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BOOK REVIEW:

The Zombie Reader

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Murphy, Kieran, editor. *The Zombie Reader*. Rev. ed., Cognella Academic, 2020. ISBN 978-1516531981.

In January of this year, I watched the 1966 Hammer horror film, *Plague of the Zombies*. Noted for inspiring much of *Night of the Walking Dead,* this film seemed itself a call-back to the much older film *White Zombie* (1932) but also pushed back against it, seeming to refuse to call people of color "barbaric" and also pointing the finger at white people for cultural appropriation. In seeing *Plague of the Zombies* for the first time, I was reminded of just how inextricably tied the zombie-figure is to our current racial moment, at least here in the United States. In another recent zombie book I reviewed (*Books of the Dead*), I harped on the book's general ignoring of racial issues in the analysis of the zombie, and it was in that moment of writing that review that I really wished there was a book of foundational essays on the zombie – something that included such texts as Zora Neale Hurston's "Zombies" or Laura Kremmel's "Rest in Pieces". And then I discovered Kieran Murphy's *The Zombie Reader*.

This book, as Murphy states in the preface, is meant to be a book of contexts. He envisions *The Zombie Reader* being taught alongside works such as *The Walking Dead* (2010–present) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) (ix). As such, his book contains an introduction, short introductory essays of his own at the start of each labeled section, then the various essays considered foundational to the place of the zombie in culture, history, and literature, and finally some discussion questions. Murphy sees his reader as working on defamiliarising the zombie for students, helping them see the zombie through a non-Eurocentric lens. Murphy himself admits to teaching his own zombie courses since 2009. He also admits that his frustration, like mine, has been that many zombie scholars (as in, scholars of zombies in literature, not the undead

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scholar imagined by Robin Becker in *Brains*) tend to relegate the zombie to a position of popular and sensationalised Eurocentrism void of historical or Afro-Caribbean context or significance. As he says in the introduction, this willful ignorance "eclipses the pioneering Haitian experience of modernity that produced the zombie in the first place and that facilitated its passage into the American imagination during the Great Depression" (xi–xii). *The Zombie Reader* ultimately challenges these dismissals, and it functions as an essential companion book for any class on the literary figure of the zombie.

After a preface and introduction, Murphy separates the essays into four parts based on distinct themes or literary tropes: voodoo, spectrality, death, and sympathy. Each section begins with its own short (usually three- to four-page) introduction, defining some key terms and introducing the discourses mentioned in the following two or three essays. Because of how these ideas intersect, though, the organisation does seem arbitrary, and even the introductory notes feel less like section introductions and more like introductions to each specific essay. For example, in Part 1, before the readings, Murphy has written three mini-essays, one of which is called "Zora Neale Hurston Takes the First Photograph of a Zombie". What follows is not Hurston's essay "Zombies", however, but two other essays and *then* "Zombies". So, I think readers would have been better served if those part introductions had functioned instead as textual notes at the start of each essay.

The first section, "Vodou, Voodoo, and the Globalization of a Haitian Curiosity", starts the reader off strongly with an introduction to the Haitian origins of the zombie mythos. Essays from Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Sydney W. Mintz, W. B. Seabrook, and Zora Neale Hurston depict early encounters with and constructions of the zombie, especially in Afro-Caribbean contexts. For me, this was the most significant part of the book. Reading any 21st-century zombie novel (or even watching any TV show or film) alongside just these three readings would greatly benefit any class on zombies. This part alone makes the book worth its purchase price and worthy of inclusion in a course syllabus. It tackles fundamental Afro-Caribbean elements of the zombie narrative: the origins of the zombie, the importance of vodou and voodoo in that mythos, and the historical-political elements of the zombie's geographic past. This section pushes the book above and beyond many other zombie academic texts today. The section introduction, too, carries some useful historical context for the pieces.

The second section, "Haunted History: Dispossession and Spectral Works," feels more "forced" than the others, however. Its introduction deals with several different themes but none that carries through in the section's first two essays, though the idea of labour is a major theme that emerges in the latter two essays by Joan Dayan and Sascha Morrell, which focus on vodou and labour issues in historical zombie narratives. Moreso than other sections in the reader, this section encourages students to think about the ways in which the zombie can be a revolutionary force. Moving Dayan's piece on dismemberment to the first section would have left room to reshape this second section as a segment on modern race issues. Even with Murphy's attention to historical race, the book leaves much to be desired in terms for zombies in the context of modern critical race issues – I immediately think of Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton's edited collection *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie* (2011) or Camilla Fojas' *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers* (2017). The most contemporary

that Murphy's second section gets is a 1990s discussion of race in South Africa. However, one could easily argue that this fits in with the overall theme of the book: defamiliarisation. Murphy does not express any interest in having students read the zombie as relevant to their own lives – only as relevant to cultural history. This in itself seems like weak pedagogy, too, when half the point of cultural history is that it *is* relevant to students' own lives.

The third section, "Projections of Death: Mourning, Melancholia, and the Undead", tackles some other important zombie tropes in literature. The theme of melancholia in relation to zombies, after all, is a crucial aspect that comes up often in zombie discourse, so it certainly deserves its own section in this reader (even if it is the shortest of the four). Both Roger Luckhurst's and Laura Kremmel's essays are valuable for beginning scholars in thinking through what happens with perceptions of death, grieving, and melancholia. The introduction for this section gestures toward reading capitalism into the modern zombie mythos, but Murphy shies away from including essays with any substantial critique here – again, I'm thinking of Fojas again as well as Sarah Juliet Lauro's *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (2017). Even had Murphy wanted to keep strictly to a more international context, Chase Pielak and Alexander H. Cohen also discuss globalisation in the zombie narrative in *Living with Zombies* (2017), although it is possible that, given how long academic publishing can take, their monograph appeared too late for Murphy to include an excerpt. Although he situates cannibalism within a history of colonialism, Murphy leaves the subject there, making room for cannibalism to seemingly evolve into melancholia without much reasoning involved in tracing that transition or considering whether colonialism is still implicit in the zombie mythos for the 21st century.

The final section focuses on "Sympathy for the Zombie". This is arguably the most modern of the sections, focusing in on the ever-emerging trope of the "good" zombie. Especially with the wealth of young-adult fiction going this direction, for instance *Warm Bodies* (2010) and *Rot & Ruin* (2010), it is productive to have both theory and history behind those kinds of texts, making this section potentially an easily teachable one depending on the primary texts involved. Both Kyle William Bishop's and Kaiama L. Glover's essays work well in that context, theorizing why consumers of zombie protagonists could include sympathy as a reader response and addressing the humanity inherent in the human zombie. This is probably the most digestible and lightest material in the book, but that is far from a critique. It situates a literary zombie trope in a larger tradition, which will be valuable to students who find these sympathetic zombies in their texts.

Overall, *The Zombie Reader* shines most in its focus on history. Too many zombie scholars ignore – whether in their research or in their pedagogy – many of the historical contexts evoked in this reader. Likewise, I have seen zombie courses that speak to the "sensationalist evocations in travel literature and horror films" that Murphy critiques (xi). As such, this reader succeeds best as a historicising challenge. The essays Murphy has chosen are foundational to the cultural history of zombies, and they ground (pun intended) the zombie in long-established discourses beneficial for students in zombie lit classes. All are therefore necessary inclusions. The book also succeeds in defamiliarising the zombie for students, getting them away from pop-culture sensationalism and into an awareness of the figure's rich traditions in culture, history, and

literature. Plus, I truly appreciate the Afro-Caribbean focus the editor carries throughout the volume. Even though the essays become more Eurocentric as the book progresses, the section introductions keep reminding the reader that the zombie comes from Haiti.

However, this book unfortunately remains more of a zombie *history* reader than a zombie *critical* reader. There has been so much work over the past five, ten, even twenty years to show how the figure of the zombie is used to speak out against capitalism, against racial issues, and even against environmental waste. Rather than leaving room for and encouraging those kinds of discussions, Murphy focuses too much on defamiliarisation, relegating zombies to a far-off past, even while the texts being read for a zombie class might virtually beg students to analyse the very modern issues the zombies were meant to address. There is even room for these two ideas to be blended. As Murphy indicates throughout the entirety of his reader, the zombie has always been a political figure (again, I think of the wealth of essays in Lauro's volume). An easy takeaway from this reader, though, would be that the zombie *stopped* being political at some point.

All the same, despite these limitations, I definitely would recommend this book for any zombie-lit class, especially those needing Afro-Caribbean and historical context. I cannot say that I would recommend this *above* Lauro's reader, but what Murphy's book does that Lauro's does not is include a great deal of needed historical information. The defamiliarisation Murphy aims for *is* important – just not in isolation. In my own zombie-lit classes, assuming I had a chronological order to my primary texts, I'd teach the oldest zombie texts alongside Murphy and then move on to Lauro as the primary texts became more modern. And who knows? Maybe in a few years, Murphy will release a sequel to this reader with more modern essays and critical analyses. It should nonetheless remind us as scholars that context does matter, and hopefully it will inform our students that the zombie has been shambling a long time, well before *The Walking Dead* and *Ash vs. the Evil Dead*.

Biography: Jonathan W. Thurston-Torres is a PhD candidate in English and Animal Studies at Michigan State University. They are also an HIV-rights activist in the Lansing community. Their book *Blood Criminals: Living with HIV in the 21st Century* was nominated as POZ Magazine Book of the Year, and their edited collection, *Animals and Race*, is forthcoming from Michigan State University Press.