

Zombie Author J.R. Angelella Talks Body Parts, Neckties, His Own Zombie Code & More!

Posted on August 2, 2012 by Debi Moore | Dead Central

<http://www.dreadcentral.com/news/36048/zombie-author-j-r-angelella-talks-body-parts-neckties-his-own-zombie-code-and-more/>

Last month we told you about the new book *Zombie* by J.R. Angelella, and it sounded so intriguing we decided to chat a bit with the author about his inspiration for the novel, which includes a studied appreciation for the finer points of zombie cinema, along with a few other topics.

Dread Central: What inspired you to tackle the zombie sub-genre? We heard something about you being held up at gunpoint; can you elaborate?

J.R. Angelella: It's funny that you mention the robbery because I have tried to write about that night for many years and have not been able to in any kind of successful way. Writing can feel so removed emotionally from what an event like that does to a person that the story feels more symbolic of suffering through the experience, rather than really sinking into the reality of it. The robbery is responsible for my simultaneous abhorrence and obsession with violence, specifically in the arts.

The zombie sub-genre really came about at the 11th hour, so to speak. Several editors thought the novel was missing something. I decided to re-read the book from start to finish, something I hadn't really done for a few years. A line jumped out at me (a line that coincidentally no longer exists, if memory serves correct): a description of the Plaids hazing Jeremy, our narrator, by grabbing and lifting him by his legs and arms. Jeremy describes them as zombies wanting to pull him apart limb-by-limb. For some reason this line stopped me. In addition to searching for the missing piece of my novel's puzzle, I wanted to find ways of further connecting Jeremy to his father and really solidifying their bond as a father and son. Then the lights turned on. It just hit me. They were both zombie aficionados. This was their bond.

Zombies were the missing piece.

I spent the next few months researching zombie films, taking notes on scenes that would fit well in the book, examining zombie film story structure, and so on. The zombie sub-genre connected to the content in ways that readers are still bringing to my attention that I had not realized. I did a final rewrite, adding in all of the zombie-rific material, and it was then that I knew it was done.

DC: What role do necktie knots play in *Zombie*? What do the knots—Windsor, Half-Windsor, and Limp Dick—say about the men that wear them? Where did the idea of the knots come from?

JRA: My father taught me to tie a necktie when I attended a private school where neckties were required by the boys. Most of the kids wore clip-ons, but my father was insistent on teaching me to tie my own tie. It was something his father had taught him and he wanted to pass on to me. He taught me the Windsor and Half-Windsor and the Basic knot as a foundation to build on. But he never referred to the Basic in as colorful language as Ballentine calling it a "Limp Dick." My father was fond of the various Windsors, even the Double Windsor, which he had the most difficulty tying. In high school most kids still tied these gnarly little knots that looked more like rope knots you'd find tied between a dock and a boat. Like my father, I preferred the Half-Windsor.

Recently I received an email from a reader who only had one question: Did I make a certain character wear a clip-on tie because his character is gay? Clearly, this was not my intention, delineating a character's sexual preference by the type of necktie he wears, but the various knots presented in the book had her thinking about their possible classifications and meaning and trying to figure out their placement within the novel. I loved it! (NOTE: I wrote back to this analytical reader the truth about the clip-on tie—that the character in question wears a clip-on not because he is gay, but because he is simply lazy.)

An interesting fact to be noted, I think, is that the opening to *Zombie*, the drive to school and Jeremy's first day, was the first thing I wrote for this book and in a single sitting.

DC: Human interaction (or lack thereof) and physicality are described in great detail and to varying effects throughout the book. How do surgery and body parts fit into the landscape of this novel overall?

JRA: I am immensely pleased that you picked up on the varying degrees of human interaction, physicality, and body part aspects to the novel. Before the zombie movies were assigned as the chapter titles in the novel, I named the sections for body parts. Hand. Foot. Tongue. Neck. You get the idea. If you read each section in its entirety, you should be able to pinpoint which body part that particular section used to be. Once I worked out the zombie motif, renaming the sections after Jeremy's favorite films was a no-brainer.

Surgery, body parts, physicality, contact—these are all overtly present throughout the book and act as a trail leading us to the house on Tiller Drive. People are shocked or surprised by the ending. But re-read the first few chapters. Look back at Jeremy's journey...I don't believe readers should see the end coming (if they do, then I haven't done my job), but a novel called "*Zombie*" is not really bound to end well. Can you name a zombie movie where nothing gory, violent, or bad happens? I thought a lot about the biblical passage Matthew 5: 29–30 when I was writing. It states: "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." It seemed appropriate for all characters involved, the question being: How do we remove those unwanted parts of ourselves that are woven into the fabric of our being? Or, more importantly: Is there way to redeem ourselves from ourselves?

DC: *Zombie* is a mash-up of genres. Part classic zombie story, part coming-of-age narrative. What do you offer especially for the horror fan, and are you concerned at all about using too much of a "kitchen sink" approach?

JRA: I laughed when I first read this question because there is an old tradition where you place the name my home town, Baltimore, in front of a "kitchen sink-esque" recipe. Baltimore Chicken. Baltimore Omelet. Baltimore Stew. Baltimore Sloppy Joe Surprise. The idea is that you just throw any ingredients you have on hand into the dish and a "Baltimore" dish it becomes.

Needless to say, that wasn't my approach to writing *Zombie*. Most of my fiction seems to be genre-mixing, no matter how hard I try to stick within a single genre. I love so many different genres that I am always wanting to borrow a little from here and a little from there and see what I come up with. It's what keeps me interested because if I'm not interested, then a reader absolutely won't be either.

I'll admit that later on in the editing stages, my brilliant editor, Mark Doten at Soho Press, helped to dial in and focus the individual genre aspects, making them each sharper and braided together more seamlessly.

Zombie definitely comes across as your typical coming-of-age story but quickly morphs into something else. You start off on one journey and end up on a completely different one. One bookseller who read an advanced reader copy said, "It starts out as a Wes Anderson film and ends up a Wes Craven film." That made a lot of sense to me. It straddles the line of a family drama, romance, addiction narrative and a zombie horror nightmare. The book makes few, if any, apologies for its content and, I hope, gives the horror fans exactly what they would seek out in a straightforward horror novel. One of my favorite aspects to the book is all of the zombie references—some notable, some obscure. The beauty of this book is that while titled "*Zombie*," it welcomes fans of any horror genre. Trust me. The ending does not disappoint.

DC: Given the title, isn't it a bit of a risk not to have any actual zombies in the book? Or are there maybe a few in there after all?

JRA: It is absolutely a risk to title a book *Zombie* when it's not really a zombie book at all. But this just isn't a brain-chewing living dead book. It's more.

In *Zombie* every character fights some self-reflexive, cannibal-like demon, whether it be an addiction or their own naiveté or ill-fated belief. Some characters attempt to overcome. Some characters do not overcome. Some characters' storylines are left unfinished, as they are still struggling to overcome. In a way these could be individual zombies. Just not dead ones. Then again, maybe not.

Technically, I suppose, it could be argued that there are undead zombies in the book, if you count the numerous zombie movies that the narrator watches and all of the scenes he recounts, applying them to his own life.

I guess the best way to answer your questions is with a question: Yes?

DC: What are some of your favorite zombie movies? What is it about them that you like? What are your least favorite?

JRA: Gosh. I watched so many. Too many. I love all of those mentioned in the book. *Night of the Living Dead* is probably one of my top five favorite films of all time. I really dislike the more schlocky zombie movies with bad synthesized musical scores and lazy special effects. Films that didn't quite make it to the book that really made an impact on me were *Deadgirl* and *Dead Snow*. Neither is for the faint of heart. *Deadgirl* is a slick take on the high school drama that takes a severely wicked and unsettling turn when our teenage boys discover a, well, dead girl in an abandoned warehouse. *Dead Snow* is more fun—medical students vacationing in a cabin on a mountain discover buried treasure that belongs to an army of zombie Nazi soldiers who come to collect. The rest of the film you can probably imagine. Probably the goriest film I've ever seen. Both were unsettling for different reasons. Must see movies for zombie fans, but unless you like films about insanely disturbed high school kids or hyper-gore fest films about Nazis, then you should probably skip these.

DC: Let's say you are alone in the house and asleep upstairs in your bedroom when the zombie apocalypse happens. What's your "code"? Weapon of choice? Who do you want on your team?

JRA: Wow. This is the first time I have ever been asked this. I don't know. Um. There are so many factors to take into consideration. First of all, it depends how humans become infected. Is it blood-to-blood contact? A bite? Or do we just have to stay alive and not die because in death is when we become zombies, rising from the ground? Or are we going way back to the hoodoo/voodoo idea of zombies and people just put into a trance? I think once I figure these rules out, I can make a more educated guess.

For the sake of argument, let's just say we're dealing with blood-to-blood infection, like in 28 Days Later. Under these circumstances heavy artillery is ideal. The farther away you remain the better chances you have of survival. (I mean, don't get bit would probably be my first and final code.). Also, fortified transportation—preferably something with 4-wheel drive, some kind of bumper-guardrail, and big ass tires. Generally speaking, moving about in groups or large numbers is never a good idea and will absolutely box you into a situation that will get you bit. (See my only code referenced above.) I would most likely remain solo, although family would be allowed to stay with me so long as they don't get all crazy and hysterical on me. My main goal would be to fight my way to the nearest body of water and commandeer a boat. In order for this to work effectively, however, I would also need to stock up on gasoline, food, and ammunition. The water would prove to be the best place, in my opinion, to seek solace from a zombie apocalypse, at least to kill time until things settled down. Zombies aren't traditionally known for their swimming abilities.