

Can Brad Pitt save us from the (secular) apocalypse?

By [Kelly J. Baker](#)

July 16, 2013

In the opening scenes of [World War Z](#), a news montage assaults the viewer. Clips document epidemics, wolves, global warming, reality television, pundits and others forms of dangerous nature. They evoke a world in seeming decline, in which one pivotal moment could lead to the global disaster from which we might not recover. Chaos and inevitable decline set the tone for the film.

But what ends us in *World War Z* are zombies. They appear from an outbreak of an unknown disease. Once bitten, humans turn into creatures seeking to spread infection. These zombies are quick and resourceful. They conquer walls by piling on top of one another; they take down helicopters. Strikingly, the zombies contort, twist, and make sounds similar to the velociraptors from *Jurassic Park*, complete with clicking jaws. The apocalypse occurs, with zombies squarely to blame.

Zombie apocalypses appear [everywhere](#) these days: [television](#), [video games](#), [smart phone apps](#), [5K runs](#), [ad campaigns](#), [political bumper stickers](#). And this is only one example of the burgeoning presence of secular apocalypticism since 1945.

Prior to World War II and the emergence of the atomic bomb, religious apocalypticism was common: divine intervention ends the current world and creates a new one. The corruption of the current age dissolves in divine-made catastrophe, and the faithful share in the new millennium.

Folklorist Daniel Wojcik catalogs how the possibility of total human annihilation via nuclear weapons created a *secular* apocalypticism, in which fatalism reigns. It becomes only a matter of time before humans will destroy other humans. The end is near. There is no intercession. We cannot stop it; we cannot be redeemed.

Unsurprisingly, much of zombie media fits the archetype of secular apocalypticism. [George Romero's \*Night of the Living Dead\*](#), the film that renewed the fascination with zombies in the later 20th century, is not a hopeful film. Zombies attack, humans turn against one another, and in the final scenes—spoiler alert—the African American protagonist is shot. Zombie films skew toward bleak visions of humans as

depraved. Redemption appears elusive at best.

This is why *World War Z* was so interesting to me. I loved Max Brooks's book, on which the film is very loosely based. (I agree with Brooks that zombies are [not good fun](#)). Relying on an oral history model, Brooks unflinchingly catalogs the devastation of the war against zombies from the perspective of human survivors. The book is stunning social commentary on geopolitics, "survival at all costs" models of living, and the pressing danger of other humans.

The film scraps most of Brooks' smart narrative and focuses instead on Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt), a former U.N. investigator, as he searches for patient zero. Rather than recreate the complicated and ambiguous stories that Brooks compiles, *World War Z* ramps up action and suspense while providing a compelling focus on Lane's family. Lane manages to survive the hairiest of situations while those around him die at an alarming rate. (I couldn't decide if he was a jinx or just incredibly lucky.)

Yet *World War Z* doesn't neatly fit the model of fatalism so prevalent in zombie media, the model I have come to expect. Instead, the stoic Lane emerges as almost a superhero as he jets around the world to figure out how the epidemic started. More importantly, he is a white, American, male savior who almost single-handedly finds a solution to the zombie plague. Of course, the supporting cast offers the requisite gesture to diversity. Yet Lane is the savior who would willingly risk his own life for all of us.

In the end, we are redeemed, but what does this redemption tell us? While I could appreciate the film for its big-budget effects and intriguing storyline, I found myself frustrated with Gerry Lane as the one who saves the world. Max Brooks recognized the need for global cooperation as the way to survive the zombie apocalypse. But the film relies upon a tired narrative in which one white man offers redemption. Fatalism, at least, offers more complexity.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).*