

World War Z: Monsters of this society's own making

By Christie Schaefer
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World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War, by Max Brooks, Three Rivers Press (CA), \$14.95

Zombies do not exist. Mass tragedies, natural and social, do, however. American writer Max Brooks in his best-selling science fiction work, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, understands this, and though he is committed to zombies as his metaphor, his message is clear: We are not prepared for disasters. Why we are not prepared is one of the many subjects of this book.

Unlike much of the work in science fiction and horror genres today, Max Brooks (son of Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft) approaches his work with a straight face—there is not the expected and desired wink that would make it seem “all right” and less frightening. From the first pages of this book, which is written as a series of interviews with survivors of a future “zombie war” from every level of society, Brooks is in character. The book’s press material carries on the conceit; Brooks gives interviews in which he details the war that officially cost some 600 million dead. It is the seriousness with which the author takes his subject that makes his efforts effectively chilling.

Brooks’s narrator starts out by detailing his falling out with the chairperson of the United Nations Postwar Commission Report when he finds that more than half of his work has been left out of the official version of the events. The half left out was the human factor—the opinions and emotions of those who survived. He asks, “But isn’t the human factor what connects us so deeply with our past?” This work, then, is the presentation of the human factor.

Offered as vignettes presented by the participants themselves, and moving from the first recorded outbreak in rural China through the most industrialized and technologically advanced area of the world, and even into space by way of an international station, Brooks’s book leads us through a catalogue of the world’s failings. That many of these failings are exacerbated, if not flat-out caused, by governmental hubris is no small element.

Starting with the first narrative, that of Kwang Jingshu, a doctor at a hospital in a relocated village that prior to the war had upwards of 35 million people, but now has barely 50,000, we see examples of the ineptitude of society at dealing with a

rising plague. The doctor excoriates the younger staff of the hospital when the initial call for help comes through: “The younger doctors, the kids who think medicine is just a way to pad their bank accounts, they certainly weren’t going to go help some ‘nongmin’ [farmer/peasant] just for the sake of helping. I guess I’m still an old Revolutionary at heart. ‘Our Duty is to hold ourselves responsible to the people.’ Those words still mean something to me...and I tried to remember that as my Deer bounced and banged over dirt roads the government promised but had never quite gotten around to paving.” With this simple passage, Brooks points up the differences between the party line of Mao’s China and the reality.

The outbreak the doctor finds upon visiting the family is covered up, and thereby allowed to spread. The second interview, with a human smuggler, lays out the means of the plague’s spread—people eager to leave China in light of the zombie threat or out of economic desperation do so. Many disappear into the poor neighborhoods of their host countries. As the smuggler states, “What better way to hide than among that part of society that no one else even wants to acknowledge. How else could so many outbreaks have started in First World ghettos?”

As the plague takes hold, and it becomes clear that there are no really safe places (each geography offers its own advantages and deadly drawbacks), it also becomes clear that modern tactics of warfare are also inefficient at best in dealing with this type of monster. Carpet-bombing, firebombing, body shots—nothing is working. As long as the brain of the beast is intact, the head, even when cut away from its body, will keep snapping and infect any who get nipped. This lack of understanding of the enemy leads to one of the biggest military defeats early on in the war, which leads to panic. If the army cannot stop them, what hope is there?

What various segments of the population do during the panic provides Brooks an opportunity to offer insight into present-day social decay. For example, one group of super-rich, including a barely disguised Paris Hilton, holes up in a fortified mansion and broadcasts their lives for the less-rich to watch as the world is exploding.

This part of the story is told through the interview with a

mercenary bodyguard. He recounts an episode during which his clients were filmed while reacting to a televised street fight between humans and zombies: “I remember I was standing next to this guy, Sergei, a miserable, sad-faced, hulking motherfucker. His stories about growing up in Russia convinced me that not all Third World cesspools had to be tropical. It was when the camera was catching the reactions of the beautiful people that he mumbled something to himself in Russian. The only word I could make out was ‘Romanovs’ and I was about to ask him what he meant when we all heard the alarm go off.” (The House of Romanov, of course, was the imperial dynasty overthrown in Russia in 1917.)

Through the use of the interviews, Brooks has managed to create a book with many highlights and “ah-hah” moments. He makes the most of these people, and writes with a straightforwardness that ends up being neither preachy nor guilty of what is known as an “info dump.” Through the views of the survivors, we see the struggle for basic survival, on the one hand, and the dispassionate planning for the annihilation of masses of people by the powers that be, on the other, through the politics of “acceptable losses.”

Moving into the years past the major outbreak and into the years of “cleanup,” we are shown the psychological effects of the war, from survivor’s guilt to the mechanics of the quislings—humans who convince themselves that they are zombies. As one interviewee puts it: “They’re always drawn to what they’re afraid of. Instead of resisting it, they want to please it, join it, try to be like it... Collaborators, sometimes even more diehard than the people they’re trying to mimic, like those French fascists who were some of Hitler’s last troops. Maybe that’s why we call them quislings, like it’s a French word or something.” Of course, Vidkun Quisling was the Nazi-installed president of Norway during World War II, as is footnoted in the book.

Brooks’s use of footnotes is interesting in that it gives the action of World War Z a bit more weight by maintaining the literary ruse that we are reading an actual account of events in the not-too-distant past.

In all, given recent world developments—Hurricane Katrina springing immediately to mind, and oft-mentioned in reviews of this work—the scenario laid out here is what is truly frightening: world governments too corrupt, uncaring or crisis-ridden to assure the basic needs of their citizenry in the face of massive disaster, and that citizenry left to its own devices.

The novel makes clear that society had not been challenged solely by the walking dead, that things were in decline long before the zombies showed up and provided an immediately tangible crisis.

That Brooks limits his Narrator in most cases to parenthetical statements and comments about the physical reactions of those he is interviewing makes the times he does step forward authorially all the more potent.

This is especially true in such interviews as the one with former White House chief of staff Grover Carlson, one of the few times when Brooks’s Narrator character takes a confrontational stance. Asked about the response of the White House to reports of the walking dead, Carlson replies, “Given how low a priority the national security adviser thought this was, I think we actually gave it some pretty healthy table time.”

He continues to brag that Phalanx, a supposed anti-zombie drug, was pushed through the Food and Drug Administration. When the Narrator points out that Phalanx didn’t work, Carlson explodes and launches into a tirade about how it didn’t matter, what mattered was that a panic had been avoided, and asks, “Can you imagine the damage it would have done to the administration’s political capital? We’re talking about an election year, and a damn hard, uphill fight...”

When the Narrator later states, “So you never really tried to solve the problem,” Carlson answers, “Oh, c’mon. Can you ever ‘solve’ poverty? Can you ever ‘solve’ crime? Can you ever ‘solve’ disease, unemployment, war, or any other societal herpes? Hell no. All you can ever hope for is to make them manageable enough to allow people to get on with their lives. That’s not cynicism, that’s maturity.”

The increasingly contentious interview continues, with the former official turning belligerent, his answers to the more and more pointed questions becoming short sarcastic quips. Carlson ultimately telling the interviewer to “grow up” as he returns to shoveling dung.

Ultimately, this book is a frightening thing. The reader may come away hoping that no major disasters will ever happen again, but one knows all too well that something is bound to arise that will challenge society on a mass scale, be it fire, flood, or not-so-natural disaster, and that the social order neither is prepared nor has the capacity to confront it adequately. Official reactions—martial law, war, hoarding, isolationist survivalism—only indicate the bankruptcy of the present order. New ways of solving massive problems are needed. Though this book does not provide a blueprint, by any means, it does provide—in a very pointed, astute and entertaining form—food for thought.

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