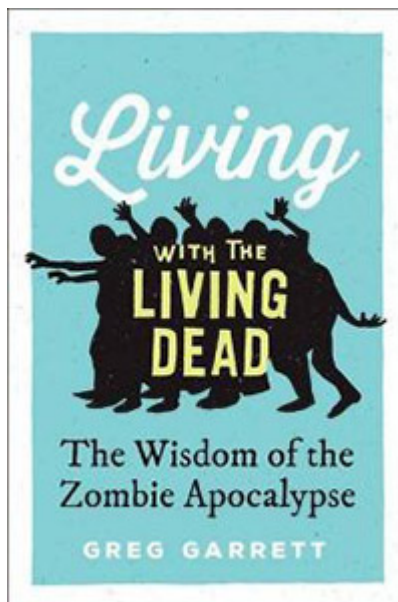


Living dead offer life lessons, Baylor prof says

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WACO—Stories of a zombie apocalypse not only force audiences to confront their own mortality, but also provide a platform to explore what being human really means, Baylor University professor and popular culture observer Greg Garrett insists.

People fear zombies because they look almost human, but they lack the distinctive qualities of humanity, including a soul, free will and the capacity to live in community, said Garrett, professor of English at Baylor and author of *Living with the Living Dead: The Wisdom of the Zombie Apocalypse*, published by Oxford University Press.



“We believe we are made in the image of God,” said Garrett, a seminary-trained Episcopal lay preacher. “We are more than the flesh we walk about in. But that’s all zombies are. They walk. They need. They eat. ... They are slaves to their impulses.”

A cultural craze that demanded exploration

Garrett, author of *Holy Superheroes!* and *We Get to Carry Each Other: The Gospel According to U2*, acknowledged his difficulty in researching and writing a book on such a grisly subject.

However, he saw the prevalence of zombies in popular culture—from the television series *The Walking Dead* and movies such as *World War Z* to novels, comic books and electronic games—as a phenomenon that demanded exploration.

Garrett wrote with two groups in mind.

“There’s an avid audience for these stories among those who are age 40 and under,” he said. “But I’m also doing a lot of explaining for an older audience who are asking why their grandchildren are going on the computer and killing zombies.”

Zombies rise when society is in turmoil

Stories about reanimated corpses date back centuries, but they gain popularity in times of great upheaval, he noted. For example, George Romero’s movie *Night of the Living Dead* premiered in 1968, at the height of unrest over the war in Vietnam and just a few months after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy.

Zombies serve as “symbols for all sorts of free-floating 21st century anxieties, from the spread of Ebola and Zika, to the breakdown of the financial markets, to changes in gender roles, to the menace of global terrorism,” Garrett writes.

Stories about a zombie apocalypse grew exponentially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, he noted.

‘Laboratory for observing human emotion and experience’

However, Garrett concentrates less on zombies than on the humans who react to them. When he interviewed Angela Kang, writer and producer of *The Walking Dead*, she affirmed the zombies are perceived as the monsters, but the real monsters are the human beings who abandon their

moral convictions to survive.



“The question becomes, ‘How do we deal with a world full of danger?’ And that’s where we find ourselves,” Garrett said, noting thorny ethical issues such as enhanced interrogation of suspected terrorists. Zombie stories provide “a laboratory for observing human emotion and experience,” he said.

He pointed to *The Road*, a novel by Cormac McCarthy, as a serious exploration of morality and ethics set in a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by soulless cannibals. It focuses on a father who continues to assure his son they are “good guys” who are “carrying the fire,” in spite of the hard choices he makes to guarantee his son’s survival.

Choose hope over despair

The redeeming aspects of zombie stories focus on humans who demonstrate hospitality in times of scarcity and build community in spite of challenges, Garrett noted. Those are the kinds of stories to which he is drawn—not the nihilistic vision of movies such as *Night of the Living Dead*.

“As people of faith, we choose hope over despair every time,” he said.

The zombie apocalypse offers a way to explore contemporary issues, such showing generosity and hospitality to immigrants and refugees in a climate of perceived scarcity.

“The gospel message is always a message of abundance,” he said.

Humanity is experienced most fully in community—something impossible

for zombies, who lack the capacity for interaction, Garrett insisted.

“We are called to community,” he said, acknowledging that message flies in the face of rugged individualism. “Within the body of Christ, we complete each other. We cannot become the people we are called to be without each other.”