**The History of Zombies**

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The zombie, often portrayed as an undead, flesh-eating, decaying corpse, has enjoyed a popularity surge in recent years. Whether they’re devouring their prey in *The Walking Dead* or getting their groove on in Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video, zombies dominate pop culture and are a popular topic of discussion from the water cooler to the dinner table. But where did zombies come from? Unlike many other horrible monsters—which are mostly a product of superstition, religion and fear— zombies have a basis in historical fact.

**ZOMBIE TRAITS**
A zombie is usually either a reawakened corpse with a ravenous appetite or someone bitten by another zombie infected with the so-called zombie virus. The virus stops the heart of the bitten person and turns them into a zombie to continue the cycle.

Zombies are usually portrayed as robotic beings with rotting flesh. Their only mission is to feed. They typically don’t have conversations, although they may grunt a little. Zombies are notoriously strong and hard to kill—decapitation is, according to legend—the most effective method.

**THE ORIGIN OF ZOMBIES**
The Ancient Greeks may have been the first civilization terrorized by a fear of the undead. Archaeologists have unearthed many ancient graves which contained skeletons pinned down by rocks and other heavy objects, assumedly to prevent the dead bodies from reanimating.

Zombie folklore has been around for centuries in Haiti, possibly originating in the 17th century when African slaves were brought in to work on Haiti’s sugar cane plantations. Brutal conditions left the slaves longing for the freedom only death could bring yet most were terrified to kill themselves.

They believed anyone who took their life became a zombie (originally spelled zombi) and was doomed to roam the plantations forever. For the slaves, hell itself couldn’t be a worse fate. To them, the life—or rather afterlife—of a zombie represented the horrific plight of slavery.

**ZOMBIES AND VOODOO**
In the Haitian voodoo culture (and other cultures that practice voodoo), members still think zombies are dead people revived by a sorcerer known as a bokor. Bokors are also thought to have the ability to capture and control vulnerable souls who linger after death waiting to join their gods.

Bokors create “zombie powders” which contain tetrodotoxin, a lethal neurotoxin found in pufferfish and some other marine species. It may cause zombie-like symptoms such as difficulty walking, mental confusion and difficulty breathing.

High doses of tetrodotoxin can lead to paralysis and coma. This could cause someone to appear dead and be buried alive then later revived. There are several credible reports in medical journals of people using these compounds to revive people from the grave. Still, using tetrodotoxin and other drugs to create a vast legion of zombie slaves is fiction, not reality.

**ARE ZOMBIES IN THE BIBLE?**
The modern-day, carnivorous zombie isn’t in the Bible. But there are many references to bodies being reanimated or resurrected which may have inspired zombie myths throughout history. The book of Ezekiel describes a vision where Ezekiel is dropped in a boneyard and prophesies to the bones. The bones start to shake and become covered with muscle and flesh until they’re reanimated yet “there was no breath in them.”

And the book of Isaiah states, “Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.”

Moreover, passages abound in the both the Old and New Testaments about the resurrection of saints and sinners in the end times. This may be one reason so many zombie stories are associated with an apocalypse.

**ZOMBIES IN POP CULTURE**
According to *The Undead Eighteenth Century* by Linda Troost, zombies appeared in literature as far back as 1697 and were described as spirits or ghosts, not cannibalistic fiends. They arrived on the film scene around the same time as their monster peers, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, with the 1932 release of *White Zombie*.

But it wasn’t until 1968 that zombies acquired a cult following of their own with the release of *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George Romero. Over the next 15 years, Romero directed two more zombie films, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*. As special effects technology improved with each film, the zombies appeared more gruesome and realistic.

From the 1980s on, dozens of zombie films were made. Even Scooby Doo battled zombies in the 1998 film *Scooby-Doo on Zombie Islan*d. And the 2013 release of *World War Z* starring Brad Pitt brought zombie culture to a disturbing new level.

Not surprisingly, television jumped on the zombie bandwagon with shows like *iZombie* and *Helix*. But no zombies ever terrified more television viewers than those on *The Walking Dead*. Each show features a post-apocalyptic zombie feeding frenzy that leaves fans horrified yet unable to look away.

**OUR FASCINATION WITH ZOMBIES**
Why does the modern world have such a love affair with zombies? History may be to blame, according to Stanford literary scholar Angela Becerra Vidergar.

Vidergar tells Stanford News she believes mankind’s perception of violence took a drastic turn after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. She feels such large-scale disasters cause people to fictionalize their deaths on a mass scale and focus on survival of the fittest, a common theme among zombie narratives.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) agrees. They took advantage of zombie mania and created a “Zombie Preparedness” website to motivate people to prepare for disasters and offer tips on how to survive a zombie apocalypse and other catastrophes. The site was a huge hit.

Whether you’re a fan of zombies or the thought of running into one causes you to sleep with one eye open, they’re part of modern pop culture. Although the zombie myth has a basis in historical fact, today’s zombies have taken on a life of their own.

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