

VAMPIRE APOCALYPSE: A BIOCULTURAL CRITIQUE OF
RICHARD MATHESON'S *I AM LEGEND*

RICHARD MATHESON SEEDED SEVERAL weird fish in the deep and dark waters of the American myth pool, not least as a prominent screenwriter for the legendary 1960s TV series *The Twilight Zone*. *I Am Legend*, a post-apocalyptic science fiction/horror novel, published in 1954 and set in 1976, remains one of his best known works.¹ It shows up persistently on “Best of Horror” lists and is generally regarded as a milestone in modern Gothic fiction. What is it about this novel that has invested it with canonical status? It tells a surpassingly bleak story, one that seems to encode very specific and largely outdated cultural anxieties. And as prophecy, it falls rather flat: Matheson depicts a vampire holocaust, and the seventies came and went with no noticeable increase in the population of vampires, except perhaps on television. So why should anyone want to read this novel?

The historian David J. Skal rightly observes that “very little about the underlying structure of horror images really changes” over time.² *I Am Legend* is the product of a troubled man in troubled times, at once intensely personal and highly dependent on local, sociohistorical anxieties. Yet, the story retains its power to engage and to disturb in contexts far removed from that of its production.³ I think an evolutionary perspective offers the best explanation for the underlying continuity in horror fiction. It also offers the best way to get at the continued fascination Matheson’s novel exercises on readers. Using an analytic scheme put into play by Joseph Carroll, Brian Boyd, and other evolutionary critics, I get a fix on the novel by triangulating between universal human fears, local cultural conditions, and peculiarities of individual identity.⁴ I take account of Matheson’s biography, isolating the fears that haunt him

personally, and locate his personal, individual fears in the larger context of the Cold War USA. And finally, I locate both the biography and the cultural context within the larger context of our evolved human nature. Matheson's protagonist is caught simultaneously in the desert of isolation and the jungle of predation, and plot and situation in *I Am Legend* give compelling symbolic form to universal human fears.

I

Speculative fiction such as fantasy, science fiction and supernatural horror fiction characteristically proceeds from a radical "What if . . ." premise. What if there were magic? What if electronic computers had genuine cognition? What if your town were overrun by flesh-eating zombies? Obviously, then, speculative fiction characteristically does not mimetically reflect the day-to-day concerns of most people.

Science fiction on the one hand and fantasy and supernatural horror fiction on the other may seem intellectually opposed. Science fiction is by definition predicated on a scientific world view, whereas fantasy and supernatural horror usually subvert or challenge the scientific world view; they are often dedicated to a pre-scientific, animistic outlook dominated by magic, spirits, and uncanny causalities. Nevertheless, these genres spring from and to some degree satisfy the same imaginative impulse, the impulse to expand one's experiential horizons beyond the mundane and the actual. For example, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* has been publishing stories from these distinct genres since 1949, apparently meeting with no conflict of interests in its readership. Likewise, late-nineteenth-century science fiction was usually called "scientific romance" and was generally seen to be more closely related to the imaginative *romance* (including what we today would call fantasy) than to the mimetic *novel*.

Speculative fiction extrapolates from ordinary, realistic anxieties and fantasies or presents them in metaphoric guise. The pertinent question is, since androids do not exist, why would anyone care whether they dream of electric sheep or not? To answer that question, we must understand the psychological source of readers' fascination with them. And to understand psychology, we must understand the adaptive evolutionary process that gave rise to the human mind.⁵

One striking and presumably unique aspect of human mental architecture is decoupled cognition, our capacity for mentally producing and hosting elaborate imagined worlds.⁶ Decoupled cognition gives rise to a

range of imaginative behaviors, from pretend play in young children to futuristic science fiction stories. It is perhaps unsurprising that natural selection has favored an ability to construct imaginative scenarios,⁷ but an ability to go from imaginations of future food sources and hunting strategies to imaginations of life on Mars and zombie invasions is more striking.

However, not each and every single one of the literally endless imaginative scenarios that could be produced by the human mind would have the power to fascinate a substantial number of persons: the *what ifs* that interest people are severely limited, and so is the possibility space of viable speculative narratives. As Brett Cooke observes, since science fiction “so readily outruns human experience, it typically probes the limits of human interest.”⁸ In turn, human interest is circumscribed by our evolutionary heritage.⁹ *I Am Legend* offers a speculative account of what happens when basic human needs are suppressed. Matheson portrays the struggles of a man completely cut off from fellow human beings and trapped in a severely threatening environment. In this way, Matheson taps into an intuitive understanding of human nature—an evolved folk psychology—to make his tale believable and interesting.

II

The story of *I Am Legend* is fairly simple. In 1976, Robert Neville appears to be the last survivor of a cataclysmic vampire pandemic that has also claimed the lives of his wife and daughter. Immune to the vampire virus and barricading himself in his Los Angeles home, Neville spends his days killing sleeping vampires and comatose infected humans, all the while struggling with deep loneliness and dejection. His systematic, yet frequently frustrated, investigation of the vampire virus offers him some purpose in life. After almost three years of bleak, solitary existence, Neville miraculously discovers another survivor, Ruth. However, Ruth is infected with the vampire virus and has been sent to spy on Neville. She is part of a group of infected people who have managed to stay alive and keep the virus somewhat at bay with pills. Ruth and her people are establishing a new and brutal society. Because Neville is the last member of the old race and has killed many victims of the vampire plague, he is captured and condemned to public execution.

Matheson is routinely credited with being a major factor in the transition of the horror genre from Gothic exoticism and Lovecraftian fantasy to modern, urban horror. Partly for this reason, the horror critic Douglas

E. Winter calls Matheson “perhaps the most influential writer of horror fiction of his generation.”¹⁰ The move from the distant to the near is, very roughly and with numerous qualifications, the historical trajectory of the genre: from Walpole’s outlandish, exotic extravaganzas in his 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto* to major contemporary horror writers such as Stephen King who let loose their high-powered, ghoulish imaginations on Main Street, USA. Matheson produced a staggering number of horror tales in the 1950s, turned his talents mainly to screenwriting in the 1960s, and only returned to the genre in 1971 with *Hell House*, after which he basically left horror behind.

When *I Am Legend* was published in 1954, 28-year-old Richard Matheson was establishing his own nuclear family and struggling to make ends meet. As he has said in an interview, “there were bad years. One of my anxieties is financial insecurity. My theme in those years [the early fifties] was of a man, isolated and alone, and assaulted on all sides by everything you could imagine” (*FF*, p. 42). This anxiety, coupled with a persistent streak of paranoia—Matheson’s children used to call him “Mr. Paranoia” (*FF*, p. 41)—he put to use imaginatively and maybe therapeutically in his early, surpassingly paranoid and claustrophobic fiction. Witness the utter alienation of the eponymous *The Shrinking Man* (1956) who shrinks by a seventh of an inch a day and is eventually trapped in a basement, unable to climb the stairs, and preyed upon by a small spider which to him looms gigantic. As the author has pointed out, “the leitmotif of all my work . . . is as follows: *The individual isolated in a threatening world, attempting to survive.*”¹¹

This type of biographical causation may explain why Matheson turned to horror fiction, but it does not explain the deep structure of the horror stories that he produced, for example why his imagination latched onto certain images (like vampires) and not the literally countless alternatives. To understand the deep structure of horror fiction, we need to understand the deep past of our own species.

Fear is probably the key word in Matheson’s work, and the defining affective feature of horror fiction. It is a striking fact of human anxiety that the things we fear are non-randomly distributed: humans acquire fear not just of any old thing, but of things dangerous in our evolutionary past.¹² That does not mean that we are born pre-programmed with a completely inflexible fear system. Like so many other human capacities (such as language), the innate fear system depends on interaction with the environment for its development and optimal functioning. This

makes sense in an evolutionary perspective, since our environments have been changing rapidly and frequently during the last several tens of thousands of years, especially due to human migration.¹³ Thus, while certain dangers have remained constant in various environments, others have changed. The threat from snakes, spiders and other people—so often the objects of phobias—probably constituted a constant selective pressure, whereas a variety of large mammals have preyed on humans during our evolutionary history. Hence, fierce predators with sharp teeth and claws play a prominent role in modern horror fiction, even as they are now, in industrialized civilization, relegated to zoo cages and televised nature programming.

The abstract fear of death can be fleshed out in locally specific, context-dependent ways. In one context it's the fear of a large carnivore attacking at night; in another, the fear of bombings. The adaptive fear response is largely generalized, and the physiological fear response is triggered by a range of diverse threats, from thunderstorms to predators, from darkness to social separation.¹⁴ *I Am Legend* obviously extrapolates from the kind of anxieties that grow particularly well in the shadow of a mushroom cloud. The fear of nuclear and biological warfare looms over much of Matheson's nineteen-fifties work, and in *I Am Legend*, Neville and his wife speculate in a flashback on a possible relationship between nuclear bombings and the vampire virus, or rather, mutated insects as disease carriers (*IAL*, p. 45). So what was the young Richard Matheson afraid of? Insofar as *I Am Legend* is a window into his psyche,¹⁵ he was afraid of nuclear war, of predation, of being all alone in a dangerous world. While the first fear is a highly context-dependent one, the second two generalize across cultures and times.

In *I Am Legend*, Matheson translates his fears into an emotionally saturated narrative. The novel's strong internal focalization with the protagonist, Robert Neville, and its use of free indirect discourse as a window into his thoughts, emotions and inner struggles, all work toward facilitating empathy with Neville. As Robert Bloch has observed, "Matheson's skill in creating empathy lends special strength to his work." Bloch points to Matheson's "own sensitivity to the fears and innermost imaginings which are common to us all,"¹⁶ invoking a folk-psychological conception of human nature to explain Matheson's skill at engaging readers. Matheson's fears and anxieties are not so idiosyncratic after all, and they potentially reach across cultural and temporal borders.

III

I Am Legend has been treated to scattered ideological readings and commentary, for example by Kathy Davis Patterson. Typically for this sort of criticism, Patterson reduces the novel to subtext and ideological pyrotechnics. It is not clear from her essay why the novel has captured the attention of a single reader beyond Patterson herself. *I Am Legend* is not a crypto-ideological tract; it's a story, and literary criticism that loses sight of the peculiar characteristics of stories has very limited explanatory power.

Patterson reads *I Am Legend* as an uneasy attempt to negotiate racial anxieties and the vampires as thinly disguised African-Americans. As she writes, the novel "contains a very clear, racially charged subtext" that makes "racial difference and vampirism synonymous."¹⁷ To be sure, the vampire is an apt metaphor for the other, the mother, the subaltern, the liminal, for the allure of death, for fear of death, desire for immortality, fear of immortality, for immigration, the phallus, the vagina, capitalism, for colonization, female sexuality, male sexuality, amorphous sexuality, and probably much else.

Yet we should not lose sight of the vampire's literal presence: the vampire is, first and foremost, a *predator*, an ontological freak that demands not just the characters' blood, but the reader's attention. As the author Peter Straub has observed, the stock characters of horror fiction have a certain "metaphoric juiciness," yet they *demand* to be taken literally.¹⁸ The vampire strikes both cerebrally (as metaphor) and viscerally (as a predatory, counterintuitive menace).

Predation is the central theme in horror fiction. Being threatened by powerful forces, whether ghosts, chainsaw-wielding maniacs, or vampires, is a powerful motif, probably because the selection pressure from predation has been a ubiquitous fact of human existence for millennia.¹⁹ However, *I Am Legend* is slightly atypical as a horror story in that the horror of the monster is pushed somewhat to the rear. The vampires prowl relentlessly in the periphery, craving Neville's blood, but the reader is not treated to lengthy descriptions of the bloodsuckers. We do learn, however, that the vampires are cold and that they have white fangs and bad breath (*IAL*, p. 34). The vampires play an integral role in the narrative, but they share the stage with a host of other, more abstract monsters.

IV

Of particular salience in *I Am Legend* are the motifs of being isolated, sexually frustrated, and preyed upon. Initially, sexual frustration is foregrounded. At night, when the vampires attack his house, Neville is especially troubled by the female vampires: "It was the women [vampires] who made it so difficult," he reflects, "the women posing like lewd puppets in the night on the possibility that he'd see them and decide to come out." He attempts to shut the nightmarish outside world out by immersing himself in literature and music, but all the "knowledge in [the books in his bookcase] couldn't put out the fires in him; all the words of centuries couldn't end the wordless, mindless craving of his flesh" (*IAL*, p. 7). Neville's sexual frustration is in fact so powerful that it very nearly gets him killed when he ventures outside his house in a blind fury at nighttime.

Fundamentally, Neville's need for human company remains unfulfilled. When he visits the grave of his wife, whom he has lost to the virus, he is overcome with dejection: "[I am] still alive, he thought, heart beating senselessly, veins running without point, bones and muscle and tissue all alive and functioning with no purpose at all" (*IAL*, p. 26). After about eight months' solitude, Neville's life is a "barren, cheerless trial" (*IAL*, p. 85), and yet he notes how he has "always, in spite of reason . . . clung to the hope that someday he would find someone like himself—a man, a woman, a child, it didn't matter. Sex was fast losing its meaning without the endless prodding of mass hypnosis. Loneliness he still felt" (*IAL*, p. 91).

This, the loss of love and companionship, is the central concern of the novel. As Neville is prowling an empty library, he imagines a maiden librarian cleaning up the place. "To die, he thought, never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one's embrace," to become a vampire, doomed to "sterile, awful wanderings," all "without knowing what it was to love and be loved"—that itself "was a tragedy more terrible than becoming a vampire" (*IAL*, p. 68). This deep need for sociality is exactly what they cannot satisfy, and their non-social behavior is a crucial feature which I suspect that Patterson's ideological critique cannot account cogently for. The vampires never even talk to one another (*IAL*, p. 55). Later in the narrative, when Neville sees another apparently normal human being for the first time in three years, he at first writes it off as a hallucination: "The man who died of thirst saw mirages of lakes. Why shouldn't a man who thirsted for companionship see a woman walking

in the sun?" (*IAL*, pp. 110–11). Metaphorically, Matheson suggests that the need for companionship is as real, as fundamental, and as strong as the need for sustenance.

For members of a social species such as ours, the horror of isolation is very real and very rational. Solitary isolation in the criminal justice system is considered an especially severe form of punishment. And a human infant dumped into the world would have slim chances of surviving on its own: at best, it would grow up severely psychologically impaired, as the cases of feral children demonstrate. Other people have for millions of years been a crucial component of our species' ecological niche; we are highly adapted to social life and depend on culture for our mental development.²⁰ Sociality is and has been crucial to human ontogenetic and phylogenetic development. We depend on other people not just for reproduction and survival, but for psychological and emotional growth and fulfillment. This is the common-sense observation that is conveyed by *I Am Legend*; imaginatively and more powerfully than any psychology textbook could ever hope to accomplish.

When there are no humans around, apparently even a dog will suffice. Neville chances upon a scraggly canine and spends an inordinate amount of time trying to befriend the creature—after all, he could have spent the time trying to find a cure for the virus or strengthening his barricades—only to lose it to the vampire virus. The dog momentarily saves Neville from a self-destructive descent into alcoholic despair: "To come across a living being, after all this time to find a companion. . . . To Robert Neville that dog was the peak of a planet's evolution" (*IAL*, p. 84). For a while, at least, Neville's attempts to befriend the dog overshadow his prior *raison d'être*, his attempts to understand the vampire virus.

Like all other humans, Neville struggles to make sense of the world around him, to discern patterns and collect information relevant to his fitness.²¹ This quest for information, the occasional frenzy of discovery, is what sets off the plot of *I Am Legend*, and along with the hope of finding a companion it is what sustains Neville throughout the narrative. Following a breakthrough in his researches, we learn that for the "first time since the dog had died he smiled and felt within himself a quiet, well-modulated satisfaction. There were still many things to learn, but not so many as before" (*IAL*, pp. 106–7). The mysterious cause of vampirism sustains suspense throughout most of the narrative; indeed, much fiction is characterized by a quest for knowledge, an attempt to understand something which at the outset is poorly understood, whether it be a murder or a vampire pandemic.

The story of *I Am Legend* is highly unlikely, yet Matheson uses his tacit understanding of human nature to craft a psychologically realistic protagonist. It is striking that in the face of fierce attacks from the walking undead, Neville listens to music, puts works of art on his walls, and watches motion pictures on his home projector. As an author, Matheson no doubt intuitively understands the deep psychological need for art that probably everybody experiences: art is a human universal, essential to human nature.²² After a particularly violent attack on his house, Neville sets about fixing the broken generator and, significantly, putting up a mural on his living room wall, and then, when the work is done, sits down to listen to Mozart (*IAL*, p. 39).

V

The paradox of Neville's isolation is, of course, that he is not alone at all. By populating the narrative universe of *I Am Legend* with vampires (rather than, say, portray a single man in an empty world), Matheson is able to offer the vampire as a metaphor for human depravity as well as meditate on salient contemporary social issues. The vampires are at once sub-human and eerily like normal people: like Neville, who in various phases is driven by monomaniacal obsessions (for companionship, for survival, for knowledge), the vampires are driven by *their* basic needs ("Their need was their only motivation," *IAL*, p. 11). Matheson thus seems to suggest that the vampires are dangerously similar to normal human beings in certain respects (and vice versa). As Neville thinks when he is about to slay a comatose victim of the vampire virus, "but for some affliction he didn't understand, these people were the same as he" (*IAL*, p. 28).

It is reasonable to regard sub- or para-human horror monsters as meditations on the human: zombies and body-snatchers, for example, offer apt metaphors for the masses and mindless humanity, whereas the vampire—a vastly overdetermined figure—has somewhat different connotations. The horror critic Mark Jancovich identifies a group of 1950s horror texts, *I Am Legend* included, that are characterized by a "preoccupation with the figure of the outsider, and their experience of alienation, estrangement and powerlessness."²³ As he notes, the concept of conformity in 1950s USA was not just highly prevalent in social discourse, but highly ambivalent. The paradoxical motif of being alone among others is one that finds currency in a paranoid Cold War cultural climate. Via flashbacks, we get glimpses of Robert

Neville's conventional, lower-middle-class life with his wife, daughter, and factory job before the plague struck. When the pandemic is at its highest, Robert Neville is dragged against his will to a religious wake in a significant scene (the only one where he directly interacts with many other people): "He was surrounded now by people, hundreds of them, swelling and gushing around him like waters closing in" (*IAL*, p. 102). This "wild revival meeting" (*IAL*, p. 104) provokes panic in Neville and offers an unattractive alternative to the vampire society that is to come, and once again underscores the point that alienation does not just mean to be alone.

Even the terror of isolation is somewhat culturally modulated. In *I Am Legend*, it finds uneasy expression in Matheson's ambivalent portrayal of the outsider. Neville's own nuclear family is portrayed as the ideal state; on-the-fly religious wakes and vampire hordes alike are not viable alternatives. Even at the end of the narrative, when a shaky societal order is being reconstructed by the new order of infected people, Neville remains the outsider, unable and unwilling to participate in the brand new vampire world. It is thus that he meets his death with a measure of peace. At this point, all hope is irretrievably lost: Neville is wounded, imprisoned, scheduled for execution before a terrified crowd. These are people to whom Neville is "an invisible specter who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones" (*IAL*, p. 160). Neville is the last man, and true companionship is forever beyond his reach: "Robert Neville looked out over the new people of the earth. He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like the vampires, he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed." This is when Neville swallows his suicide pills, and these are the final words of the story: "Full circle, he thought while the final lethargy crept into his limbs. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend" (*IAL*, p. 161).

Although the narrative trajectory of *I Am Legend* follows a relentless descent into despair and finally death, the ending of the novel is curiously uplifting. The narrative tension that grows out of the frustration of the protagonist's adaptive needs, coupled with a slim but present hope that he finds eventual consummation, is finally deflated. The closing line offers the reader a thrill of recognition: it is here, finally, that the puzzling meaning of the novel's title becomes clear. Moreover, we finally see Neville at peace with himself and the world, even elevated to the stuff of legend. As Brett Cooke notes, following Richard Dawkins, people can leave two kinds of legacies behind: genes or memes. Cooke

has examined a number of science fiction narratives and found that even when the extinction of the race is immanent, characters are anxious to leave behind their culture, their memes. As Cooke says, “memeic immortality is often sufficient for us. It may be all we have.”²⁴ And so it is, in the end, all that Robert Neville has.

VI

I Am Legend is the product of an anxious artistic mind working in an anxious cultural climate. However, it is also a playful take on an old archetype, the vampire (the reader is even treated to Neville’s reading and put-down of Stoker’s *Dracula*). Matheson goes to great lengths to rationalize or naturalize the vampire myth, transplanting the monster from the otherworldly realms of folklore and Victorian supernaturalism to the test tube of medical inquiry and rational causation. With *I Am Legend*, Matheson instituted the germ theory of vampirism, a take on the old archetype which has since been tackled by other writers (notably, Dan Simmons in *Children of the Night* from 1992). Neville himself becomes an amateur scientist, conducting experiments on vampires, studying biology textbooks, and using microscopes to isolate the vampire bacillus. Thus, *I Am Legend* straddles the horror and science fiction genres by providing cognitive validation for the novel’s paradigmatic *novum* (its central novelty or innovation),²⁵ the vampires.

As the historian Paul Barber has convincingly argued, the modern vampire has its origin as a pre-scientific explanation for infectious disease. Before the germ theory of disease, a vampire was as good an explanation for the outbreak of lethal disease (such as tuberculosis) as any, and when villagers exhumed the first victim of the disease and found a bloated, ruddy corpse with fresh blood at the mouth, it was not unreasonable to presume this lively corpse to be the original cause of the disease. When a subsequent staking of the corpse produced a protracted groan from the presumed vampire, the case was settled. Of course, these uncanny phenomena all have a rational explanation: corpses bloat and bleed as a result of decomposition, and a staking can force gases hitherto trapped in the body envelope past the larynx and cause a groan-like sound.²⁶ A medically poor understanding of natural decomposition processes, coupled with a human tendency to attribute agency to the inexplicable, is very likely the originary cause of the vampire figure.

The contagious aspect of vampirism remains an essential characteristic of the archetype. For example, Count Dracula in Stoker’s 1897 novel

threatens not to maim and maul his victims, but rather to infect them with his disease. This is why Dracula goes to London with its “teeming millions”: to “create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons.”²⁷ The old count is essentially a disease carrier and may as such provoke in the reader a strong disgust response, which has its evolutionary origin in pathogen avoidance; he certainly does so in the characters of the novel.²⁸ In fact, one of the most disturbing and dramatically effective qualities of several traditional horror monsters—vampires, werewolves, and zombies—is their contagiousness. Characters battle not just ferocious beasts, but monstrous germs, as well. However, in *I Am Legend* this aspect is somewhat muted in the novel’s emotional impact on the reader; we do not mirror the terror of a character in imminent danger of contagion, as Neville is immune to the vampire disease. Yet the reader is not immune, and while the vampires are largely nuisances to Neville, who has bigger fish to fry (that is, his quests to find conspecifics and to understand), the reader is probably repulsed by the bloodsuckers as vile and aggressive disease carriers.

While Matheson could have opted for a naturalistic take on the themes of *I Am Legend*, he chose to dress his story of the last man alive in speculative guise. Presumably, because his mind is drawn to the exceptional, the counter-empirical, the supernatural (in his later years, Matheson has penned a number of metaphysical and parapsychological works of nonfiction), and also because the vampire is a powerful figure, one that seems to perennially interest readers and writers. The vampire has adapted cunningly and with panache to ever-changing cultural ecologies over the centuries, yet never losing its essential predatory nature and its defining violation of biology, its undeadness. The hyperattractive vampire males of *Twilight* and *True Blood* are a far cry from the repulsive bloodsuckers of folklore, but maybe not so far removed from their Romantic ancestors who are definitely mad, bad, and dangerous to know, but also dangerously attractive and Byronically compelling. And that is arguably the most fascinating aspect of the vampire archetype: the vampire is, in and of itself, interesting. It violates our intuitive expectations of biological agents, and blurs the taxonomic line between human and animal. The vampire all but demands our attention.

To Matheson, engaging the interest of readers is of paramount importance. As he has remarked in an interview: “When I went to college and took writing courses, they would always talk about the distinctions between the pulp writer and the slick writer and the art writer. I came to realize that was ridiculous. There are only interesting stories and dull

stories, no matter where they're printed."²⁹ In an essay on speculative fiction and science fiction in particular, Matheson explains how these genres allow a writer to "write a story that actually says something about people that actually mean something," how the genres allow the writer to cry out his or her indignations, but only as long as they are garbed in "colorful, interesting clothes." As he writes, "I have sold science-fiction stories about adultery and pregnancy, about sex and old age and dope addiction and insane frustration. I have sold anti-war stories, anti-race prejudice stories, social comment stories and even delved into metaphysics. This is not a brag for me but for science fiction. It not only gave me a chance to write these stories but compelled me to give them an interest they would have lacked otherwise."³⁰

As the late science fiction critic and writer Thomas M. Disch has noted, a "theory can be controverted; a myth persuades at gut level."³¹ With *I Am Legend*, Matheson thus reigns in the power of myth to deliver his anxieties; this may be part of the reason why his story transcends the time and place of its production. Narrative is, by its very nature, more engaging than any theoretical text.³²

VII

As Joseph Carroll writes, the "distinguishing characteristic of literature is that it creates an imaginative order in which simulated experience can take place."³³ This is the peculiar power of narrative: that it allows readers (or listeners, or viewers) to immerse themselves, for a time, into an emotionally saturated world where realistic figments of a storyteller's imagination can walk alongside ghosts and vampires. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides assert that with "fiction unleashing our reactions to potential lives and realities, we feel more richly and adaptatively about what we have not actually experienced."³⁴ This observation extends to lives and realities that are in no way potential; lives and realities that never could take place, or that have very little chance of taking place, such as a worldwide vampire pandemic. Yet the storyteller hardly cares about statistical probability: what matters is that his or her listeners stay for the duration of the telling. The really good stories, the ones that continue to be told, are the ones that have a peculiar resonance with human nature. Matheson, by accurately and minutely describing Robert Neville's reactions, thoughts and emotions, allows his readership to engage with his story and to imagine what it's like to be alone in a hostile world. Thus, Matheson affirms the value of sociality, and at the

same time voices his ambivalence toward other people (as potential companions *and* potential threats) and also his own culture of conformity, in which the individualist—so often the protagonist of Matheson's fiction—can never truly fit in.

Matheson seems to have hit a live nerve in the fevered American Cold War imagination with his 'new' brand of domestic horror. His mid-century tales in particular are testament to his sympathetic understanding of salient and widespread cultural anxieties, yet the fact that his stories continue to be read are testament to his profound understanding of human nature.

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1. Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (London: Gollancz, 2006); hereafter *IAL*.
2. David J. Skal, *The Monster Show* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 23.
3. The novel has been translated into many languages (including Italian, Norwegian, Japanese, Serbo-Croatian, and Spanish), it has been adapted for the screen three times (in 1964 as *The Last Man on Earth*, in 1971 as *The Omega Man*, and in 2007 as *I Am Legend*) and, anecdotally, a class of Danish undergraduate students to whom I taught the novel in 2009 engaged with it enthusiastically and with great absorption. As further testament to the novel's pop-canonical status, it is even, at the time of writing, being parodied as *I Am Virgin* (2010), about the last virgin in a world beset by sex-crazed vampires.
4. See for instance Joseph Carroll, "The Cuckoo's History: Human Nature in *Wuthering Heights*," *Philosophy and Literature* 32 (2008): 241–57; Joseph Carroll, "The Human Revolution and the Adaptive Function of Literature," *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006): 33–49; Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Charles Duncan, "Darkly Darwinian Parables: Ian McEwan and *The Comfort of Strangers*," *Evolutionary Review: Art, Science, Culture* 1 (2010): 120–24; and Nancy Easterlin, "Hans Christian Andersen's Fish Out of Water," *Philosophy and Literature* 25 (2001): 251–77.
5. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, "The Past Explains the Present: Emotional Adaptations and the Structure of Ancestral Environments," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 11 (1990): 375–424.
6. See for example Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, "Consider the Source: The Evolution of Adaptations for Decoupling and Metarepresentation," in *Metarepresentations: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Dan Sperber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 53–115.

7. Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of Mind: A Search for the Origins of Art, Religion and Science* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996).
8. Brett Cooke, "Biopoetics: The New Synthesis," in *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts*, ed. Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner (Lexington, Kentucky: ICUS, 1999), p. 18.
9. Cooke, "On the Evolution of Interest: Cases in Serpent Art," in *Evolution of the Psyche*, ed. David H. Rosen and Michael C. Luebbert (Westport: Praeger, 1999), pp. 150–68.
10. In Douglas E. Winter, *Faces of Fear: Encounters with the Creators of Modern Horror* (London: Pan Books, 1990), p. 38; hereafter *FF*.
11. Richard Matheson, "Dream/Press Introduction 1989," in *Richard Matheson: Collected Stories*, vol. 1, ed. Stanley Wiater (Colorado Springs: Gauntlet Press, 2003), p. 7.
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