*. This generation, poetically called Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2015), have little to no recollection of a life before the attacks, or an understanding of a world without the social anxiety that zombie stories feed upon. As such, I theorized that the zombie stories aimed at this generation would be notably different from those that came before. Daniel Waters’s *Generation Dead*, published in 2008, was one of the first zombie books in the 21st century aimed at a Young Adult (YA) audience. Target audiences for this book would have been 12 to 18 years old at publication, meaning that they were between five and 11 when the attacks of 9/11 occurred. A horde of new YA zombie books followed *Generation Dead*, and it is reasonable to assume that as time went on, the target audiences for these books had less and less memory of a time before the War on Terror.

If, as others have argued, zombie stories fill a social and psychological need, then the intersection of zombie stories and YA fiction would require significant changes in order to maintain relevance. I set out to review a selection of YA zombie texts in hopes of identifying traits and characteristics of the *post*-post-9/11 zombie, or what I will call the Gen Z zombie. What I found is that the Gen Z zombie narrative reveals a different relationship to monstrosity and anxiety than previous generations, and as such, the zombie itself has evolved in fundamental ways.

Klosterman argues that the strength of the zombie is its predictability throughout history, but I couldn't disagree more. The zombie has changed over time, and these adaptations have allowed it to persist in popular culture and underscored its cultural significance. As I will demonstrate, the zombie has, since American appropriation, been used to represent a cultural Other and helped an audience cope with the fear of difference. This is a standard consensus amongst scholars, but in the following pages, I will briefly cover some aspects of how the zombie had been used historically as to demonstrate the magnitude of the change that we see with the introduction of the Gen Z zombie. In examining the historical progression of the zombie, I focus specifically on the way that the Uncanny is used to instill the fear of this liminal monster. Again, it is common for scholars to use Freud's aesthetic theory to explain how zombies work, but I hope to take this concept a step further by examining the directionality of recognizing similarity in the Other. This work will help to clarify how fundamentally different Gen Z zombie narratives are.

Traditionally, the zombie is frightening because of its uncanniness—it looks human but reveals itself to be different and monstrous. But, as will be demonstrated, the

Gen Z zombie shifts this fear of the Other through the use of empathy for the monster. This alteration also changes how the Uncanny is used in a zombie story. With the Gen Z zombie story, YA protagonists are forced to face the monstrosity in themselves and as a result, audiences are made to confront their own Otherness. Time and again, young protagonists in these stories realize that what is really terrifying is the world that the previous generations have left to them. Here, I go back to the generational difference between those who experienced a time before and after events like the attacks of 9/11, but also intergenerational troubles that have come to a head in the modern era, such as global warming, social dynamics based on division and discrimination, and the reckless use of power by the older generations, leaving young people to suffer the consequences.

It is my intent to show how the Gen Z zombie employs the concepts of Othering and the Uncanny in new and revealing ways, while still playing on certain aspects of the monster that have been essential to the use of the zombie in storytelling in previous generations. Ultimately, my aim is to show that zombie stories have and will continue to be important on a social level and that their ubiquity in pop culture is essential and informative to understanding modern identity. A zombie story has always done more than frighten—it reveals exactly who each generation is afraid of becoming. However, in modern YA fiction, becoming a member of the undead is frequently presented as less terrifying than the idea of growing older and taking on the fears, hostilities, and biases handed down from previous generations—and of course the deeper fear that that monstrosity is already inside, waiting to be revealed.

From the “Dark Island” to the “Golden Age”

I've heard monster stories dismissed as "genre fiction" or ranked below the standard of what is "literary." If observed in the abstract, monsters can seem like nothing more than repetitive shadows on the wall—they lack substance or meaning. However, monster stories have important functions in society and have been used throughout history to signal which creatures (or people) should be feared, which behaviors are forbidden in a given society, and, perhaps most importantly, how a protagonist may effectively cope with things deemed monstrous. Fear is hardwired into the human mind, triggering fight or flight reactions. Stories allow a person to experience these triggers through their imagination, which is much safer than engaging directly with the danger. Joni Richards Bodart writes that even as humankind developed living conditions that enabled them to avoid natural, real threats (such as spiders, snakes, or disease), the monster was still effective in evoking fear useful toward surviving in a developed society. Whether the monster is a fairly direct representation of a threat to life or if it serves as a more metaphoric abstraction, monster stories are useful in shaping perceptions because "the concept of [anything monstrous] in the individual's mind is more intense, important and fearful" (Bodart xx).

Monster stories often operate on a set of codes or representations specific to a culture, region, or people. For example, in areas where a wolf was a predatory threat, monsters that were wolf-like would be shared in local stories. People who heard these stories would learn first to fear the wolf, then how to cope with that fear and ultimately overcome the threat. While wolf attacks are uncommon in the modern age, the psychological benefit of monster stories still carry weight, and while there may be more resistance to belief in the reality of a monster today, the effects of monster stories still

serve a given society. Essentially, it is important to recognize that monsters have power in the human mind, and that while the intention behind the monster may have changed over time, they are still useful to their population. As we look closely at the various iterations of any monster, it becomes clear that, far from being repetitive shadows on the wall, they are both nuanced and essential.

With that said, it should also be noted that an equally harmful approach to understanding monster fiction comes from those who cherish the creatures and their stories to the point of near-religious awe. In the age of geekdom, snobbish claims by fans and self-proclaimed experts demand a sense of purity in the presentation of a monster—as if there were an absolute mold that a creature, such as a zombie, must fill—and anything else that does not match is a disappointing bastardization. For example, some argue that zombies should never be capable of reason and their behavior should be rooted in mindless hunger. They forget that George A. Romero's ghouls in *Night of the Living Dead* used rocks and sticks to smash headlights and batter doors (first at 00:08:10). A rigid belief in what the monster *should* be like limits how the creature can be written, read, and interpreted. Time and time again, there have been examples where such rigid standards have been applied to any number of popular geek culture executions and the intent is almost always based on the desire of the fan to maintain a sense of ownership, thereby excluding anyone who may enjoy an altered version that speaks more to their personal experience. For example, a person may find connection and kinship to the characters and situations found in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*. For them, the infected, fast zombie is the ultimate version of the monster, and they become a zealous fan of this particular zombie incarnation. Instead of understanding this as their own preference, this

particular fan base goes on to dismiss other zombie iterations. They discount fans of Romero's films as being old-fashioned and those who enjoy *The Walking Dead* as being too easily seduced by pop culture. *Warm Bodies* is for lovesick teens and *Train to Busan* is not "American enough" (irony is often lost on these so-called experts). In any case, that fan of *28 Days Later* is limiting who is allowed to enjoy the genre to only include people who think like they do. On one hand, this is understandable and even useful to a researcher such as myself because generations and cultures will identify "their" monster movies and that identification enables a more complete dialogue about how the monster functions for a reader response. But ultimately, this closed perspective is harmful to the genre as a whole: partially because it locks the zombie into a specific place and time, obscuring its alteration and evolution; and partially because readers should be able to find a connection to literature in any way that serves their own experience.

As stated above, I believe that monsters are essential to who we are as a people and society. Looking at the monsters at the intersection of a given age and culture can reveal a lot about the genre, and the people who need those monsters in their lives. The zombie, over time, has been any combination of rotting, molding, vomiting, frozen, domesticated, unthinking, reasoning, infected, enchanted, still living, or completely dead. The specific aspects of the creature and its situation do not make it a "correct" version of the zombie above all others. Instead, slight shifts in the details of the creature enable a unique connection and social parallel between the zombie and the specific audience that receives that story. This alteration or evolution of the zombie occurs because the codes and symbology required by a society also alter and evolve.

Monster stories are socially instructive and cathartic. It is important to remember that the fear useful to a society mentioned previously must also be entertaining for it to work. The monster allows a person to step away from their everyday and see life from a place with higher stakes, greater dangers, and more noble acts of bravery. This escapism also enables an individual to see monsters as analogous to struggles and fears in their own lives, helping a person to develop new perspectives on the real horrors of their own lives and develop methods of coping. It is no coincidence, for example, that zombie stories climb into popular culture during major times of conflict in American society. This boom and bust has been noted by Annalee Newitz for *i09.com*, where she demonstrates that the number of zombie films in production rise exponentially during times of social conflict in the United States, including the height of the Cold War, the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement, and of course, the so-called “golden age” of zombie stories following the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Newitz). When culture needed to contemplate the sudden loss of life in such a massive way, zombies were there for us. But the monster must change and adapt to the needs and concerns of an age to remain popular. If not, it will fade into obscurity.

A History of Change

The modern zombie is a product of decades of development, alterations, and evolutions. Over the years, from their use in the Haitian practice and lore of Vodou to the most recent adaptations, zombie stories have often stood on the shoulders of previous iterations of zombie stories while still evolving to suit contemporary needs. For example, in Haitian lore, zombies always had zombie masters, trapping and enslaving them, but George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* did away with the controlling presence, and

almost every story since has followed suit. Instead, Romero's zombies carried a viral nature, and that trait was essential to Danny Boyle's zombies of *28 Days Later*. Boyle's zombies, as noted by Klosterman, were fast. In 2011, Colson Whitehead's novel, *Zone One*, built on the idea of speed and ability in zombies by creating a world where some were fast and others were seemingly frozen in time. The point is, the monster has a tendency throughout its history to remain familiar enough to be recognizable as part of the zombie tradition but different enough to stand out. This difference makes them unique to the space and time that they are produced in. When an audience recognizes a zombie as belonging to them in some way, it is because it is reflective of their contemporary societal concerns. This reflection can be presented as a direct representation of contemporary social conflict or, as Klosterman suggests, offer an escape from contemporary real-world angst (which, for zombie stories, are not mutually exclusive possibilities).

One consistency in zombie stories is that throughout its history, the zombie, like other monsters, has occupied a liminal state—that is to say, a position between two different and often oppositional states. Nearly every zombie exists between the state of living and dead, and with little wonder. When we talk about the fears of early man, it is easy to believe that few would rival the concept of death. One moment, we have a friend or loved one—the next minute, that person is a corpse—unoccupied mass. Has something escaped? Will it return?

A belief in a spirit or a soul would seem to be a natural conclusion then, but practitioners of Vodou (I use this spelling to differentiate the actual religious practice from the fabricated Hollywood bastardization, referenced as “voodoo” below), according

to Kette Thomas's *Haitian Zombie, Myth, and Modern Identity*, believed that every person carried in them two spirits. The first, the *Gros Bon Ange* (big good angel), was the living energy that powered the motor and basic sensory functions of a person. The second, the *Ti Bon Ange* (little good angel) gave a person a sense of identity, individuality, and even a sense of space and time. To make a zombie, a *bokor* (sorcerer) would remove the *Ti Bon Ange* and hold it. As a result, "the zombie lacks the portion that animates life, offers personal choice, and governs control over identity construct" (Thomas 4). In other words, the person becomes the equivalent of an empty car with keys still in the ignition—it is running, but someone else must get in and steer.

This half step to death is an important form of liminality in the history of the zombie, because it is only the lack of the self-awareness and ownership of the body that makes the monster resemble the dead. For obvious reasons, this liminal state was understood as a direct parallel to existing in slavery prior to the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). In some stories, such as that described by Kaiama L. Glover in "Exploiting the Undead," a key narrative feature is the ability of the enslaved zombie to be freed and rise against those that enslaved them. Glover recounts Frankétienne's story, *Les Affres d'un defi*, where the sorcerer, Saintil, turns a young hero, Clodonis, into a zombie after the young man's political beliefs challenge his power. Saintil tries to make an example out of Clodonis, but the sorcerer's daughter, Sultana, falls in love with the young man and frees him from his zombified state by feeding him salt. Clodonis then feeds salt to the other zombies under Saintil's control and together they claim their vengeance. Allied with other commoners in the area, the reclaimed zombies lead the way to a productive community (Glover 110). A key feature of the zombie in these stories that differs from

most stories after the American appropriation of the monster is that the zombie can reclaim its human status. Existing on the borderlands between life and death, new life was just as much of a possibility in these stories as final death.

By the 1920s and 30s, the American appropriation of zombie stories had begun. In works such as *The Magic Island*, a piece of exaggerated travel writing by William Seabrook, and Victor Halperin's film *White Zombie* (1932), the zombie was appropriated to darkly exoticize the people and practices of Haiti while fueling the deep-seated fears that those who were once enslaved might rise up and seek vengeance. One might hope that these fears were tied in some way to feelings of guilt for past abuses, as can be seen in Manly Wade Wellman's 1940s tale "The Song of Slaves," but many more stories, stemming from fears of the Haitian Revolution, were bent on portraying the zombie revolution as a result of corruptive Otherness. The United States' understanding of itself as an advanced and morally correct nation depended in many ways on portraying nations like Haiti, and their people, as "backward" or even monstrous. The effect is much like what Edward Said describes of the relationship between Western Europe and the Near East, where Orientalism means viewing the Other not as human, but as an exotic, even monstrous, fiction. Reinforced by military superiority, this meant that these former slave nations and regions could be reduced to concepts, and not actual places—or as Said writes, "an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (Said 5). Essentially, early tales of zombies were part of a process to create a generalized Other for the dominant culture of the United States, who, at best, were grappling with the crimes of slavery, but were more likely concerned about the fear of violent revolution and a change of power happening in

their own backyards. As Kyle William Bishop writes in “The Sub-Subaltern Monster: Imperialist Hegemony and the Cinematic Voodoo Zombie,” “the real threat and source of terror ... [is] not the political vagaries of a postcolonial nation or the plights of the enslaved native zombies, but rather the risk that the white protagonists might become zombies themselves” (Bishop 141). In other words, the early appropriation of the zombie relied first on pointing to an assumed Otherness of oppressed people and nations such as Haiti but then using the liminal state of the creature to suggest a possibility of infiltration into and corruption of dominant American culture.

The connection between the zombie and Othering is almost a given amongst those who study literature about the creature. While Othering in zombie stories did begin around concepts of race, films and literature would go on to use the monster to represent political, social, and economic divisions as seen through the gaze of the white dominant culture. The protagonists of these stories are often reflective of society’s dominant culture at the time and even when there is representational differences amongst the survivors, their internal conflicts and relationship to the zombie Other are centered in white patriarchal view of the world. I use the term “survivors” only to differentiate them from the undead, though in many of the cases described in this thesis, survival is not guaranteed.

If the survivor is reflective of the dominant norm and the zombie is representative of the Other, this means that the concern of zombie stories plays on the psychological fear of the dominant culture being overwhelmed, consumed, and ultimately turned into the Other. In Halperin’s *White Zombie*, for instance, the protagonists are a young white American couple visiting a young white plantation owner. The woman, Madeleine Short

(Madge Bellamy), becomes the target of voodoo sorcerer “Murder” Legendre (Bela Lugosi). Legendre already has other zombies under his control, including a number of black men who work his fields and mill. There is no consideration of their humanity—they are lost causes, already as good as dead. At one point, one of these zombies even falls into a mill, meeting a gruesome end that elicits no reaction from anyone except the audience (*White Zombie* 12:50-13:30). Closer to Legendre, there are a number of other zombies who are not black but are still exoticized in their dress and manner. They are equally enslaved but have more of a sense of individuality among them. This individuality is not enough to evoke empathy for the characters, but these zombies can be differentiated from one another and are therefore more meaningful to the viewer. The one thing that is consistent is that no one in the film tries to save or protect any of these zombies. The entire plot revolves around the effort to keep Madeleine from becoming like the enslaved. It is the classic damsel in distress plot in many ways, but again the real horror stems from the psychological concern that even a pure, innocent white woman can be turned into the Other.

The effort to protect the norm becomes a mainstay of zombie films for most of the next century, though island zombies enslaved by a voodoo priest in Hollywood were eventually replaced by new threats, like Nazi and communist zombies created by science or alien technology (such as 1943’s *Revenge of the Zombies* or 1959’s *Invisible Invaders*). Despite the alteration in the origin of the monster, the protagonists overwhelming remain representative of a “typical” white American, with the conflict focused on protecting American ideals of the time.

Eventually, the zombie shifts from being controlled by an outside power to being an aspect of the natural world, with an early example being Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954). While the monsters in this book are called "vampires," their nature would go on to influence Romero's zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), essentially setting the mold for all the zombie stories that followed. Still, in each case, the zombie is the Other, though what kind of Other changes to fit what is socially monstrous or taboo as defined by the era's zeitgeist. Who is thought of as the outsider shifts, but for the most part, who is represented by the survivor—the mostly white, middle class dominant culture—remains consistent. If the most obvious liminal state inhabited by the zombie is the state between alive and dead, then this history of Othering through zombie stories presents another liminal space for our consideration: the boundary between "us" and "them," or those "inside" and those "outside."

At the beginning of the essay, I used very common storytelling elements to illustrate how familiar zombie stories have become, but within those elements, the concept of "inside" and "outside" are almost required. The tale begins, "*You've locked the doors and nailed them shut. The windows have been boarded up. You run through the home's layout again in your mind—there should be no other way in or out*" because the most common zombie plot device in the modern era stories center on the survivor's effort to keep themselves separated from the monsters. However, when we start to consider representations of the survivor and monster correlating to the dominant culture and repressed Other, we see that the effort is to keep the Other on the outside and social norm on the inside.

Freud's writings from "The Uncanny" are particularly useful in understanding how these monsters evoke fear. In this piece, Freud offers several insights that have been applied to zombies by other scholars. Examples include his thinking about the doppelganger and the automaton and how the familiarity and difference observed in these creatures causes fear and confusion. An example of the Uncanny appears in George A. Romero's iconic *Night of the Living Dead* when the little girl, Karen, has become a monster. Her mother, Helen, finds the girl in the basement eating her father's flesh and Helen freezes, terrified. Even though she should be able to easily overpower such a tiny monster, she instead collapses, shrieking, until Karen kills her with a trowel. In that moment, the fear Helen experiences is more than just terror of being brutally killed. It is complicated by confusion because she is unable to distinguish the daughter she loves and remembers from the monster she has become (*Night of the Living Dead* 1:24:05-1:24:50).

Freud's "Uncanny" also helps in understanding other aspects of the psychological effectiveness of the zombie. Freud uses the German words "*Heimlich*" and "*Unheimlich*" to more precisely define the Uncanny, pointing out that the word *Heimlich* means that something is familiar but also secret and hidden away from the public. It is often attached to ideas of repressed shame connected to the development of identity (Freud, "The Uncanny" 931-933). The *Unheimlich* also relies on that idea of familiarity, but places it on the outside of the self, which creates confusion and discomfort in a person. It is to perceive our private selves, in some way, reflected and exposed in public ("The Uncanny," 934, 940-943).

The *Unheimlich* and the *Heimlich* do not exist in direct opposition per se. There are levels of discomfort, doubling, and exposure to both concepts. Instead, I prefer to

think of how they work in terms of directionality of what is exposed or revealed. That which is Unheimlich exists outside of the self but reveals what is secret, familiar, hidden or taboo—essentially, what is outside and dangerous will appear safe and normal, infiltrate that which is thought of as familiar or homey, and corrupt that environment. In zombie stories, this is seen when a person encounters a zombie and is temporarily unable to distinguish whether the creature in front of them is human or monster. This Unheimlich sensation is increased when a survivor recognizes someone close to them and cannot see them as the monster they have become, but only as the person that they were. The closer the survivor is to who the monster once was, the more they experience cognitive dissonance. The line between monster and man gets thinner and as a result the tension and danger is higher. This is seen in *Night of the Living Dead* when Barbara (Judith O’Dea) recognizes her brother, Johnny (Russel Streiner), among the monsters. She has only just gotten to the stage of rationality to help the other survivors in the house, but seeing her brother as a monster causes her confusion to return in full force, which ultimately leads to her death (01:25:15-01:25:30).

Conversely, the Heimlich manifests in zombie films when someone is bitten or infected by a zombie but hides it from other survivors. The Heimlich represents the concern about what is inside, secret, or private being revealed to the outside world, along with the repressed memories and discomfort attached to that shameful sense of self. The individual experiencing the Heimlich may feel exposed and vulnerable but also defensive. While both the Heimlich and the Unheimlich appear in most zombie stories, the Unheimlich seems much more common in most zombie stories of the last 100 years. Perhaps this is because the Heimlich asks the audience to see the self as potentially

monstrous. In my personal opinion, having to face the possibility of one's own monstrosity and shame is more terrifying than the idea of something foreign coming in and destroying the individual. Using *Night of the Living Dead* as an example, the Unheimlich of the zombies breaking into the house is terrifying and exciting, but the terror experienced by Barbara being grabbed by Johnny (who teased and frightened her while he was still living) or Helen being killed by Karen was more disturbing to watch. These moments were amplified in the film because the feelings involved by the living are more complex. For the characters, being attacked by these specific ghouls is unnerving because their new states violate the understanding of previously loving relationships. It also exposes inward fears of the living, such as Barbara's vulnerability to her brother's cruelty or Helen's inability to help her child. These fears are often internalized and buried, but then revealed when their loved ones become monsters. The type of fear I associate with the Heimlich is more complicated for audiences because it asks them to see their own vulnerability and repressed emotions. Put simply, the added complexity of relating to the monster may have made examples of the Heimlich sense of the Uncanny less fun to watch unfold in zombie stories but also essential to the type of terror the zombies put forward.

The concepts of Othering and the Uncanny can help in clarifying various unifying factors in zombie narratives, but how these ideas are employed changes from one era to the next. The zombie subgenre continually defines and redefines itself according to its cultural context. Previously, I used the word "evolution" in suggesting how the idea of the monster has changed over time. As we trace zombie stories through time, certain influences and relationships appear that resemble a family tree. I would suggest that the

primary branch of this tree begins with the Haitian stories. This branch splits when the zombie is appropriated by American storytellers, in films like *White Zombie*, altering some of its fundamental concepts, including how Othering and the Uncanny were employed. Because the Haitian zombie tales were largely meant for enslaved populations prior to the revolution, the Othering occurred between those held in bondage and those who were free, and the sense of the Uncanny arose from the realization that one could lose the piece of their soul that gives them their individual identity. The American appropriation then shifts the Othering along racial lines, stoking the fear that a white protagonist can fall victim to the same sort of loss of the soul as black (former) slaves, as is shown in the analysis of *White Zombie*.

This American section of the zombie family tree branches off again with the introduction of the B Movies of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, where the zombie didn't always represent the racial Other and instead became tied up in the political, as is seen in Communist controlled zombies of the Cold War, such as 1941's *King of the Zombies*. The Cold War, I think, also inspired another branching of the zombie family tree. Fear of nuclear apocalypse found an emotional outlet in the post-apocalyptic zombie tale, most notably in Richard Matheson's *I am Legend*. The novella used the idea of nuclear war and mass destruction to isolate the survivor, Robert Neville, from the ghoulish Other. This version of the zombie (though called vampires) had no master and, until the end of the story, no ability to organize. Their strength was in their relentlessness and sheer number. In the book, we see different aspects of the Uncanny, most specifically the fear of infiltration into a safe and homey space, such as when Neville comes upon a young woman named Ruth, who appears to be human. Using makeup and pills, Ruth is able to

appear to be unchanged like Neville, and because of this, she is taken into the protagonist's home fortress. Where the Other could not get to him by force, she was able to enter through simulating sameness.

The viral nature of Matheson's creatures, as mentioned previously, greatly influenced the films of George A. Romero. The *Living Dead* films are broadly considered foundational to every zombie story that followed, to the extent that some mistakenly start the zombie family tree there. *Night of the Living Dead* was seen to represent the racial tensions of the Civil Rights era, and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) took aim at American consumerism a full decade before films like 1987's *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone) reveled in it. Here, I would like to note that while many zombie films prior to *Night of the Living Dead* seemed more like propaganda, playing on the already pervasive fears of an era and exacerbating them, Romero's film set a new expectation for the most important zombie stories: either by happenstance or foresight, these stories seemed capable of predicting the prevailing fears and concerns of society during a specific period of time.

This is true for the film that set the tone for the "golden age" of zombies following the terror attacks of 9/11. Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* was still filming when the attacks happened, and it was released into a world where the War on Terror warned that constant vigilance was now necessary for survival. Politicians and news agencies warned that the next attack could happen at any time, perpetrated by anyone. The idea that "anyone" could be a threat was also liminal in a way—the news warned that it could be a neighbor or family member, but at the same time, the face of the threat that was presented to the public belonged to people who were social, religious, political, racial, or national Others. We were regularly warned that the type of mass casualty attack could

take on other forms. Death could come in the shape of an envelope, a backpack, a pair of shoes, or any other number of things and we, as citizens, needed to guard against them. Perhaps the most steady narrative in those first months after 9/11 was that, in any of these attacks, from any of these people, the resulting casualties would be catastrophic. Here, I speak from personal memory of those years when, as a new adult, I was thrust into a world where I had to reconcile the fact that I was not as safe as I had previously been led to believe, which, as an American, was shocking. This was also fundamentally different from the fear of nuclear death because it was, in many ways, more insidious and unexpected.

I understand this is a limited and reductive way of looking at the complex politics of the time, and it is limited to my positions of privilege as a white male U.S. citizen, but as a member of the “norm,” I was also the target audience for a film like *28 Days Later*. Looking back, I realize that Boyle’s film appealed to me in part because it allowed me an outlet to confront the general feelings of dread at the time. In “Terror in Horror Genres: The Global Media and the Millennial Zombie,” Nicole Birch Bayley writes, “What is most striking about this particular age in film is not necessarily in how society has been variously paralleled or mimicked, but in how these films cast a light on the anxieties and antagonisms of the global media in the new millennium” (1148), which reinforces that the type of fear exploited by millennial zombie films worked in conjunction with the constant tension of globalized media using cultural Othering to foster fear and improve ratings. To be sure, as shown in Klosterman’s column, Boyle’s film is often noted for introducing a version of the zombie that was fast, predatory, capable of problem solving, and still living, but what should not be overlooked is that these monsters were infected by

a virus made of rage, science, and the 24-hour news cycle (*28 Days Later* 00:00:25-00:01:40). Returning to the idea of the zombie family tree, Boyle's zombies were different in terms of their behavior, capabilities, and to some extent, method of spreading, but the more important alteration may be how the Uncanny was applied to the living situation of audiences in the post-9/11 era.

However, *28 Days Later*, for all its influence, is only one of many branches born in this era of zombie films. The boom of zombie fiction and film production inevitably gave rise to many alterations of the myth. The most direct descendent of *Night of the Living Dead* was Romero's own *Land of the Dead* (2005). This film spoke to the fears and paranoias concerning wealth inequality and racial division for the contemporary zeitgeist, but the film struggled to resonate with fans who took Boyle's rage monsters to be the new standard of zombies. Other fans rejected *28 Days Later* in favor of the more traditional *Land of the Dead* zombie or the similar monster offered in *The Walking Dead*. Even something as different as the monsters of *Resident Evil* (both the video games and films) must still be reconciled on some level with the other creatures carrying the same name. Essentially, the exponential increase of zombie stories at the turn of the 21st century allowed fans to pick a version of the monster that resonated most with their experience, making an absolute definition of the millennial zombie difficult. There were commonalities, to be sure, including the influence of technology, mass media, and the use of Othering and the Uncanny in terms of the living becoming the zombie. Another commonality, however, may be that the "golden age" of zombies ran into an issue that the genre had not encountered before: pop culture fatigue.

The Cost of Not Dying

As stated, the trend of the zombie in popular culture rises in times of political or social tension (Newitz), only to fade in public consciousness until called upon again—but the retreat of the monster from popular culture was almost as necessary to its growth and alteration as its presence across all media. The post-9/11 zombie found an unprecedented longevity in the public eye. There are a number of reasons this likely occurred, including profitability for companies, psychological needs of audiences, and even a sense of familiarity that was grotesquely comforting. Essentially, the zombie did not disappear from the public eye as it had in the past, which means that any transition it went through as a genre would not seem sudden or severe as it had in the past. With this pattern broken, the new iterations of zombies would be part of a smoother transition, holding a resemblance to zombie stories meant for the millennial audience who used the stories to cope with fears around the War on Terror, but telling a fundamentally different story.

As a result of the ubiquity of the subgenre over an extended amount of time, many golden age zombie stories had to shift focus away from the monster to maintain relevance. Perhaps few zombie stories exemplify this narrative shift as much as the 2010 TV series *The Walking Dead*. The zombies in the series are very similar to the standard set by Romero, in terms of the image of the slow, decomposing walking corpse passing on its affliction through bite or death. The show was also similar to the *Living Dead* series in that it begins just before the apocalyptic event but carries viewers into a post-apocalyptic setting. In these ways, *The Walking Dead*'s place on the zombie family tree is clearly descended from Romero's branch, and this familiarity no doubt drew many people to the show. However, the show diverges from Romero's films most clearly

because of the TV show's ongoing storytelling. While both series, when taken in whole, show a progression from the initial apocalyptic event to a post-apocalyptic world, Romero's world progresses seemingly over decades, with different settings and protagonists. *The Walking Dead*, however, has maintained a steadily evolving cast and a plot that has grown with the audience for over a decade. In both series, the zombies serve almost as secondary threats, motivating conflicts between survivors. Both worlds demonstrate that the primary source of pressure, fear, and conflict arises from the collapse of civilization, and how the survivors navigate a society without familiar rules, but in the case of *The Walking Dead*, the protagonists (again, a somewhat stable collection of characters) are confronted with an evolving cast of "villains." These antagonists are not the zombies, but humans named Shane Walsh (Jon Bernthal—first appearing in Season 1, Episode 1, "Days Gone Bye"), the Governor (David Morrissey—first appearing in Season 3, Episode 3, "Walk With Me"), or Negan (Jeffery Dean Morgan—first appearing in Season 6, Episode 16, "Last Day on Earth"). They are the living threats to Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) and his group. As the series progresses, the zombies become little more than an extra bit of pressure to push the plot along. The monsters become background—part of traps set by devious masterminds and dangers of the wilderness threatening to overtake any sense of civilization—but their Uncanny nature is decreased because they stop being individuals or connected to humanity.

The sense of shock and confusion created by the presence of the zombie, that sense of the Uncanny, is lessened in *The Walking Dead* because of the survivors' (and the audience's) continuous exposure. After all, the Uncanny is felt when characters (and by proxy, the audience) experience an irreconcilable confusion of something occupying two

states simultaneously. But when characters (and again, the audience) have been exposed to the liminal state of the zombie for years, the shock wears off. The creature is no longer existing in a perplexing state between living and dead—it's just a zombie. Under these conditions, the zombie cannot function in the same psychological way, and as a result the zombie functions differently in the narrative. Of course, *The Walking Dead* and other zombie stories still often serve as social or political allegories, but these parallels to modern society must rely on other sources of conflict beyond the creatures to convey these parallels. Negan, the primary foil in Season 6 and beyond in the show, has built a sort of civilization through fascistic rule. The main protagonist's journey sees Rick meet Negan's absolutism with a ruthlessness of his own for a time before he comes to realize that a unified front with several leaders, a sort of democracy, is the only solution (Seasons 6-8). The conflict between the two men could have many parallels to the modern political climate, but what is more important for this analysis is that the zombies are little more than weapons, training dummies, and distractions compared to the main, human conflict. Even when a long-time hero, Sasha (Sonequa Martin Green), chooses to commit suicide to turn herself into a zombie and thus weaponize herself (Season 7, Episode 16, "The First Day of the Rest of Your Life"), the implicit racial, gendered, and social commentary has little to do with her crossing over in a liminal state. Her choice is dramatic and sympathetic, but the transformation is not Uncanny.

Returning to the idea of the family tree, one way particular heritages of zombie stories sought to maintain relevance to popular culture is to make the zombie more sympathetic. In terms of the Uncanny, a sense of sympathy toward a zombie would increase its connection to the human state even though it has changed into something

else. This emotional relationship to the monster should cause more confusion about its true, horrific, nature. Romero's zombies in the 1980s and 2000s alike both used this strategy. Bub (Sherman Howard) in *Day of the Dead* (1985) and Big Daddy (Eugene Clark) in *Land of the Dead* (2005) were given increased agency and seemed to reflect more human behavior in spite of being the Other. The result of this should be, according to Freud, a greater sense of the Uncanny. Freud cites the work of Ernst Jentsch, stating that the Uncanny occurs when there is "uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton, and to [create this confusion] in such a way that his attention is not focused directly upon his uncertainty" (Freud, "The Uncanny," 935). The word "automaton" is somewhat inadequate in reference to the zombie but Jentsch's idea is that, in order to create the sense of the Uncanny, the distance between what is and isn't human should be present without it being the primary focus of the audience. When the difference is revealed, the result is to shock and confuse. In zombie stories, this distance is narrowed further and further to increase the sense of tension around the Uncanny. These distances are narrowed through violations of that absolute division—a liminal trespass. Big Daddy shouldn't be able to figure out how to operate a machine gun, and yet he does (00:15:25-00:16:22). He shouldn't have care and compassion for his fellow zombies, and yet he does. This allows the monsters to organize an invasion, which is also a violation of their nature as it is understood by the survivors of the film and, as a result, the understanding of the audience and their expectations based on previous zombie stories.

These violations of more traditional zombie nature are necessary for the zombie stories to feel important, new, and appropriate to the era they are released into. And yet, I

would argue that, in the “golden age,” with stories such as *The Walking Dead*, these violations and transgressions, despite their outrageous nature, become less and less effective for an audience because of a factor that the zombie, as a part of pop culture, had never before faced—viewer fatigue.

As noted above, the zombie always rises to popular consciousness (especially in the US) during times of social or political unrest, with new film, TV, and written stories emerging after major periods of transition in the United States (Newitz). However, what is often left out of this analysis is the importance of the time between these moments. The zombie experiences spikes in popularity because it also experiences lulls in popularity. This has allowed storytellers the opportunity to reinvent the monster, creating new attributes that connect that new version of the monster to the era it is created in.

Since 2001, however, the zombie has not experienced such a lull in the cultural consciousness. Instead, the zombie has become nearly ubiquitous. It has grown beyond a level of cult popularity, where a considerable population feels a connection to the monster or the zombie narrative, with an average person having some sort of zombie escape plan, should the stories become real. In fact, in 2015, the U.S. Center for Disease Control launched a webpage dedicated to disaster preparedness, using a zombie apocalypse as the theme (“Zombie Preparedness”). The fear of the zombie has traditionally relied on fear, shock, and confusion. But then where do you go as a storyteller when everyone has become an “expert” in the monster, and exposure is unavoidable?

One outcome is the comical zombie. Films such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Fido* (2006), and *Dead Snow* (2009) are part of the horror comedy genre that distorts the

understanding of the zombie and points out some of the more ridiculous elements of the zombie in a tongue-in-cheek way. It's hardly a coincidence that many of these satires are not American films (those mentioned being British, Canadian, and Norwegian, respectfully). The zombie is often described as a particularly American monster and as such, part of the joy of these movies seem to be in exposing the absurdity of American discomfort, paranoia, suburban ennui, and an obsession with firearms. If zombies in the United States help the common consciousness grapple with times of division and great loss of life, then comedic zombie films from around the world might help other populations grapple with America's paranoid and obsessive behavior.

Of course, this is not true of all zombie stories produced outside of the United States. Indeed, *28 Days Later* is a British film and more recent releases (such as England's *The Girl with All the Gifts* or South Korea's *Train to Busan*, both released in 2016) are examples of the continuing potential for potency of the zombie in horror despite the years of audience exposure. Regardless, the zombie, to remain a part of popular culture, must continue to evolve, or it will lose the ability to serve as representation of fear, Othering, and the Uncanny for a specific place, time, and culture. The zombie story that was useful at the start of the "War on Terror" era became as familiar and ultimately as disturbing as any other effort to cope with modern concerns. There was once a time where taking off one's shoes at an airport was a strange practice tied to fear and paranoia, but as time moves on, these efforts do not seem strange at all. There are now adults who have never experienced a world where these behaviors weren't normal—where liquids and gels go in Ziploc bags to pass security, and threats of terrorism and mass death are a part of everyday existence. The zombie that serves as a

psychological equivalent for these threats becomes equally dull to those who have never experienced anything else.

Putting the Zombie in Generation Z

By the late 2000s, zombies had been a mainstay of pop culture for years, and yet audiences who were younger than the millennials who had come before (Gen Z) likely felt a lack of connection to the stories. The social catharsis experienced through those stories were a part of someone else's stresses and concerns. As such, it might have once seemed likely that the zombie would be abandoned altogether by young audiences. But instead, the zombie began to appear in Young Adult stories, initiating another opportunity for the monster's evolution.

Young Adult authors, writing zombies for Gen Z audiences, have created a number of different choices in recreating the monster and trying to develop a new branch of the zombie family tree. One of the major consistencies is the use of sympathy for the monster. As will be shown, the level of sympathy and insight can vary greatly in YA zombie fiction—from simply seeing the monster as a victim of natural circumstance, worthy of pity more than fear, to casting the zombie in the role of protagonist. The latter move is by far the most surprising thing in these narratives because it complicates the potential relationship of the zombie to audiences. As Bishop pointed out in relation to the popularity of the “golden age” post-9/11 zombie, the monster allowed “those tormented by post-9/11 anxieties and stresses of contemporary living” a chance to escape, with zombies taking on the role of “redemptive ‘missionaries’, inviting fans to join their masses while promoting an easier, less angst-ridden existence” (“The Contemporary

Zombie as Seductive Proselyte” 26). While this escapism is still reflected in some stories, many Gen Z Zombie tales complicate this idea by giving the zombie increased agency and awareness. As such, becoming a zombie only presents new kinds of problems, not an escape from them. This new emotional dynamic between the monster and the audience takes the zombie past sympathetic entities (like Romero’s Bub and Big Daddy, mentioned above) into being empathetic, where the audience sees themselves as the monster, not a liminal step away from them. Again, this relationship is special to the Gen Z zombie. Max Brooks’s 2006 zombie story, *World War Z*, is an example of the limitation of the golden age zombie story in that it endeavors to tell the story of a zombie apocalypse from as many points of view as possible. This includes a mercenary, a retired vice-president, a human turned “feral” to survive, refugees, and soldiers—but the one perspective that cannot be captured in this oral history is that of the zombie. Brooks’s work is impactful in part because the reader can relate to the protagonist of at least one of the stories—but the zombie Other remains voiceless and unrelatable. This is not true in Gen Z zombie stories, where the protagonists or other main characters are often zombies, challenging our simplistic understanding of the zombie as Other.

The intersection of YA and zombie stories and the creation of the Gen Z zombie offers an interesting and perhaps predictive point of where the monster will go next in pop culture (again, imagine the family tree). Using four YA novels, I will make the case that the Gen Z zombie is a dramatic alteration in the zombie myth, especially in relation to the oft-studied “golden age” post-9/11 zombie. Just as every generation of the zombie alters to relate to and reflect the concerns of the contemporary audience, the empathy used in creating and consuming the Gen Z zombie suggests new concerns and paranoias

of their audiences. This empathy for the monster also alters how Othering and the Uncanny is used in these stories, making this perhaps one of the biggest alterations to the zombie myth since *Night of the Living Dead*.

Chapter 2: The Young Adult and the Zombie

The Gen Z zombie exists at the intersection of zombie fiction and Young Adult literature. This combination seems almost inevitable due to the popularity of each separate genre in our current era. For the sake of my analysis, I have chosen four YA zombie titles that demonstrate some of the most important trends and features of the Gen Z zombie. The four titles are Daniel Waters's *Generation Dead* (2008), Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies* (2011), Jonathan Maberry's *Rot & Ruin* (2010), and Darren Shan's *Zom-B* (2012).

There are a plethora of Young Adult Zombie novels to choose from and more come out every year. In choosing these particular four, I had a number of considerations in mind. First, these books have sold many copies. By selecting some of the most popular titles in the genre, I hope to gain an understanding of how the title connects to the general pop culture zeitgeist of its YA audience. Content wise, these books were also excellent examples of trends which I observed across other titles. While they may not have been the first to try something new or particular to the Gen Z zombie, they are strong reference points for the subgenre. Additionally, when considered against the historical lineages of zombie story in terms of the zombie family tree, these titles are notable in the way that they shift previous understandings of the monster itself.

The four books are stylistically different from one another in important ways, which I will discuss in their respective analyses, but there are some commonalities worth noting up front. Each title is the first in a series of books. It is common practice to serialize any successful YA title, but the first books are most informative to my research

because those initial texts establish the rules, behaviors, and other concepts particular to the series' world, which ultimately articulates aspects of the Gen Z zombie.

I have previously established the history of the zombie story and the relevant critical concepts needed for this examination. Some of the Gen Z zombie books predictably reach back in time to their predecessors, including the “golden age” zombie, the Matheson/Romero era ghoul, and even into the representative aspects of the Haitian myth. For this reason, I have previously offered an abbreviated history of the monster to assist in understanding how the Gen Z zombie both reflects and skews previous versions of the monster. With this established, it is important to also provide a foundational understanding of what YA fiction is and how it works. This foundation is helpful in considering how the older traditions of the zombie had to change to fit the expectations of the YA genre, and the hybrid of these genres ended up creating a new branch of what the zombie can be in pop culture.

When we speak about YA, popular titles such as the *Harry Potter* or *Hunger Games* series come to mind. Their wild popularity touched many aspects of culture and continue to influence what YA can be. These titles were targeted at young readers. The annual release of the *Harry Potter* series ensured that an entire generation of readers grew up with these books, and the films reinforced the cultural connection. While this generation of readers was able to find direct relationship with the books and the characters, the success of the series really took off because the books were also enjoyed by older audiences. One of the most clear ways of defining YA is to simply state that it is literature intended for readers aged 12 to 18 years old, but even when considering the most quintessential texts of the genre, like *Harry Potter*, defining YA by an age range is a

bit simplistic. Many readers of YA texts fall outside of this age range, suggesting that it is more a marker of the way a book is marketed than a limit on the book itself.

This simplified age-range classification also has consequences that go beyond marketing. YA is often dismissed as being “less literary” because of its intended audience. Even one of the authors reviewed in this essay resisted the designation. In a 2012 interview with ZombiesWorld.com, Isaac Marion, author of *Warm Bodies* said, “I don’t like that the book has been classified as YA. It never crossed my mind while writing this that it would be marketed to children ... it’s a very “adult” book. There is a lot of graphic violence, drugs, sex, foul language, and adult themes” (*Interview with Isaac Marion*). There are many misconceptions of the Young Adult genre, even from those who write within the genre. I held the same impression until I studied the genre under acclaimed YA author David Levithan. Through the exploration of many titles, it became clear that YA fiction has the same basic storytelling elements, the same range in themes, and the same potential for literary quality as “adult” titles. The difference in target audience often meant a difference in marketing (such as placement in a specific part of a bookstore or the style of cover art), not in subject matter.

Many who continue to consider YA books as “less literary” than adult fiction are in fact confusing YA with texts aimed at younger ages. It is important to distinguish Children’s and Middle Grade books from YA. The morals, themes, and the narrative style of Children’s literature most often trend towards simplicity, and Middle Grade readers bridge the gap between Children’s lit and YA, providing additional complexity and challenge in the reading, but still largely avoiding adult themes, language (swearing), and certain controversial subject matter. YA titles also tend to be longer than books intended

for younger audiences, ranging from 55,000-70,000 words for YA readers, as opposed to 20,000-55,000 words for “Middle Grade” literature (Sambuchino).

Having noted both the commonalities between YA and adult literature, and the distinction between YA and Middle Grade and Children’s literature, the question remains whether there are specific traits or trends in YA that can be considered hallmarks of the genre. To be sure, there is still a considerable disagreement in the academic community about what constitutes YA literature, but I have found that Jonathan Stephens’s assessment in *The Alan Review* to be the most succinct and helpful. In his article, he presents five factors that play a primary role in YA fiction. While there may, of course, be exceptions to these rules, they hold true in the texts that I have identified for my research and the majority of YA fiction. Stephens’s establishes that YA texts:

1. Are Written About Teens
2. Have a Distinctly Teen Voice
3. Involve the Journey Toward Identity
4. Tackle Adult Issues in Teenage Lives
5. Hold the Same Potential for Literary Value as Grownup Novels (Stephens 41)

The first qualification, that the book is written about teens, is almost always true in the genre. Even in cases where the protagonist may not technically be a teen, they are still presented as a teen (an example would be Edward Cullen in *Twilight* or R in *Warm Bodies*). This enables younger readers to feel a connection to the character, but does not necessarily alienate older audiences since they were once teens as well.

The second factor, having a “distinctly teen voice,” is what makes the first feature believable. As Stephens notes, the majority of YA novels are written in first person (41). I have found that the first person allows for a more organic exploration of the interiority of the character. Through this first person point of view, conflicts can arise from an incomplete or naïve perception of the world—a familiar feeling for many young readers. In the novels I review, the first person perspective is necessary in books like *Warm Bodies*, but other texts, such as *Generation Dead* and *Zom-B* use a limited third person to permit the reader insight into inner conflicts the character might not verbally express.

If there is one thematic commonality that is most persistent in YA novels, it is Stephens’s third factor, the journey toward self-identity. Many popular YA novels utilize the “chosen one” trope—a young person rises from obscurity to fulfill a great destiny (again, I refer back to the *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* series as examples). This idea of the “chosen one” is so common that it could almost be seen as a defining factor, but I believe that Stephens’s focus on the journey of identity is even more accurate. Whether the character is a “chosen one” meant to fulfill a great destiny or simply a young person trying to cope with their day-to-day life, the effort to find one’s place in the world and understand one’s identity occurs across nearly all YA titles. This is true across all four of my selected texts.

The search for identity often occurs within the confines of a larger adult world and, as such, the teen protagonists are faced with what would normally be considered “Adult Issues”—Stephens’s fourth qualification. Harry, Hermione, and Ron’s concerns become steadily more complex and connected to the adult world as the *Harry Potter* series progresses. This growth is also displayed in Melinda Sordino’s efforts to cope with

sexual assault and ostracization in Laurie Halse Anderson's essential YA text, *Speak*. Ultimately, the search for identity is also a journey toward adulthood and the responsibilities and difficulties that follow. Stephens's third and fourth defining factors of the YA genre—journeying towards identity and tackling adult issues—are in many ways dependent on one another. But as interrelated as they are, they are also essential to consider on their own.

In my opinion, Stephen's fifth qualification—that YA titles “Hold the Same Potential for Literary Value as Grownup Novels”—is less a characteristic of the genre, and more a defense against those who would dismiss YA fiction as “non-literary.” As mentioned before, Marion resisted calling his book YA, and while he mostly emphasized the adult themes in his book as the reason his book should not be considered YA, I wonder if part of the issue isn't also the perception that these books are somehow lesser in terms of literary quality. In truth, the genre is no different from any other genre. As Stephens suggests, there have been numerous texts which demonstrate the capacity for literary greatness within the YA classification, but there are also examples of less impressive works. He writes, “some books survive, and most are forgotten, Children's, Young Adult, and Grownup books alike” (Stephens 41). Working at the intersection of two oft-dismissed genre classifications—YA and Zombie Fiction—makes literary value difficult to establish. The number of books sold may suggest an idea of popularity and cultural influence, and critical examinations like this one may give way to academic viability, but “literary value” seems even less quantifiable. Still, these four books suggest important changes to the zombie subgenre, and if they (and books like them) influence the next evolution of the zombie story, if they “survive,” then maybe their literary value

can be discussed. In the meantime, what is required is the agreement, as Stephens suggests, that there is *potential* for literary value.

Beyond Stephens's five rules, there are also tropes common to the YA genre which find a home in zombie fiction, such as the aforementioned idea of a "chosen one." Another trend that has been on the rise since 9/11 is the apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic setting. Zombie stories also frequently use this sort of setting, and adult zombie stories like *The Walking Dead*, Whitehead's *Zone One* and films such as *Train to Busan* start, reflect on, or center around the apocalyptic moment—the changeover from the world as we know it to the world after decimation. I find this particularly interesting because, for American audiences, this change and alteration reflects the perspective of those who experienced and can clearly recall a pre- and post-9/11 existence.

Since contemporary YA stories and golden-age zombie tales both make frequent use of the apocalypse, it is not surprising to find that YA zombie texts are very frequently also post-apocalyptic. However, I do feel it is important to note a specific shift; many YA stories place characters in worlds where the apocalyptic moment is the experience of their elders. For example, the protagonist of Maberry's *Rot & Ruin* only has vague recollections of when the end of the world happened, but he was completely unable to affect it because he was still a toddler. Other popular YA titles, like Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, exist in a time where society's rules and religious beliefs have been built around the existence of the monster, and it has been this way for the character's entire life. This differentiates the Gen Z zombie story from other zombie tales because it is more in line with the young reader's understanding of the world: there have always been global threats and anxiety-inducing rules imposed on their generation. This

trauma was caused by the generations that came before Gen Z, and yet these young people are stuck living with the consequences that have come from those other generations' actions.

This common issue in the Gen Z zombie story between the protagonist and the adult world is closely aligned with Stephens's fourth feature of YA storytelling, which focuses on teens taking on adult issues. In many YA stories, including some of those examined here, young protagonists find themselves grappling with the politics, secrets, and depravity of a society that has been established by the adult generation. As these stories continue, and the teen protagonist takes on more responsibility, they come to see the adult generation as the ones who made everyone vulnerable and failed the society that these young adults are now left to live in. While an adult character might see their actions in the apocalypse as utilitarian and necessary, the young protagonist, living in the post-apocalyptic world created by those adults' actions, can only see heartlessness and corruption. This is what distinguishes the Gen Z zombie from the post-9/11, adult zombie. The Gen Z zombie story reflects the young reader's perception of the world they were born into.

One way Gen Z zombie texts draw attention to this intergenerational conflict is by shifting the perception of the monster. The Otherness of the zombie serves as a reflection of the protagonist's own feelings of being Othered and outside. This is a major difference from the golden-age zombie or even the comforting release that Bishop suggests in "The Contemporary Zombie as Seductive Proselyte," where the zombie offers a way out of an anxiety-ridden existence. The Gen Z zombie, instead, tends to be shown as either a guiltless victim similar to the teen protagonist or, in the case of *Generation Dead* and

Warm Bodies, a creature full of their own anxieties and conflicts with the social norm. There is no implied release, just more Otherness that the reader can see as a reflection of their own experience. This increased permeability between the monster and the emotional position of teenagers alters how the Uncanny is utilized by authors, as will be shown.

The intersection of Young Adult fiction and zombie fiction seems to be predicated on some surprising commonalities, but what is most important for my work here is to see what can grow from the intersecting possibilities of these types of writing. I believe that this genre intersection results in some important alterations in how the zombie story functions in popular literature in the modern age. These texts lay the groundwork for the expectations of the zombie myth after the golden age, born of terror and mass panic, subsides. Now, audiences are left with a strange mixture of exhaustion, anxiety, fear, and disconnection in a world of assumed horror. The monster must change to meet this new emotional state. Perhaps even more significant is that these alterations of the monster happen on such a fundamental level that critical concepts that are so commonly connected to the zombie—specifically Othering and the Uncanny—start working differently in the Gen Z zombie texts. Where the zombie family tree grows from here is anyone's guess, but it is possible that this generation of changes will be as essential as the zombie evolutions offered by Seabrook, Matheson, Romero, or Boyle.

Generation Dead

Navigating high school relationships can be difficult, and the subgenre of YA romance has been a staple for decades. Daniel Waters's *Generation Dead* (2008) is one of the earliest books of the Generation Z zombie, but it is also a YA romance. Its

emphasis is on the relationships in a group of high schoolers, with one complication being that some of the students are zombies. Unlike many Gen Z zombie stories, *Generation Dead* is not post-apocalyptic. In fact, it is not even apocalyptic. It is set in the contemporary age and the dead have just begun to rise.

Waters alters many aspects commonly associated with the undead and the worlds they inhabit. For instance, the concept of a zombie—complete with movies, books, and the word zombie itself—already exists in this world, and predates the event of the dead rising. This is unusual among zombie stories, but still, it isn't the first time such a concept has been used. Similar setups exist in the zombie comedies of the golden age zombie, such as *Shaun of the Dead* or *Dead Snow*, and in some Gen Z zombie stories. In the case of the zombie comedy, there is often a character with a near encyclopedic knowledge of the monster that serves as an unlikely hero, helping others to survive when fiction becomes reality. However, in Generation Z zombie stories such as Waters's *Generation Dead*, the characters' pop culture understanding of what a zombie should be is often different from the actual undead, and the resulting misunderstanding of the monster causes conflict.

This is certainly the case in *Generation Dead*. Waters's zombies, unlike the common pop culture perception, do not eat flesh or crave brains. They don't smell bad or rot, either (2). At the time of their death, the adolescent zombies stop changing in most ways. Their bodies are held in a state of suspended animation (7). This means that those who suffered serious deformity at the time of their death will always look that way. The process of dying also leaves most of the dead with a diminished mental capacity, but this capacity ranges widely from one zombie to the next. Some are labeled as "high

functioning” and can maintain somewhat normal interactions, while others struggle, resulting in slower movements, responses, and thinking (2-9). Through the first book, the origin of the zombie remains a mystery. What is known is that the undead are American teenagers who have died but have, for some reason, come back to life (7).

The novel is centered on students at Oakvale High School, where the administration is attempting to integrate the zombies back into “normal” teen life. The story begins with students in the cafeteria, choosing seats and gossiping about classmates. An undead girl named Karen sits alone, and the main character, Phoebe, is listening to her friend Margi claim that Tommy Williams, another undead student, sneezed out his eyeball in a class earlier that day (Waters 1-2). Without the aspect of the students being zombies, this scene would be familiar to any teen reader, but the division between living and undead students does seem to emphasize certain forms of social division and Othering. Many of the zombie (or, the novel’s more politically correct designation, “differently biotic”) students are held apart because of a combination of actual difference conflated with pop culture stereotypes. Any reader can see that Waters uses the zombie as an abstraction of other social divisions, such as race or class, in the real world. That said, the book shouldn’t be praised for making direct social commentary that isn’t there. The town of Oakvale and the majority of the students seem to be overwhelming white and middle class. All that is clear is that the zombie is standing in for *some* kind of Other, and that this Other is heavily misunderstood, misrepresented, oppressed, and terrorized by the society they live in.

The book’s focus on a group of teenagers fulfills Stephens’s first two markers of the YA genre (written about teens, and using a distinctly teen voice). Phoebe is the

primary protagonist, but the story shifts to others including Adam, one of Phoebe's best friends who secretly wants a relationship with her, and Pete, a violent, misogynistic football player who hates the undead and eventually acts on that hatred. Other teen characters include Margi, who is uncomfortable around the differently biotic students. The zombies include Karen, a beautiful and strange girl, Colette, an undead girl who was best friends with Margi and Phoebe when she was still alive, and Tommy, a politically active student who becomes the object of Phoebe's affection. Karen and Tommy are high functioning undead, able to react and move with little delay, though no one knows why exactly. Other differently biotic students, such as Colette, Tayshawn, and Evan, are considered lower functioning and have more delay in speaking and moving and increased trouble interacting. It is worth noting that while much of the story involves the zombie students, they are not the primary protagonist of any chapter. Also, the closer to "normal" they are, the more they are tied into the main plot line. This changes as the series goes on, but focusing on this first novel, it seems that Waters offers the readers an intermediary between the living and the dead with these high functioning zombies. By keeping the zombies at a slight distance, the book in many ways reflects its roots in the golden age zombie story.

This is an early book in the Gen Z zombie story type (it was published in 2008), and while it is difficult to gauge its influence on later YA zombie titles, it is an early example of what becomes a major thread in the subgenre. Unlike the many kinds of zombies that came before, from early American appropriation of the myth through the golden age, the Gen Z zombie story tends to emphasize empathy for the monsters, and Waters achieves this through undermining some of the most foundational ideas of what

zombies are. The undead teens of *Generation Dead* are not monsters. While theorists like Bishop have suggested that the golden age zombie is a manifestation of the audience's desire to escape the anxiety of modern life by becoming braindead and joining the horde, Waters's teens have no such escape. They still have to go to high school. They are still wrapped up in relationships and striving for their individuality. The zombies of *Generation Dead* have all the same concerns as their living peers, except their experience is made more complex by being Othered, not protected by the law, and facing stereotypes that make it nearly impossible to coexist with the living. While Waters is unclear whether the undead are meant to be an abstraction of any specific marginalized group, he does make it clear that they face the same problems as other teens, but amplified.

Generation Dead has many interweaving storylines. While it is mostly told from the perspective of Phoebe, the primary catalyst for most of the story is Tommy. As a high functioning zombie, he tries to interact more with other students and gain support for the differently biotic in a number of ways. In an effort to get press attention and appear more "normal," he joins the football team, where he befriends Adam and crosses paths with Pete (42-52). Later, we see that he has been responding to the crimes against zombies in the world as well as the pertinent media coverage through his personal blog, "mysocalledundeath.com." He uses this blog to advocate for zombie rights (206-210). He also becomes involved when the school partners with a group called "The Hunter Foundation" to study and promote positive interaction between the living and the undead (103).

As is to be expected of a YA romance, one of the primary plots revolves around the budding romance between Tommy and Phoebe. Their relationship allows a window

into the zombie experience through a sympathetic human perspective, but Waters violates some of the more common tropes that can occur in the YA genre. The first is that Tommy's mother, Faith, is supportive of their relationship and her undead son, so the two don't have to avoid parental scorn from both sides (210). In fact, the love of Tommy's mother plays an important role in the story. A second violation of the YA romance genre is that the teens are not completely consumed by romantic obsessions. Each student, zombie and living alike, has a number of concerns that go beyond their budding relationships. This is not always true in the YA romance subgenre, and ensures that the reader's attention is directed beyond the personal, so that the relationships often serve to complicate the other concerns. This complexity, I believe, illustrates how multifaceted Stephens's third marker of the YA genre can be. "The journey to identity" in YA texts can reveal the many dimensions in teen life and allow readers multiple ways of relating to characters in the book.

One of these focuses that goes beyond the book's romances is the role of media in the teens' lives. In a way that is reminiscent of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, the teens at the center of the novel get news reports of the controversy but are, for the most part, more concerned with their immediate environment. However, the types of media that are used in the story show a shift in media culture from Romero's "live" broadcasts to the modern age. Through press coverage by CNN, the audience learns the story of the first living dead teen, a boy named Dallas Jones, and the conflict that followed, with many other teenagers returning undead. CNN reports that the living are capturing and killing these undead teens without repercussion since there is no law against harming someone who has already died (Waters 116-120). This coverage is disturbing to the

Oakvale High students, and yet may be familiar to teen readers in a way that evokes Birch Bayley's suggestion that the 24-hour news feed is a part of a culture of paranoia and fear that helps make the zombie effective in modern times. The teens, much later in the book, note that local news provides coverage of attacks on differently abled teens, while the larger media outlets do not (Waters 272-273). Waters presents the town of Oakvale as a sort of microcosm of the larger world it exists in, and its closer focus as well as the information gathered from the local outlets (both online and in print) are more nuanced. CNN mentions the fight for the rights of the differently abled, but it is Tommy's efforts to gain awareness on the school campus and his blog that truly brings the difficult situation the zombies face into focus. Extremist actions shown on national news programs, such as a zombie being tied to a basketball pole and set on fire (Waters 120), seem sensational in comparison to the development of Pete's extremism, even if the resulting violence that he undertakes is equally terrible. This stands out in the story because the adult world seems incapable of understanding the lives of these teenagers except in the broadest of strokes, and yet the teens have no choice but to exist in this adult world (here, Stephens's fourth marker of YA text, dealing with adult issues as teenagers, is seen very clearly). For a young reader seeking out Gen Z zombie stories, this may feel similar to their own personal experience in dealing with mass media, anxiety, and their own day-to-day lives.

The media in this world also provides an additional challenge, particularly for the zombie students. As mentioned above, the fictional concept of the zombie exists before actual zombies begin to appear. In most zombie stories, especially those of the golden age, it is essential that the idea of the zombie is unheard of before they actually start

appearing. As an example, in *The Walking Dead*, the zombies have a myriad of names—walkers, biters, the dead—but the term “zombie” doesn’t exist. As noted in my overview of zombie history, this is essential to the plot of most American zombie stories because the entire world needs to be taken unaware by the phenomenon. This rule is broken in some zombie comedies and knowledge about the zombie is a specialized niche that allows unlikely heroes (nerds) to emerge. But in *Generation Dead*, zombie stories exist in a way that reflects our own world. The undead students often demonstrate an even greater awareness of the stories than other teens. For example, when the students begin working with the mysterious Hunter Foundation to help in human/zombie relationships, they are invited to participate in a focus group for a “pro-zombie” product line, including hats and shirts with messaging including “DEAD... AND LOVING IT!” and “OPEN GRAVES, OPEN MINDS” (Waters 196). While some adults in this world work to destigmatize the zombies by using terms like “differently biotic” (a clear play on the real world’s PC culture), these sloganized shirts seek to monetize the struggle of the undead through shock and appropriation. Of course, both approaches are problematic and oftentimes dismissed by the teens in the book, from Adam denying that referring to them as “zombies” isn’t appropriate and saying, “Zombies, dead heads, corpsicles. What’s the difference? They don’t care” (Waters 2), to Karen commenting on the shock media campaign stating, “The way to social change in America is through conspicuous consumption, hmm... that zombie theme goes way back” (Waters 199). What comes through is that one of the larger difficulties the zombie students face is discrimination based on stereotypes, and those stereotypes are influenced by media and pop culture. Ultimately, the undead teens struggle to define themselves in society against these

preexisting ideas in a way that sometimes reflects the difficulty of confronting identity issues in the modern age.

The story culminates in a conflict in the woods, outside of a broken down house where zombie teens, rejected by society, have made their home. Tommy reveals to Phoebe that his motivation in developing their relationship stems from his observations that love and affection help the undead regain function and may, ultimately, return them to a living state. His own ability seems to support this belief because he has the support and love of his mother. He tells her, “I thought that... if... I... could get a girl... a real girl... to love... me... to kiss... me... I’d come back... even more.” Of course, this admission hurts Phoebe because it isn’t about her specifically, but just “a girl” (Waters 379). This moment is further complicated by two other plot lines coming to a head, including Adam deciding to tell Phoebe how he feels about her, and Pete seeking out Tommy, wanting to shoot and “reterminate” him. The ghosts from Pete’s past haunt him when he approaches the couple, and his hatred of the zombies becomes clearly connected to the loss of his own girlfriend who did not come back to life. Instead of threatening Tommy, Pete hallucinates that she is his former girlfriend, and aims his gun at her (Waters 380-381). At the last moment, Adam appears and steps between Pete and Phoebe, taking a bullet for her and ultimately dying (Waters 382). He rises again as a zombie, but it is clear that he is not high functioning at all. Phoebe swears to herself that she will bring him back as far as she is able, while Pete is left to face more militant teen zombies who don’t attend the school, led by a young man named Takayuki (Waters 382-391).

Generation Dead uses common elements in the YA genre to create new possibilities for the zombie narrative. As an early text occupying this intersection, the choices that are made are important because they fundamentally alter certain established zombie tropes, including using media to connect the protagonists to the world, giving the zombies agency and ability, and using established zombie stories to create discriminatory stereotypes of the undead. The pop culture awareness that is layered into the text allows Waters to use the history of the zombie while still creating opportunities to violate it. These violations reflect the YA audience's experience of having awareness of zombies as a pop culture phenomenon that is, in many ways, discriminatory and not a part of their own lives. While some of the implied concepts of Otherness are a bit disappointing because of their vagueness and lack of clear representation, *Generation Dead* still created an opportunity to rethink the purpose of the zombie myth and use established tropes in a new way. Many of the aspects of the Generation Z zombie are first seen in this text, and that influence can be traced across later titles—from both the perspective of the authors writing in the YA/Zombie intersection and the expectations of their intended audience.

Warm Bodies

Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies* came out two years after *Generation Dead*. Essentially, *Warm Bodies* is a take on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but with zombies. The story is primarily told from the perspective of Marion's Romeo, a zombie named "R." In an interview, Marion acknowledged this narrative complication to the traditional zombie story, saying, "with a zombie narrator, *Warm Bodies* is much more about the Dead themselves, and what it means to be in that state vs. fully alive" (T. Smith). The

unusual presence of a zombie narrator is of particular note when considering Marion's work in the context of the Gen Z zombie. Where earlier zombie stories presented sympathetic zombies, *Warm Bodies* asks the audience to perceive the world from inside the mind of a zombie, always embodying the experience of the Other.

As was the case with *Generation Dead*, the history around how the zombies came to be is not revealed in Marion's first book. In fact, R has no recollection of any time before he became a zombie. He recognizes all the signs that he used to be human, but his sense of self is completely based on who he is as the monster. R and the other zombies of *Warm Bodies* do possess the traditional zombie appetite—they eat flesh and have a particular fondness for brains (unlike the undead of *Generation Dead*). Marion's creatures also continue to deteriorate over time, with many becoming “boneys,” or zombies that have lost flesh (which also serves as an indication of their loss of humanity). The zombie community in *Warm Bodies* has a hierarchical structure, placing the vicious, unfeeling boneys at the top. R and his zombie friend, M (a reference to Shakespeare's Mercutio), are “younger” in the sense that they still have their flesh, and more importantly, human feelings. Just as having a zombie protagonist is strange, the idea of two zombies being friends is also unheard of in older zombie tales. R and M communicate through grunts and moans (classic zombie noises), but R's interpretation of that communication is complex and nuanced. For example, R recalls that M has told him, “the irony of being a zombie is that everything is funny, but you can't smile because your lips have rotted off” (Marion 3), even though M can, in actuality, manage little more than to grumble and pronounce a rare single word. In this way, Marion's text fulfills Stephens's second rule of the YA genre in an interesting way, creating a “uniquely teen

voice” that demonstrates that the literal utterances of a young person may not match their rich inner dialogue.

Marion uses R’s internal dialogue to teach the reader the rules of a post-apocalyptic world from the perspective of someone who has already fallen victim to it. The book begins, “I am dead, but it’s not so bad. I’ve learned to live with it” (Marion 3). R’s tone is self-deprecating, clever, and endearing. He has come to accept his reality and his place in society, even if he does feel like an outsider among other zombies. His fear of the boneys often compels him to go along with whatever these “elders” put upon him, including a strange series of events where R ends up with a zombie wife and “children.” R meets a zombie and tries to get to know her. They walk around the airport holding hands and then she leads them to a “church” made of stair trucks assembled at the end of a runway. The boneys surround them, grumble a ceremony of some sort, and R seems to understand they are married (9-11). The next day, they are presented with two zombies who are essentially children, and he and his bride are expected to look after them (11-12). R doesn’t seem to understand the reasoning behind these customs, but he also goes along with them with a mixture of hope and apathy—however, when watching the children play, R feels something stir, or what he refers to as a “twitch” (12). This is an early foreshadowing of what is to come for R and the other zombies, indicating the importance of emotions to their existence.

R’s role in the zombie society, including his apprehension regarding the boneys, serves as a parallel between confused, passive youth in the real world and authority figures. R questions the most basic aspects of being a zombie, such as when he thinks, “I don’t know why we kill people. I don’t know what chewing through a man’s neck

accomplishes” (Marion 8). This place of doubt, though gruesome and violent, is a reflection of feelings that may be familiar to teen audiences who are also grappling with the more brutal real-world aspects of adult society. Again, if we are to reflect on the idea that many of the zombie stories that preceded Gen Z zombie stories were often aimed at helping people cope with the effects of global terrorism and unrelenting news coverage, the average American YA reader has grown up in a time where the nation has always been involved in an international conflict and the media is a seeming blend between fictionalized violence and real war. For these audiences, there is no satisfying way to understand how or why the world got to this point, but they still have to cope and live in the reality of such situations. R does not begin as a rebel against a society he doesn’t understand or agree with—he simply tries to survive in the best way he knows how, which is to follow along with society’s rules and find some form of release when he can.

At the same time, R’s internal doubt challenges the reader’s most basic assumptions concerning what zombies are. R understands his position as a member of the zombie Other, but even within that culture, he feels like an outsider. This displacement, coupled with the casual familiarity of his tone, creates empathy for the monster, even in his darker moments. For example, eating flesh is common for the post-Romero zombie, with the eating of brains being mentioned specifically on occasion; but R’s interior perspective offers an insight that would not have been possible outside of a zombie protagonist. In *Warm Bodies*, zombies experience a sort of hallucinogenic high when eating brains that also allows them to experience the victim’s memories. This is particularly impactful for the creatures since they have lost their own memories and identities.

Early in the book, Julie (Marion's Juliet equivalent), her boyfriend Perry (like Shakespeare's Paris), and other members of the living are out looking for supplies. They encounter R and a group of zombies. Driven by their hunger, the zombies attack and kill off most of the living. R kills Perry and begins to eat his brain (Marion 16). R's reactions to Perry's brain and memories are particularly potent--he sees what Perry remembers and feels what Perry feels (16-18). Because of this, R experiences a sort of "love at first sight" and decides to protect Julie from the other zombies (while also pocketing more of Perry's brain for later consumption) (18-20).

As the story progresses, R and Julie's bond continues to deepen as they learn about each other's societies. R hides Perry's leftover brain from Julie, but as he continues to consume it, Perry's memories become more vivid and active. R is a voyeur when experiencing Perry's memories, watching from the outside. These memories are almost like experiences of his own, but they are, of course, locked in a time and perspective not of his own making. While uncomfortable, the consumption of the last of Perry's brains brings him closer to Julie and R slowly starts to appear more human and less zombie-like. The fine line between Perry's memories and R's experience of them gets continuously closer until he consumes the last part of Perry's brain. He has always been along for the ride in Perry's mind, but with the last bites, he is forced to watch the moments before Perry is eaten from Perry's point of view (59-61). Clearly disturbed and guilt ridden, R wants to turn away from what he is seeing, but Perry won't let him. The intervention of Perry's voice alters the moment from sampling someone's memories into something Marion describes as "unscripted." Perry addresses R directly and tells him he has to watch these moments if he wants to become "something new" (61).

What is suggested, though not plainly stated, is that the difference between the dead and the living is directly tied to feeling and memory, and the more memory and the deeper the feelings a zombie experiences bring them closer to a living state. This concept is seen through R and M's growth and alteration but also proven through the boneyes who have lost their capacity for emotion, memory, or understanding. At the beginning of the book, R and M are mostly just apathetic, painted in a manner very similar to burned out stoners, but their trajectory, most likely, is to become like the boneyes. Their interactions with both Perry and Julie shift that path, and as the two zombies bond with the living and others of their kind, they regain their human qualities.

This growth also helps connect the younger zombies to the living society, most specifically other young people. Julie's father and other adults prove as harsh and unfeeling in many ways as the boneyes. R and Julie's relationship helps bridge the gap between the young people, altering both societies in the process.

Unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, *Warm Bodies* ends with a message of hope and a possibility of life after conflict. The boneyes have surrendered and the living and the dead are working together toward a new future. R has recovered almost every piece of his functionality, but when Julie asks him if he's hoping to recover his former life, he expresses that he prefers the one he has. "We have big plans," R thinks at the end. "Oh yes. We're fumbling in the dark, but at least we are in motion" (Marion 239). Essentially, R has overcome his apathy for the idea of love but then takes a step beyond the intimate relationship to do something greater in uniting societies, and this has endowed him with humanity, both in a figurative and literal sense.

Thematically, this message of turning away from apathy in favor of engagement with life and others seems particularly well aimed at young Gen Z readers in that, again, many have been born into a world of war and tension and division that has nothing to do with what they have done. They are not only expected to cope with it, but, in a trend that is always pushed on youth, overcome it and make the world better. Like R, apathy is almost expected of young people, yet they have the potential to achieve so much more.

That said, *Warm Bodies* has a somewhat complicated relationship with the Gen Z zombie subgenre. The first complicating factor is the age of the narrator. It is important that R presents as an uncomfortable outsider, using what Stephens calls a distinctly teen voice, because his actual age is most likely not a teen. He cannot remember his actual age but he does note that his clothes from his previous life are professional, indicating he had some sort of career (this was changed to a hoodie for the 2013 film version, leaving R to reason he was probably unemployed when alive). Again, for a book to fit within the previously established rules for the genre, the primary character(s) must only *present* as a teen, not necessarily be one. The novel meets Stephens's other defining traits of the YA genre, especially "the search for identity." It is the lack of identity that keeps the zombies in their undead state, and discovery of self through connection and interaction with others is the cure.

It is interesting to note that the author, Isaac Marion, had issues with the YA designation of the book. This may largely be due to a common misperception of what YA can be. As mentioned previously, in a 2012 interview, Marion indicated that he did not like that the book was classified as a YA book because of the adult issues (Zombiesworld.com) but concern about subject matter does not in fact keep it from being

appropriate for the YA genre. In fact, according to Stephens, teens dealing with adult issues is one of the defining features of YA.

Warm Bodies also engages with Gen Z readers in some fascinating ways. The stream of Perry's memories in R's mind as he consumes the remnants of Perry's brain has a voyeuristic pleasure and want that Gen Z readers experience on a daily basis through Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites. R's internalization of Perry's experience as his own feels perverse in some ways, especially when Perry begins to call him out. In the age of social media, it is possible to view another person's life events remotely and yet fold those experiences into our own lived experience. While examining how invasive this consumption might be (R is, after all, eating Perry's brain) may create a feeling of discomfort for a reader, it is an uncanny mirror to the act of taking another person's online posts as part of our own experience, where the act of looking becomes an activity that influences how we interact in the real world. In this way, brain consumption can be seen as the public embodiment of the inwardly shameful acts of "cyberstalking" another person or experiencing "FOMO" (Fear of Missing Out). In essence, it is Unheimlich, but it is achieved through finding familiarity with the zombie, not Otherness.

Warm Bodies also challenges and complicates the popular understanding of how zombies function in storytelling. Where post-Haitian zombie stories focus on the permeability between man and monster, they almost exclusively focus on the progression of man to monster. Marion's story does just the opposite, tracking the progression of the monster towards being human again. In terms of Freud's Uncanny, a reader might be tempted to approach R as the Unheimlich Other—someone who is outside of the understanding of what is normal and relatable but might invade that sense of norm.

Instead, he is made familiar to the reader's own experience through his relatable view of the world and voice, and as he proceeds in both grotesque and admirable acts, the reader may feel the best and the worst of themselves exposed, making R a Heimlich hero of sorts.

Both *Generation Dead* and *Warm Bodies* use the ideas of love and connection to return aspects of normalcy to the undead, dissolving the boundaries between the Other and the survivor through the use of the Heimlich. The desire for love, recognition, and acceptance is something that is simultaneously widely shared and also discouraged from being publicly announced, so when R or *Generation Dead*'s Tommy discover that the key to their regained humanity is love, the reader may feel their own private wants exposed.

Of course, a common criticism of books like these zombie romances is that they are not actually zombie novels at all. While zombies are present, neither *Warm Bodies* nor *Generation Dead* fits into the horror genre where zombies are usually classified. And of course, placing these stories in one specific subgenre is misguided. As has been discussed previously, zombies cross genre lines (such as horror to sci-fi and comedy) frequently, but the intersection of teen romance and zombies is surprising. Regardless of the crossover genre type or time period, Othering is still a key component of the zombie myth, with previous iterations using the zombie as the representative of Otherness. However, these Gen Z zombie novels stand out from previous zombie narratives because the Otherness of the zombie is not defined by its disenfranchisement from society; in fact, it is the opposite. The zombie becomes more relatable to the teen reader because of their inability to integrate into society. Instead of serving as "props" to motivate action on the

part of survivors, Marion gives his zombies agency and social hierarchies, and makes them relatable. In this book, as well as many other Gen Z zombie titles, the humanizing of zombies is critical.

It is important to note, though, that this humanization does not remove the idea of monstrosity from the text. Instead, monstrosity is usually given to another social group. In *Warm Bodies*, for example, both human and zombie societies have their monstrous members. On one end of the spectrum are the terrible boneys, devoid of compassion or care, and on the other side, the human adults are terrible in their own way—dismissive, aggressive, and discriminatory. Given the genre, it is only natural that many of these YA zombie stories end up revealing the monstrous Otherness of grownups and the absolutist nature of their behavior. Both the boneys and the surviving adults expect for their rules to be followed without question, and the natural drive of teens to question that authority makes them the enemy.

According to Stephens's third and fourth characteristics of YA stories (the journey to identity and dealing with adult problems as a teen), the conflict between the older generation and the young demonstrated in *Warm Bodies* is undoubtedly fulfilling the expectations of the YA genre through a story about zombies. The “younger” characters are able to find common ground in hope and affection where the adults cannot. While a bit sentimental, *Warm Bodies* also shows a reflection of its zombie predecessor—specifically the Haitian myth. As mentioned in the story of Clodonis (above), an enslaved zombie who is reclaimed by consuming salt to lead a rebellion against his enslaver (Glover), R, too, is able to regain his humanity. Once freed, he becomes a leader and a freedom fighter against the repressive powers in the story. In the

same way that the Haitian myths were a call for action against brutality and control in the slave trade, *Warm Bodies* might be seen as a call to action for young people to overcome the discrimination, intolerance, and violence of the generations that came before them. This is especially urgent for a Gen Z audience that lives in an era when the threat of terror is constant and based on conflicts that are not of their own making but on the intractable beliefs of the generations that came before them.

Rot & Ruin

Where *Generation Dead* and *Warm Bodies* represent a dramatic shift from the traditional zombie horror narratives, Jonathan Maberry's *Rot & Ruin* (2010) utilizes many of the familiar tropes in a new way. The story is set 14 years after the zombie apocalypse. What remains of humanity lives in fenced-off camps, surrounded by free-roaming hordes of the undead. The zombies seem to be right out of the Romero tradition in that they attack and feed on the living. In addition, every living creature is at risk of becoming a zombie, as revealed by the teen protagonist, Benny, when he explains, "Since First Night, anyone who died would reanimate as a zombie. Bites made it happen too, but really any recently deceased person would come back" (Maberry 54). This is also true in the *Living Dead* series, as well as Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*, but this isn't the case in the majority of other zombie stories. The difference is important because the threat of turning is, in a sense, inevitable (barring intervention from the living). Essentially, becoming a zombie is not just a threat from the Other but the price of living.

The post-apocalyptic setting for the story is noteworthy. As stated, it has only been 14 years since the apocalyptic events of "First Night," but the world has deeply

changed. Part of this, of course, is because of the presence of zombies, but it is also due in part to choices made by the living based on belief. More religious adults in this world believe that the living are being punished for their hubris, and they largely blame technology for the fall of man (Maberry 16). The community Benny lives in is largely utilitarian and technologically backward. While the people survive through communal sharing, everyone is expected to contribute in some way. Having a job is required and the beginning of the book follows Benny's effort to find work. It is required that he begin training for some sort of job when he is 15 and if he does not take on an apprenticeship within a few weeks, his food rations are cut in half by the town (4). Any job in the community ensures that a person's needs are tended to and certain skills or high risk jobs bring higher financial rewards (9). Zombie hunters are the most well compensated and respected of all. The living exist entirely within fenced off communities, but the hunters go out beyond, into the zombie infested lands, or the "rot and ruin." Ultimately, this society, while still carrying the burden of the somewhat recent apocalyptic "First Night," has rearranged itself into a new normal that uses economic and faith systems to give shelter and a sense of safety to the majority of people (9-23).

The young in *Rot & Ruin* have never known (or barely recall) a different way of life, and as they grow up, they are expected to fit into this society. Benny's parents died on First Night, so his much older brother, Tom, has raised him. Tom is a well-respected zombie hunter. In this world, the hunters do not simply go out and kill the undead. Instead, people in the village put bounties on specific zombies—often family members or loved ones. Many of the zombie hunters are very violent and simply enjoy the task of killing the undead, but Tom's approach is different (62-63). Instead of being called a

“bounty hunter,” he prefers the term “closure specialist” which is reflective of his work with both the zombies and the peace of mind of the living. He even tries to kill zombies in the most humane way, with a quick plunge of the knife just below the skull (54). He calls the action “quieting” and is respected for what he does. However, Benny doesn’t hold Tom in the same regard as does everyone else.

Benny, growing up in this society, is consumed with anger and has bought into the complete Otherness of the zombie. When we first meet Benny, he despises the zombies with “a white-hot consuming hatred” (Maberry 5), and he is accused of taking zombie attacks personally. He does not differentiate between one zombie and another. As such, he has no appreciation of Tom’s more humane way of doing things and instead looks up to Charlie “Pink-Eye” Matthias and his partner, the Marion “Motor City” Hammer. These men kill zombies for fame, fortune, and fun, employing whatever brutal method suits them at the time (24-31). Much of Benny’s brutality stems from a childhood trauma: Benny’s earliest memories are of his parents’ death at the hands of zombies, and so every time he sees the creatures it conjures up those formative traumatic memories (5-8). This regressive pattern is almost exactly the sort of trauma Freud references when describing the underlying psychological cause of the Unheimlich. Essentially, the somewhat repressed memory of the loss of his parents comes to the surface any time he is confronted with the undead. He sees his internal trauma externalized everywhere and he cannot understand Tom’s merciful attitude. At first, Benny tries a number of jobs to avoid working with Tom, but after repeated failures and with a looming deadline to find a career to train in, he is forced to accept being Tom’s apprentice (Maberry 9-23).

The apprenticeship allows Benny to see his brother in a new light. At first, he is impressed with Tom's skill with a sword and surviving in the rot and ruin. However, over time, Tom teaches Benny his philosophy and the younger brother starts to see the zombies as more than just dangerous monsters but also as victims and people who should be mourned. Early in Benny's training, Tom explains, "Every dead person out there deserves respect. Even in death... They aren't just 'zoms,' Benny. That's a side effect of some disease" (Maberry 62). While the zombies remain a threat because they are unable to resist their new nature, they are increasingly humanized through Tom's teachings throughout the novel, and the more violent bounty hunters like Pink Eye and Motor City Hammer become, in contrast, more monstrous.

Benny is forced to confront his overly simplistic view of reality into the rot and ruin with Tom. Tom usually takes on bounties set by the family or people who loved a particular person who has turned. They hire him out of the desire to see their loved one laid peacefully to rest (100-102). For Tom, this is an act of respect and love and he treats it as a sacred duty. Confronted with Tom's beliefs and seeing the process first hand, Benny becomes disillusioned about his childhood heroes and gains respect for both his brother and the undead. By taking on more adult responsibilities as an apprentice, Benny is forced to overcome his simplistic understanding of the world and deal with the complications that come with growing up (52-63). This is an example of how one of the standards of the YA genre, namely Stephens's fourth rule of YA which suggests these novels ask the protagonists to confront adult issues as teenagers, has a profound effect on the zombie narrative. Growing up means that Benny is forced to reconsider his Othering of the zombie. The shift from the golden age standard of zombie Othering is dramatic

and, according to Maberry, very intentional. In an interview with Matt Molgaard, Maberry says, “*Rot & Ruin* isn’t a story about racking up a zombie headcount. It’s about the value of human life, the difference between assumption and reality, and the nature of what it means to be alive” (Horror Novel Reviews). Where the golden age zombie story focuses on sheer numbers and an unrelenting hellscape of Others terrorizing the norm, the Gen Z zombie is humanized.

As his training progresses and he continues to grow, Benny becomes obsessed with the story of “The Lost Girl,” a famous living survivor in the wild (145-150). He first glimpses her likeness on trading cards, and his search for her begins a conflict with his former heroes, Charlie “Pink Eye” and the Motor City Hammer (121-122, 152-156). We discover that the two men have extended their cruelty beyond the killing of zombies and have been torturing, trapping, and killing the living as well (162-167). They seem intent on keeping Benny from finding the girl, but they are unsuccessful, and eventually, she saves him from two bounty hunters who are helping Charlie “Pink Eye” (347-348). She is named Lilah, and in her Benny sees what a lifetime of danger and cruelty can do to a person. Lilah has become an efficient, brutal killer, who is also trying to cope with the harm she experienced at the hands of the bounty hunters. Where Benny’s anger was focused on his brother and the zombies, Lilah has become isolated, untrusting, and largely non-communicative (349-352). She doesn’t trust the living or the dead because she has been traumatized by both, including being held captive at a place called “Gameland” where humans and zombies are pitted against one another as a betting sport.

Her trauma is in stark contrast to Benny’s. The loss of Benny’s parents is connected to the larger mass death that occurred that same night. While Benny’s pain

feels personal, it is shared with a larger community. This form of trauma holds a lot in common with other post-9/11 zombie fiction, and other scholars have argued that the images of mass death and an apocalyptic event can provide catharsis for readers coping with the mass tragedy and shared loss. Lilah's trauma, on the other hand, stems from specific and ongoing violence. She may have gone wild, but it is also fair to say that her living among the undead has created a constant state of anxiety which deeply impacts her ability to connect with others. She cannot share her trauma with the experience of those around her in the way that Benny can.

Benny's pain is part of a general zeitgeist but when confronted with Lilah's reality of ongoing pain and difference, he has to reconsider the nature of the world again. Earlier, Tom taught Benny that zombies are more human than he thought. Lilah shows Benny, and by proxy, the reader, that corrupt human men are monsters. After all, in many zombie stories, including *Rot & Ruin*, zombies are incapable of sadism or cruelty. Their undead state eliminates their ability to have intention beyond their hunger. They do not choose to act the way they do. Benny's run-ins with Charlie "Pink Eye" and the Motor City Hammer, as well as other bounty hunters who side with those men, become the increasing center of action in the story, and they are revealed to be the true evil in the world. This increased suspicion of bounty hunters also leads Benny to other revelations about his world, including that while not necessarily villainous, the fear and unalterable beliefs of other adults is both problematic and dangerous.

Having suffered through First Night and the ensuing effort to survive, most of the adults allow themselves to be ruled by fear and past trauma. They fear outsiders, the dead, and any break with tradition that has given them a false sense of security. They

have chosen safety instead of pursuing a better world. Benny and his young friends, under the tutelage of Tom, ultimately feel that their survival relies on distancing themselves from those anxiety-driven adult beliefs. Tom explains the important difference between the adults and the teens, saying, “most of the people my age or older are lost in fear, and they’ll never find their way back. But you and your friends, especially those young enough to not remember First night... you’re the ones who will choose whether to live in fear or not” (Maberry 189-190). Essentially, Tom indicates that living through the apocalyptic event has made adults incapable of overcoming it, leaving all possibility for real change in the hands of the younger generation.

In many ways, this division based on experiencing First Night is reflective of the difference between golden age zombie readers and the expectations of Gen Z zombie audiences. As mentioned previously, across his work, Bishop suggests that the golden age of the zombie was brought about as a coping mechanism in the wake of global terrorism. Maberry’s story doesn’t fight that suggestion at all, but opens up new possibilities by focusing on those who were not old enough to experience the tragic event first-hand but who must still live in a world holding on to the fears connected to that time. Following the attacks in the real world, the anxiety and desire to feel safe led to a whole host of security measures, from removing one’s shoes at the airport, to the creation of the NSA and the Patriot Act. To this day, the announcer in the New York City subway still broadcasts the message “if you see something, say something.” This was started as an effort to combat terrorism but for many younger people the root cause is missing. Instead, these messages are generalized self-policing to change behavior with the hope that constant anxiety will keep people from acting dangerously or even suspiciously and

young people, namely Generation Z, have never known a world where that sense of fear did not exist.

Benny's limited exposure to the initial trauma of First Night may appeal to a Generation Z audience who have grown up in the shadow of 9/11 and yet remember very little of it themselves. Bishop suggests that one of the appeals of the golden age zombie is the release that comes from joining the ranks of the undead, finally freeing the individual from the stresses of living, but this book does not portray the zombie as an alternative to that anxiety. In fact, as mentioned before, the zombies of *Rot & Ruin* are victims worthy of pity and fear (and even though the circumstances and reasonings behind being made into a zombie is different, the idea of the zombie as a victim can be seen as a reflection of the original Haitian zombie stories).

While the zombies of *Rot & Ruin* do not have the agency to be empathized with in the same way as the zombies of *Generation Dead* or *Warm Bodies*, the use of the Uncanny is still very different with this take on the Gen Z zombie because they are treated with compassion. *Rot & Ruin* ends with Benny and Tom returning to Benny's childhood home to find their parents as zombies. In an emotional moment, the brothers "quiet" their parents. After all the violence and chaos that precedes this moment, this act is clearly one of love (454-456). Here, the monster is treated in a way that is familiar and protected, or Heimlich. Both the men recognize that the creatures are not exactly their parents anymore, but they do represent the memory or reflection of who their parents were. Where it is common to use the familiar (or Heimlich) in traditional zombie narratives to bait a protagonist into danger, here the purpose is different. The reader is left with a feeling of comfort and relief as they see the monster treated with respect. The

behavior of Benny and Tom suggests that heroism in a world consumed with fear is based in compassion and love.

Zom-B

Similar to *Rot & Ruin*, Darren Shan's *Zom-B* (2012) uses many elements that are familiar in more traditional zombie lore. Before the reader meets the protagonist, the author introduces the monsters as well as the person that commands them. On what would be a normally quiet street in Pallaskenry, Ireland, wives are attacking husbands, children are devouring parents, and the distorted creatures, their wounds infected with a green moss, seek to consume the brains of the living. In the middle of the fray is a man with large eyes and a potbelly, watching the carnage but not being attacked by the monsters. He is clearly a zombie master, similar to the *bokor* in the Haitian tales but resembling, in many ways, Bela Lugosi's character, Murder Legendre, in the film *White Zombie*.

The prologue centers on a little boy, who is as much a victim of his childlike beliefs as he is a victim of the monsters. Shan writes, "Brian was a child and he believed that adults had all the answers, that you should always seek assistance if you found yourself in trouble" (xii). Like the other YA writers discussed previously, Shan not only creates a division between the zombie Other and the survivor, but also between the young and the fully-grown. As Brian watches, his mother eats his father's brain. Brian's experience is the embodiment of the Uncanny effect in earlier zombie literature in that what is familiar and comforting to him has been replaced with violence and foreignness.

His mother has become something monstrous but still resembles his mother, and witnessing this, he experiences an acute cognitive dissonance.

In many ways, Brian watching his mother eat his father can also be seen as a violent distortion of another of Freud's theories, specifically the primal scene (Freud, "From the History of Infantile Neurosis" 36-45). In *Zom-B*, the witnessing of a sex act is replaced with an act of violence, but there is still a sense of intimacy because of the relationships between the people involved. Brian cannot understand or verbalize what he sees, and the disruption causes extreme psychological trauma. He runs away and eventually falls at the feet of the man with large eyes. The man (who is clearly an outsider) is sympathetic to the boy and soothes him. He offers to save the boy from the zombies and when Brian says he wants the man's help, he snaps the boy's neck (xvi). In this prologue, Shan sets many of the expectations for how the zombies function in his series, leaning on many classic tropes, including the use of the Uncanny, how the zombie infection spreads, and the general behavior of these monsters once turned, but in setting up these expectations through the eyes of a young person lost in the chaos, he engages with the innocence of the audience.

After the prologue, *Zom-B* shifts to its primary plot, told from the perspective of "B," a tough teenage girl living in London. The first chapter presents a number of dynamics that are interesting in terms of the book's relationship to both the zombie and YA genres. It begins with a domestic scene, where B's father is drinking and her mother is concerned about reports of zombie attacks on the television. B is focused on keeping her father in a good mood, knowing where things are likely headed. This is a familiar situation for B, and she thinks, "Dad stares at Mum, his eyes hard. I tense, waiting for

him to roar, or maybe just throw a punch at her without warning. If he does, I'll hurl myself at him, the way I have countless times in the past" (Shan 3-4). It is clear that the dynamics of this household are tense, even before the characters have direct interactions with zombies.

One way that this scene is important to consider is in terms of the use of media and its impact on the characters. As in *Generation Dead*, zombies exist in B's world as a piece of fiction before becoming part of reality. However, in *Zom-B*, the presence of the zombie is still far away from the protagonist. B's father, despite the news reports, doubts the reality of the zombies (3). His inherent distrust of the news media is especially interesting to think about in relation to today's media climate. While the term "fake news" wouldn't come into popular usage for many years after the publication of the book, the truth is that B's father is able to maintain racist and abusive views in part by dismissing outside information. B's mother, however, is driven to a state of anxiety in thinking that the reports are true. This could be easily overlooked in reading the chapter, but the adults' polar reactions to the news reports are, in many ways, reflective of the attitudes of many adults and how the reaction to the 24-hour news cycle is often used in golden age zombie narratives. In an essay exploring the role of media in zombie stories, Birch-Bayley suggests that the zombie in popular culture has become representative of "western culture's 'crisis mentality'" (1137) and in our world, that crisis mentality is exacerbated by the sensational, violent imagery offered in 24-hour news network coverage, especially in the age of the War on Terror. Zombie writers and filmmakers have used imagery that invokes that coverage, making the parallel between the threat of terrorism and the threat of zombie infestation even closer to one another (for example, the

use of a constant video feed of global violence being a key ingredient in the creation of the rage virus in Boyle's *28 Days Later*).

What differentiates *Zom-B* and other Gen Z zombie stories is that that news coverage and the paranoia that it fosters is often easily dismissed by the teen protagonists. I would suggest that this is another fundamental difference between golden age zombie stories and Gen Z zombie stories: for younger audiences that have never known a time without this sort of media pressure, the effect that had so much impact in reinforcing fears and “crisis mentality” for older generations is dismissed as background noise. This isn't to say that they are unaffected—it's just that the more immediate worries at home and school take precedence.

The second important dynamic set up in this chapter is actually fairly common in YA titles. Domestic and parental abuse are some of the “adult topics” handled by a teen protagonist mentioned in Stephens's fourth rule of YA. Shan resists oversimplifying B's relationship with her father despite that abuse. She does not see her father as a complete monster, but she does feel responsible for keeping him happy and her mother safe. But B's efforts to calm and reassure him in the past has also corrupted the way she sees the world. While she is tough and smart and capable of thinking for herself, dealing with her father has inevitably stained her own personality and experience.

Of the problematic characteristics B has adopted from her father, racism and xenophobia are certainly among the worst. She has been exposed to his hate speech her entire life and lives in a situation where it is dangerous to oppose him. After she calms her father down that night, she leaves the house and meets her friends in a park. They run into a fellow student from her school, Tyler, who is black. B jokes that she would enjoy a

lynching (Shan 15). When one of her friends asks her why she would say such a thing, she laughs it off, but inwardly recognizes that “the trouble with putting on an act is that sometimes it’s hard to tell where the actor stops and the real you begins. It’s rubbed off on me to an extent, the years of pretending to hate” (16). In this, she refers to the act that she has put on to placate her father. She recognizes, too, that the act is not only superficial, saying “part of me genuinely fears the menace of those who are different” (Shan 15-16). This is remarkable for a zombie narrative because the fear of the Other is explicitly stated, but here, the Other being feared is specifically a racial Other and not the zombie serving as a metaphor. It is an interesting difference because, as discussed above, zombie stories have a long history of serving as allegorical representations of racism and hatred since their American appropriation, and yet Shan’s story presents racism and discrimination as a human problem.

Of course, the zombie threat does not stay in the distance for long. After a run-in with the big-eyed man in her home (65-67) and a “mutant” (who seems to be a higher functioning zombie) during a school trip to a museum (77-81), B’s school is attacked by zombies. The doors have been sealed shut, and the students who end up with B use their knowledge of zombie tropes, observational skills, desperate determination, and sacrifice to try and keep the group alive. As the students try to find a way out, B learns to accept and appreciate people outside of her usual group of friends and beyond her own racial experience. However, many of these connections are short lived as one student after another dies or is infected.

Ultimately, their rescue comes at the hands of a group of parents, and B’s father is leading the way. B is struck by this, and as she and her father embrace one another, she

thinks, “Dad loves me! He risked his life to find me ... Dad will save me. He’ll save us all! He’s a bloody hero!” (Shan 153). As they make their way toward the exit, the darker aspects of her father are nearly forgotten until the group comes to a locked door. Despite a great effort to batter it open, a large group of zombies are nearly on top of them and B’s father tells her, “Throw them the black kid” (Shan 162). He is referring to Tyler, and at first, B resists, but then when he yells, “years of conditioning kick in. Fear takes over. I go into my dutiful-daughter act. The racist in me swims to the fore and rejoices at being set free” (Shan 162). Here, despite the personal growth that has occurred, B goes back to what is familiar in order to survive. She throws Tyler to the zombies (162).

This, of course, is deeply troubling, and as the reader has likely formed a relationship with her as the narrator, they are likely to feel betrayed or repulsed. That said, her actions stem from a lifetime of abuse from her father. B is also disturbed by this, but for readers who see her as a mirror of their own thinking, trauma, and experiences, there is an Uncanny revelation regarding what she is capable of because of the darkness in her, and the reader may feel that exposed in themselves. Ultimately, she is unable to reconcile what she has done to Tyler against what she has experienced in surviving the zombies alongside her fellow students. When faced with a true Other (the zombies), they were able to work together and bond, regardless of what divided them, but at her father’s command, she abandoned all of that. Consumed by the recognition of what her trauma has made her into, she refuses to follow her father to safety, saying, “you know the problem with you, Dad ... You’re a bigger monster than any bloody zombie” (Shan 167). B turns back toward the zombies, is infected by one, and then her heart is ripped out and consumed by the zombified Tyler (172).

That B chooses to reject rescue and, instead, go back toward the zombie horde does bring to mind Bishop's suggestion of zombies as "redemptive 'missionaries'" ("The Contemporary Zombie as Seductive Proselyte" 26), offering a more simple, less divisive lifestyle. This would seem to bring it more in line with the golden age zombies Bishop was writing about, except that she ultimately chooses death over the guilt of her upbringing and the resulting behavior. Perhaps she sees throwing herself to the zombies as a way to relieve her anxieties and remorse, but the choice she makes is not about seeking freedom from an anxiety-driven life but rather acceptance of her very human monstrous tendencies and accepting punishment for them.

It's almost unfair to examine *Zom-B* in isolation from the larger series because of its ending. Shan's books infamously end in cliffhangers, but this one is important because despite experiencing her "death" in the last chapter, there is enough foreshadowing to know that B will, in a sense, survive for the next book, *Zom-B Underground*. *Zom-B* serves to set the stage for a deeper exploration of what it means to become a zombie by first making the protagonist accept that her actions are already monstrous.

When examining the use of the Uncanny in zombie stories, part of the danger of the zombie is the mental effect the undead has on the living, blending familiarity and terror into a single creature. In *Zom-B*, the zombies throughout the majority of the book are held at a distance—a true Other, and while the risk of infection brings them closer to a permeable state, the monstrosity of those creatures is never in question. Instead, it is B's father that exists in two states simultaneously. He is both the father she loves and the hateful monster she has to protect others from. As such, she is often caught in an in-between state herself, and ultimately, she ends up infected with his evil. Though the

interactions with other students surviving a zombie onslaught offers some redemptive opportunities, B is ultimately defined by her willingness to continue taking on aspects of monstrosity. Her father's corruptive racism is, in a manner, no different from the zombie infection.

Zom-B is emblematic of the Gen Z zombie story. While it does have aspects of the creatures in common with more traditional tales, ultimately, the YA influence undermines many of their familiar structures. Her search for identity and need to deal with adult issues as a teen (Stephens's third and fourth rules) reveals an alternate form of monstrosity which is as infectious as any zombie strain—and that this hate is passed from human to human, father to daughter, is the important distinction.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

The zombie myth has undergone numerous alterations in its short history, and its newer iterations often reflect aspects of the monster's earlier versions. I refer to this as a family tree of zombie mythology, where each generation of zombie stories grows and changes to fit the needs of an audience of a specific age, while still maintaining some aspects of previous zombie stories. As mentioned previously, Newitz demonstrated that the production of zombie stories in film (but also in literature) tends to spike during times of war or cultural tension in the United States. Whether the connection is determined by authors or audience is less essential in my review than the recognition that, in order for zombies to hold cultural relevance, they must in some way respond to the needs of the audience.

Recently, critical work done to examine the cultural relevance of zombies (including those mentioned above, such as Bishop and Birch-Bayley) has focused on the "golden age" of zombie storytelling, or the boom of zombie stories around and after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 and the resulting War on Terror. In the analyses of the "golden age" zombie, many have focused on the use of Otherness, which connects the more recent zombie to every iteration since the American appropriation of the zombie myth. Bishop, Birch Bayley, and others have suggested that the golden age zombie has also allowed audiences a way to cope with consuming societal fears of mass death and infiltration by the Other, and to come to terms with a time before and after a catastrophic event like 9/11. For these reasons, the golden age zombie story tends to be apocalyptic (featuring the actual apocalyptic event) and the protagonists in these stories are forced to

survive in a time immediately after a major catastrophe, where they can still recall a time before the apocalypse and its concerns.

However, it is important to note that the golden age zombies' effectiveness is contingent on the audience's ability to relate to the real life tensions that are represented in telling them. Essentially, the zombie has always gained traction in a given age because of its ability to connect with contemporary concerns and, through a sort of defamiliarization, allow audiences to confront their fears. As time moves on, the appeal of the post-9/11, golden age zombie will suffer as audiences lose connection to the real-world event. While the events of 9/11 still have an indelible effect on American society, we are nearly two decades removed from the attacks. As such, younger audiences have little to no context to connect to these golden age stories. Still, the zombie persists in popular culture. It stands to reason that, in order for the monster to connect with the particular paranoias of younger audiences, or those who don't know a time before the War on Terror, the zombie must change again, creating a new branch on the family tree. As I see it, the intersection of the zombie myth with YA fiction is this new branch, this next generation. Reading at the intersection of YA fiction and zombie stories offers a unique insight into the Gen Z zombie and how it connects with a new generation of fears.

Though there have been many alterations over time, zombie stories have almost always relied on the concept of Othering and the use of the Uncanny in telling stories connected to a specific culture and time. The zombie is simultaneously a creature that has a specific context and meaning based on its generational usage by storytellers, how it is consumed by audiences, and in some sense, an amalgamation of all of these concepts across time. In other words, while it is important to understand the zombie in terms of a

specific space and time, the overarching concept remains intact, and if anything, only slowly evolves.

The Gen Z zombie, which I define as existing at the intersection of zombie stories and Young Adult fiction, represents a major evolution in the way the zombie is used in popular culture to represent societal fears, division, and anxiety. While the Gen Z zombie still uses aspects of previous zombie iterations (especially ideas from the golden age zombie), these concepts are altered so that the stories fit the expectations of the Young Adult genre. These changes are essential in maintaining the relevance of the zombie after the post-9/11 boom. The golden age zombie is, in many ways, a reaction to the fears that consumed American culture and global interactions after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Young contemporary audiences have less connection with the given event, but still live in a world that is influenced by societal fear and anxiety from that time. The tragedy is not really theirs, but it impacts them all the same, and these issues are often grappled with in Gen Z zombie stories.

One of the major reasons why the Gen Z zombie shifts is because of alterations that are required to fit the YA genre. While the expectations of the YA genre are somewhat broad, Stephens's five key aspects of the genre are useful in understanding how the expectations of the YA audience has resulted in a new zombie. Stephens suggests that in a YA story, the protagonist must present as a teen, use a "distinctly teen voice," be faced with a journey toward identity, and deal with adult issues as a teen (Stephens 41). He also argues that YA stories must hold a possibility of literary quality (Stephens 41). With the exception of the fifth qualification (which, I believe, is

completely subjective), these hallmarks have caused a deep shift in how the zombie works as a character, and as a result what these stories offer thematically to a reader.

My review of YA zombie texts has demonstrated that the expectations of the YA genre, as defined by Stephens, are fulfilled by these new zombie narratives. In doing so, however, storytellers have altered many previously established features of zombie narratives, especially in their use of Othering, including who is portrayed as the Other and how that Other is represented. Previously, the zombie has been most often represented as the Other (whether racial, political, or something else), while the protagonist represented the cultural norm. The Other did not need to be individualized because it represented a generalized sense of an outsider, not a specific individual. As the zombie myth evolved over the years, from early American appropriation through the golden age, storytellers increased the presence of the Uncanny by continuing to blur the boundary between the Other and the norm, and increase the permeability from one state to the next. However, in YA titles such as *Warm Bodies*, *Zom-B*, and *Generation Dead*, the zombies are given increased agency and featured as either secondary characters or primary protagonists. The result is that the Otherness of the zombie is called into question. Even in YA zombie tales such as *Rot & Ruin*, where the zombie still has no real sense of agency, the events of the story revolve around humanizing the zombies. Many other YA zombie texts do this, resulting in what I call the Gen Z zombie.

The Gen Z zombie stands out from previous versions of the monster because it asks the audience to empathize with the monster, and as a result, the Otherness of the creature is lessened. This also results in an alteration of the Uncanny. In the Uncanny, the

protagonist's (and by proxy, the audience's) experience is doubled in a way that causes confusion and discomfort.

Because the Otherness of the Gen Z zombie is replaced with familiarity, the Uncanny nature of the monster also changes. Previously, the zombie relied heavily on a sense of the Unheimlich, which elicits a cognitive dissonance stemming from a fear that the zombie outsider might move in and replace the individual (and this reflection of self was often a representation of the societal norm). The Gen Z zombie, however, often becomes the reflection of the individual, and so the sense of the Uncanny becomes more Heimlich. Again, the Heimlich sense of the Uncanny plays more on the psychological fear that something safe, secret, and homey will be revealed to the outside world. Essentially, the audience is asked to acknowledge their own Otherness and as a result the monstrosity of the zombie is called into question. In some cases of Gen Z zombie stories, the zombie is even offered a chance at redemption, whether in the reclamation of their humanity or in gaining enough agency to exist outside of the horde (such as is the case in *Warm Bodies* and *Generation Dead*).

In a Gen Z zombie story, this achievement of independence and possible transcendence from the outsider state is not only limited to the zombies. In the conclusion of *Rot & Ruin*, the protagonist, Benny, leaves the fenced-in settlements of humanity because he realizes that the paranoia of the adults in the community is destructive and keeps them from improving their place in the world. Similarly, in *Zom-B*, B rejects being rescued by her father because she realizes she is becoming just like him—a racist and an abuser. Across Gen Z zombie stories, protagonists reject the path laid out for them by older generations. This is consistent with Stephens's third rule of YA, that the plot must

follow a teen's journey to identity. To take this idea further into the understanding of how zombie stories have changed from the golden age to Gen Z, it is interesting to consider that the adults that younger protagonists in Gen Z zombie stories learn to resist are very similar to the people who would be protagonists in a golden age zombie story. Another way to consider this is that for the YA reader, the source of their particular paranoia and societal fear stem from the adults who created that environment, not the Other.

These ideas of the monster having a familiar experience to the audience is a dramatic departure from previous zombie stories. While Bishop's "'I've always wanted to know how the other half lives': The Contemporary Zombie as Seductive Proselyte" does mention a couple of YA zombie texts, there is no differentiation between those texts and the golden age zombie tales he mentions. In the piece, Bishop argues that a recent trend in zombie fiction is that the more sympathetic zombie, often imbued with some form of agency, has given way to a trend of zombie audiences wanting to assume the role of the zombie. The reason behind this, he believes, is that becoming a zombie offers a sort of release from the tensions, concerns, and anxieties of modern life (26-27). To demonstrate this, the author uses examples such as Romero's *Land of the Dead*, comedic zombie films including Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* and Currie's *Fido*, as well as YA texts like *Warm Bodies* and Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*. In this vision, zombies with agency (which he refers to as "agent zombies") narrow the division between the living and the dead. In many of these stories, a living character contemplates giving themselves over to being a zombie, which marks a major change from the horror of infection in other zombie stories (such as *28 Days Later*, where killing a person before they change is considered a mercy) (31-33). Minor characters in *The Forest of Hands and*

Teeth and *The Walking Dead* TV series, Bishop notes, choose to become zombies because they want to be reunited with their loved ones who have already turned. Others, like Cholo in *Land of the Dead*, want to become undead to exact revenge they could not have in life (CITE). Regardless of their reasoning, the desire to become a zombie is a major alteration to the zombie myth. Bishop also goes on to connect the agent zombie to the carnivalesque atmosphere of zombie crawls (real-world events where people dress as zombies), and how wearing the costume of the undead allows people the chance to escape from their lives into a system where there is no stress, no one is superior or inferior, and there is a release from everyday fears (CITE).

While I agree that there is escapism in cosplay of any kind, including popular zombie crawls, the Gen Z zombie story, rather than fueling this desire for escapism, serves to complicate it. As the Gen Z zombie becomes easier to empathize with (in part due to the increased agency of the monster that Bishop rightly acknowledges), the monster's existence becomes more complex, and it no longer serves as an easy release from the pressures of the living. In *Generation Dead*, *Warm Bodies*, and *Zom-B*, the increased agency of the zombies means that they experience the same, if not more exaggerated, concerns as their human audiences. Even in texts like *Rot & Ruin* (as well as *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*), where the zombies have no real agency, the effort to make the protagonist (and by extension, the reader) experience empathy for the monsters suggests that becoming the creature is pitiable, not romantic.

Across Gen Z zombie stories, the zombie, regardless of agency, are seen in an empathetic, relatable light. The result is that the Otherness of the zombie is decreased in these texts as the reader is brought closer to the experience of the monster, often being

prompted to reflect on their own status as outsider. With the Otherness of the zombie removed, the sense of Uncanny stemming from these characters changes too. Previously, the zombie created fear through the concept of the Unheimlich—the disturbing double trying to get in and alter the norm. The Gen Z zombie, however, works in the opposite direction, through the Heimlich—the familiar that the audience seeks to keep safe and protected because it reflects their own hidden monstrosity. As a result of this shift, those who would seek to destroy the zombie and maintain social divisions become the violent outsiders to be feared. Thus, in many YA books, and especially in Gen Z zombie stories, the new Other is the older generations.

The division in these books between younger protagonists, both zombie and the living who can empathize with them, and adults is in many ways an abstraction of the fear and paranoia faced by younger audiences. The trauma in the younger person's world is not of their own making, and yet they are expected to exist with the same paranoia of the generations that came before them. In many ways, the Gen Z zombie story asks readers to imagine another way, where empathy becomes essential to survival. The intent is, essentially, to bring those who would be Othered together. When Darren Shan was asked in an interview why he felt that zombies were a good way to address racism, he responded that it was “because they were a way of getting the books into the hands of readers who wouldn't necessarily read an ‘issues’ book.” Shan sees the zombie story as a way to engage with impressionable audiences through entertainment and escapism while taking on serious contemporary issues in the real world. He goes on to explain, “There are lots of good books out there which tackle racism head-on, but I doubt that they make it into many households where racism is the norm. *Zom-B* is a series about breaking the

trend of hate and violence” (Morton). Gen Z zombie stories, then, offer a platform through which to confront constructed Otherness, including racism, class division, and more, in hopes of finding a resolution.

YA fiction has given the world a more fully fleshed zombie, still horrific, still dangerous, but less difficult to understand. After years of stories where people use guns, swords, barbed wire-wrapped baseball bats, and chainsaws to combat the undead, this new generation of YA stories choose to confront these creatures with empathy instead. If zombie stories reflect the needs and desires of their audiences, then this new evolution of the zombie signals a desire to embrace the Other and reject the cruelty of discrimination. There will always be a new Other to fear and a new sense of Uncanny representation that makes us unsure of who we are, and because of that the zombie will trudge on, adapting, altering, and illuminating cultural fear. For Gen Z zombie stories, monstrosity is often less about who is the Other and more about who is doing the Othering.

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