



WORLD WAR Z

An Oral History of the Zombie War

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For the first time in history, we faced an enemy that was actively waging total war. They had no limits of endurance. They would never negotiate, never surrender. They would fight until the very end because, unlike us, every single one of them, every second of every day, was devoted to consuming all life on Earth. That's the kind of enemy we had waiting for us beyond the Rockies. That's the kind of war we had to fight. --General D'Ambrosia, commander the airship Mauro Altieri, p. 273

About the Book

World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War by Max Brooks is published by Three Rivers Press, New York. First published in 2006, the critically acclaimed book spent four weeks on the New York Times best-seller list.

As an oral history in the tradition of Studs Terkel, novelist Max Brooks challenges readers to examine how our global society reacts when faced with crisis. His book, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, unfolds through the words of the survivors of a fictitious zombie apocalypse who provide chilling details to a global pandemic that transforms the infected into bloodthirsty monsters. Like all great works of science fiction, *World War Z* uses the imagined future to explore issues we are facing today. In the face of crisis, how do we react? How quickly can science, government, and emergency personnel cope with a growing crisis? What are the network effects of an increasingly globalized world?

Max Brooks paints a stark picture of a global pandemic which is fictional, but, like all great horror and science fiction stories, has reality buried within the fiction. The novel brings forth a range of themes, including disaster mobilization, network effects, and global pandemics to name just a few.

Program Themes

Infectious Disease and Public Health

In recent years, discussions of pandemics and global public health has been of concern. SARS, H1N1, and other diseases have tested how well countries can prevent outbreaks from occurring. Misinformation about vaccines has caused the reemergence of diseases that were almost wiped out a generation ago. *World War Z* uses a fictitious zombie virus to explore how our health systems function.

Oral History and How We Remember

As an oral history, *World War Z* is modeled after Studs Terkel's WWII history, *The Good War*. In *World War Z*'s introduction, Brooks delineates between the cold hard facts of official reports and the emotions, opinions, and personal accounts of oral histories. Brooks asks us to consider how we tell stories and how we remember the past—even a fictional past.

The Individual and Society

In film and literature, zombies are often used as a metaphor for followers and the lack of identity. The mindless zombie hordes stumble forward overrunning everything in their path. The zombie metaphor asks us to consider when we act as individuals and when we follow the crowd. When we consider environmental impacts, consumer cultural trends, and political debates, how often are we part of the mindless hordes?

Zombies, Monsters, and The Profane in Art and Literature

Monsters and tales of tragedy have been part of art and literature at every step of human history. How do modern zombie stories (and horror stories) represent the mythologies of the past? How are they different?

Disaster Mobilization and Government Interventions

Natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and humanmade disasters such as the attacks of 9/11 call on our society to mobilize to help vast numbers of people. How effective have our efforts been? How much money are we prepared to invest in preparing for the next disaster? If we are struck by disaster, what do we expect in terms of services? When disasters strike in other countries, do we have responsibility to intervene?

Networks, Knowledge, and Infection

Mathematicians show that disease, information, and technologies like Facebook operate along the principles outlined by network theory. The network connects nodes and hubs so that these connections build a larger structure. Studying networks can help us understand how disease spreads, how knowledge grows, and the individual coordinates with the larger society. *World War Z* demonstrates that it can be impossible to contain outbreaks that spread across the networked world.

Dystopian and Apocalyptic Literature

From novels such as *I Am Legend*, *1984*, and *Canticle for Leibowitz*, dystopian literature takes us into disturbing, invented realities that teach us about our own realities. The dystopian future is just over the horizon. One wrong decision, one unfortunate disease, or one war that rages out of control could take humanity down that path. What are the lessons of dystopian and apocalyptic literature? How do these works of fiction impact society?

Beliefs, Evidence, and Science

Brooks makes it clear in the early chapters of *World War Z* that the zombie plague could have been prevented, but people refused to believe the experts, and government leaders did not have sufficient public support to act. What obstacles prevent expert opinions from being heard? What political factors influence decision making?

Just War, Genocide and Holocaust

At the end of *World War Z*, the solution to end the plague inflicted casualties on the uninfected. Brooks sets up a scenario that echoes debates in past wars of collateral damage in civilian populations. Is there a time when civilian casualties are justified? What costs are we willing to pay for security? At the end of the book, Brooks draws connections between the zombie apocalypse and the Holocaust of WWII. He notes that "no one on Earth survived this war." What commentary is he offering about genocide and the Holocaust?

The Psychology of Survivorship

World War Z is told by the survivors, and many of them are haunted by decisions they made and those they were not able to save. Survivors' guilt has plagued many who survive catastrophes. What is the responsibility of the survivor? How do survivors cope with the past?

Geology and Survival

The resources supporting a country or society are directly connected to the well-being of the people who live there. Cultural and social forces are shaped by the lands, cities, and environments around us. In *World War Z*, different countries react to the zombie outbreak in different ways utilizing resources to respond to and take advantage of the situation. The islands of Japan and Cuba offer two contrasting views of how geography impacted survival. Who have these situations played out in the real world? How does geography influence our lives?

Genre Fiction and Storytelling

Like all genre fiction, *World War Z* plays with a well established story form (the zombie story). Readers come to the story understanding zombies, and Brooks makes the genre fresh by approaching the narrative as an oral history and thinking about the geopolitical impact of a zombie apocalypse. Genre fiction including detective stories, romance, horror, and some science fiction follows this approach. Why are people drawn to genre fiction? What techniques do authors use to reinvent genres and adapt them over time?

Films made from the Book

World War Z has been transformed into a film, and the film changed the story in significant ways. Many books have made the jump to the big screen, and most of them have been changed along the way. What kinds of books more effectively move to film? Are the factors that make a good book and those that make a good movie the same?

About the One Book Program

For thousands of years, humans have used stories to communicate knowledge about the world. Stories provide contexts for our understanding of facts, emotions, discoveries, history, relationships, and all kinds of human interaction.

For this reason, the Moraine Valley Library and the Moraine Valley Bookstore invite all members of the community to come together to discuss a selected story in the One Book, One College program. Join us as we share knowledge across disciplines, exchange new ideas on useful topics, and enrich our curriculum in new ways.

For more information, contact us at (708) 974-5709 or swanson@morainevalley.edu.

Previous One Book, One College Selections

- [Mary Shelley's Frankenstein \(2004\)](#)
- [Mark Haddon's The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time \(2005-2006\)](#)
- [George Orwell's 1984 \(2006-2007\)](#)
- [The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley \(2007-2008\)](#)
- [Elizabeth Royte's Garbage Land \(2008-2009\)](#)
- [Studs Terkel's Working \(2009-2010\)](#)
- [Rebecca Skloot's The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks \(2010-2011\)](#)
- [Roxanna Saberi's Between Two Worlds \(2011-2012\)](#)

- [Tony Horwitz's Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War \(2012-2013\)](#)

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