

ZOMBIES TO DIE FOR

BY DR. BOB CURRAN

Of all the horrors of literature or of the silver screen perhaps none is as terrifying as the zombie. The idea of the walking dead man – slack jawed, bereft of senses and with his skin rotting on the bone – is enough to frighten even the hardiest of souls. In many cases the creature also has a distinct taste from living human flesh.

Perhaps part of the potency of such an image is that it reminds us all of our own mortality and of the corruption of the grave. It also gives a graphic example of the imminence of death and as to what we might well become thereafter. The image has formed the basis of many films from *I Walked with a Zombie* to *Dawn of the Dead*, and it also features as the central theme of many books and comics. But how accurate is such a vision and how rational is such a terror?

In a sense, the ambulant dead and the returning revenant have been with us since earliest times, so long it seems that they have become a part of our culture and of cultures that have gone before. Corporeal revenants have formed the basis of medieval ghost stories and were often very different from the wailing insubstantial phantoms of the later Victorian period. Nor was the grave viewed as being particularly trustworthy in these times and the dead, it was believed, often returned, either at will or under dispensation from God – or indeed the Devil. This notion has continued down the years, becoming a part of West European folk and ghostlore. Why has this been so, and is there perhaps a grain of truth in the idea of the rising corpse issuing from the tomb?

It is not only in the tradition of Western ghosts, however, that the idea of the returning dead is a central feature. Indeed, it is thought to form a part of the voodoo religion of the Caribbean Islands and in the Creole faiths in both North and South America. This has formed a rich vein for story and film-makers to exploit as well as writers, researchers and anthropologists such as William Seabrooke and Wade Davis. But is the image true? Are the Caribbean Islands, Haiti and even the American cities of New Orleans and Charleston, the haunt of shambling cadavers, animated by some dread and dark religion that whites do not understand and which they rightly fear?

And what of other cultures – Japanese, Norwegian, Mexican etc., do they have tales about, and beliefs in the risen walking dead, and if so, how important are they? What in fact are the celebrated “living mummies” of rural Japan and what beliefs lie behind the Day of the Dead in Latin America? Do the Viking dead *really* lie quiet within their stone tombs deep in the frozen north? Could, for example, the stories of resurrection in the Bible be true or do they have their origins in Semitic traditions, folklore and beliefs?

As a student of the whole phenomenon, I have looked at these questions and seek to unravel the fact, folklore, and tradition surrounding the walking dead. My new book *Zombies* is perhaps one of the first such texts to place the idea of zombies and the walking dead within their widest comparative cultural setting. Returning to very ancient cultures, I have investigated the belief systems that surround gods who have defeated death by returning from the underworld, and the cycles of death and rebirth which surrounded the central teachings of many of the early cults.

I further examine how many of these beliefs have carried on through medieval times and have been given definition in Western European thinking by the practices of the “resurrectionists” and grave robbers of the 18th and early 19th centuries and by the phenomenon of the “half-hanged”. These ideas have shaped the image of the walking dead both in our culture and in our imaginations.

The book also goes on to investigate the idea of zombies within the voodoo culture and religion of places like Haiti, the Caribbean, and even parts of present-day America. It also outlines some of the loa <the gods, spirits and ghosts> who might inhabit the bodies of the dead in voodoo lore. Surprisingly, it reveals that the word “zombie” may not strictly refer to the walking dead at all! And, there is examination of the *Cultes des Mortes* of William Seabrooke – did it truly exist? *Zombies* takes a further look at the scientific claims regarding the Haitian and West African revenants made by people such as Wade Davis and asks whether they can withstand scrutiny.

I also investigate actual and folkloric instances of the walking dead in other cultures such as the Buddhist “living mummies” of remote Japan, the murderous *draugr* of Scandinavian fable, and the festivities surrounding the Day of the Dead in Spain and Mexico. *Zombies* is a wide-ranging survey of the walking dead that explores the whole phenomenon from historical, scientific and religious perspectives.

Do zombies and the walking dead really exist? And, do they actually do so in the way that we think they do or in which they have been portrayed in the popular cinema and literature? Can they, and will they harm the living?

These questions are best left to the experts – and not the faint of heart.

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