

## *I Am Legend: George Romero's Transformations* by Tony Williams

Throughout many of his interviews, George A. Romero has often spoken of the genesis of his zombie films and the key inspiration *I am Legend* by Richard Matheson. "...got very much into the socio-political through-line that's present in it, although it doesn't really follow through. Inspired by it, I wrote a short story which dealt with a revolutionary society coming into being in the form of a zombie society – people coming back to life as soon as they die – and it was a trilogy right from the jump." He elsewhere mentions that he replaced the novel's post-apocalyptic vampires with his "blue-collar monsters." The familiar story of Romero's ingenious transformation of the Richard Matheson original is so well known as to seem to require little repetition. Yet what is not really

From out of the night they came — the living and the dead — banded together in a single obsession — to drink the blood of Robert Neville, the last man on earth . . . They came at sunset, snarling, screaming — some of them crouching on their haunches like dogs, eyes glittering, teeth slowly grating together back and forth . . . Once they had been his neighbours . . . his friends . . . Now they were  
VAMPIRES . . .

apparent is Romero's recognition of the tensions affecting its solitary protagonist Robert Neville, tensions he extends to all the human characters in *Night of the Living Dead* who parallel the devouring creatures who surround his home at night. As the back cover of my re-issued 1971 U.K. Corgi edition states, "Once they had been his neighbours...his friends...Now they were VAMPIRES..." Although Romero recognizes the necessity for a new society to take the place of the old in his film unlike the hesitancy expressed by Matheson, it is the role of the living dead expressing tensions within the human species that links both authors.

Matheson's hero is "The Last Man on Earth" as the title of the first film adaptation of his novel. Robert Neville has lost wife and daughter to the plague that has wiped out humanity and seemingly left only himself and vampires to rule the earth. Besieged in his home at night like a western pioneer threatened by savage Indians centuries past in America's pioneering days, he feels himself under threat by former neighbor Ben Cortman, now a demonic Oliver Hardy to Neville's Stan Laurel

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# I AM LEGEND

**RICHARD MATHESON**

Alone in the darkness...  
one man against the  
massed power of evil...

whose relationship is not one of comedy but rather a new version of the American Nightmare. Before the Plague, Cortman had driven Neville to work, "talked about cars and baseball and politics with him, later on about the disease, about how Virginia and Kathy were getting along, about how Frieda Cortman was, about..." It takes little imagination to see the unhealthy role of American conformity within this supposedly friendly relationship involving materialism, shallow aspects of conversation, and family life

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with Cortman insidiously playing a key pitcher testing his vehicle companion as to whether he is a “regular guy” in the words of Kubrick’s Clare Quilty in *Lolita* (1962), playing his version of one-upmanship and “keeping up with the Joneses.” It comes as no surprise to learn later that the changed Cortman is Neville’s most dangerous and elusive foe, often leading those outside at night who “walked and walked about in restless feet, circling each other like wolves, never looking at each other once, having hungry eyes only for the house and their prey inside the house.” Among those he leads are those women who expose themselves feeding on Neville’s hungry sexual desires and hoping their potential consumer will finally become a consumed item.

Several of these descriptions certainly anticipate *Night of the Living Dead* as those threatening living dead vampires in Sidney Salkow’s *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) did. Although the infected in Matheson’s novel are compared to vampires, they (like their first cinematic incarnations in Salkow’s film) more resemble prototypes of the zombies Romero will later develop. Neville had also worked in a plant, one of those Californian Cold War industrial powerhouses that once offered gainful employment to William Bendix in *The Life of Reilly* during America’s most affluent era of Empire. The plague itself may not be accidental, having suggestive contacts with that science fiction explanation unconvincingly offered in *Night of the Living Dead*. By day, Neville hunts as many vampires



as he can find, becoming a modern version of Robert Montgomery Bird's Nathan Slaughter in *Nick of the Woods* (1836), the ancestor of Herman Melville's "Indian hater" from *The Confidence Man* and John Wayne's Ethan Edwards in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). Like Ethan Edwards, the paranoid Neville may have secretly desired the end of conformist America and family life to become D.H. Lawrence's classic embodiment of the American male described in *Studies in Classic American Literature* as an isolate and a killer. The vampires also embody a new version of Indians as a monstrous embodiment of the id, both in terms of presumed libidinous sexuality and cannibalistic violence in that dark legacy deriving from the Puritan era of the Mather Brothers, one of whom had the first name "Increase." He left an inheritance that certainly became fruitful and multiplied as we have witnessed over the past four centuries. In *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombies circulate outside the Mall like their predecessors outside the farmhouse in *Night of the Living Dead* only to become temporarily displaced by those biker descendants of Simon Girty, the renegade who "went Indian." It is by no means accidental that Romero's subsequent bigger budget installment in his zombie chronicles (*Survival of the Dead*) takes the form of a Western. *The Big Country* is not the only influence there. Although the appearance of a dog offers Neville the type of loner companionship shared by John Wayne's Hondo and Brian Keith's Dave Blossingame in Sam Peckinpah's *The Westerner*; this hope is cruelly nipped in the bud. After this Cortman becomes his Scar and hunting for Cortman becomes "one of the few diversions left to him."

*I am Legend* is a study of human paranoia and suspicion. When Neville discovers the presence of

Below, zombies outside the mall in *Dawn of the Dead*; opposite, their predecessors outside the farmhouse.



a supposedly healthy woman, Matheson makes clear that the central problem of the novel lies in Neville himself not the battle between a human and vampires. "The present was enough. And he was afraid of the possible demand that he make sacrifices and accept responsibility again. He was afraid of giving out his heart, of removing the chains he had forged around it to keep emotion prisoner. He was afraid of loving again." It is this insight that Romero incorporates into *Night of the Living Dead* seeing the whole of humanity, not just one individual and certainly not the supposedly heroic Ben, as all sharing a common dilemma of hostility, suspicion, and refusal to work for the common good.

Although Neville recognizes that he has become an anachronism in the future new society he also understands that Ruth, whom he formerly thought was "the last woman on earth," has "become a brainless convert to this new violence." Unlike Romero's qualified and tentative optimism for a potentially progressive new society, Matheson pessimistically sees it as a continuation of the old as seen in Ruth's description to the doomed Neville. For Matheson, there is really no difference between the new society and the later redneck hunters in *Night of the Living Dead*. The members of Matheson's new society share the same antagonism to outsiders as Neville does to his prey.

The following description anticipates the biker horde of *Dawn of the Dead* as well as the military survivors of *Day of the Dead* who emotionally devour each other in a manner similar to the zombies outside the compound. How soon will it be before they set up their own form of hierarchy designating even their own people as "other" in a manner envisaged in *Land of the Dead* and turn on their own kin as do the warring families of *Survival of the Dead*? Although Matheson does not go into detail, the future of survivors in *I am Legend* is not positive and as dangerous as that experienced in *Diary of the Dead*. "Maybe you did see joy on their faces,' she said. 'It's not surprising. They're young. And they are killers – assigned killers, legal killers. They're respected for their killing, admired for it. What can you expect from them? They're only fallible men. And men can learn to enjoy killing. That's an old story, Neville. You know that."

Ruth's description is an uncanny echo of the codes of the Frontier Society that has dominated America since its very foundation. There is to be no positive change only a continuation of the old order in a changing of the guard where the outsiders become the new establishment and the establishment the new outsiders taking the place of Native Americans who barely survived extinction in America's history.

"As far as we know,' she said casually, 'You're quite unique, you know. When you're gone, there won't be anyone else like you within our particular society.'" It is to Romero's credit that he recognizes the dangerous continuation of America's heritage of violence in his zombie films viewing it as "a pyramid of skulls," the title of the closing chapter to the first part of Richard Slotkin's monumental cultural-historical trilogy of American psychopathology that begins with *Regeneration*

*Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1815* and ends with *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*. The first part deals exclusively with literature and the final part almost exclusively with film paralleling *I am Legend* as a dystopian science fiction text and Romero's cinema containing hesitant and qualified hopes for the future. Both Matheson and Romero interrogate different examples of the human psyche, seeing their monsters as projections of deeply contradictory and destructive tensions. Yet while Matheson concludes on a pessimistic note seeing his hero as embodying "A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever," Romero offers a less deterministic vision of the future but one left for his audiences to resolve. At least some hope exists at the end of *Land of the Dead* when the human remnants of the zombie apocalypse decide to leave the retreating zombies alone. Matheson offers no such hope but Romero suggests a tentative possibility that only human survivors can realize should they decide to and leave aside both their internal dissensions and the psychological mechanisms that will only continue violent past behavior.

"The redneck hunters" and the local police  
in *Night of the Living Dead*.

