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How to Survive the Zombie Reckoning

Associate Professor Paul Bender, an expert in post-apocalyptic fiction, shares insights from resourcefulness to group liability sure to be handy for any collapse of civilization



June 11, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Scoff at the idea of a zombie apocalypse, but if you take the undead out of the situation the story depicts a plausible scenario of civilization’s collapse that could come as a result of a deadly superbug or the much-hyped electromagnetic pulse portended to bring about the end of the industrial world.

Despite all the creative licenses taken in the literary and film genre, there’s a lot that can be gleaned from zombie tales in terms of adaptive resourcefulness and knowing what to expect of society, from neighbors to the government. Even the U.S. Centers for Disease Control offers [survival-preparedness education via zombies](#).

In *RWU Magazine* #10, Associate Professor of Writing Studies [Paul Bender](#) – an expert in post-apocalyptic fiction who touts Max Brooks’s *World War Z* and Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* among the best zombie books – illustrated the fascinating social commentary underlying some of these fictional works – when the story is done well, he hastens to add. For more on the zombie as a devastating form of social critique, read “**Six Gnawing Questions on the Zombie Apocalypse.**”

But before the next outbreak annihilates the foundations of civilization, get a pencil and pad ready – PDQ@RWU queried Bender for his ideas on staying alive during the zombie reckoning that he’s reaped from his readings.

Join a group or survive on your own?

Particularly early on a group is going to be a liability, especially if you’re going to care for that group. A small group might be advantageous – you’ll need someone to watch your back. When you have a relative amount of safety then you probably need to expand that group. But tribalism will reemerge and you start to look for ‘What’s the value added to the person you’re bringing in?’

During the early stages of the apocalypse, you want to be free to move quickly and independently, and emotional attachment is probably going to be one of those really bad enemies, because that's going to lead you to make bad mistakes. You're going to see somebody being attacked that you care about, and that's going to be your downfall: rather than running away, you're going to run towards it.

What's the first thing I should do in an outbreak?

The first thing you have to do is believe. So much of the spread is people not believing what's happened has happened, and by the time they accept it's too late.

Guns or blades – choose your weapon.

Guns are a problem because you have to get the headshot, and hardly anybody is good at that, especially under pressure. I think that you're better off with a blade. But that means closer combat. You'll want something compact enough to take the impact – because you'll have to go through skull, and you're not going to want it to hinder you when you run. A Japanese short sword, something samurais used or maybe even a little shorter.

But ultimately your best weapon is your feet – *get out of there!*

What's the most effective defense tactics?

Get up high. Zombies have trouble climbing so get off the ground.

And it's amazing how often you hear of people packing up the house – travel light, be quiet.

What are the most effective methods of destroying zombies?

You got to go for the brain, and you've got to be quick. If using a sword to take off the head, in which case you still haven't destroyed the brain, it can still come at you, it can still bite. So probably blunt force trauma – smashing in the skull. They have what they call a low-bow in *World War Z*, which is kind of a heavy blunt truncheon that bashes zombies' skulls in.

What if a zombie horde chases me into an enclosed space?

Again, try to get up high. Or that may be the point where you have to choose: Do I want to become a zombie or not?

What is the definitive wrong move to make?

To expect the system to work. I really do think that faith in everything turning out alright or in the idea that there's a "they" that's prepared for this, and that they are going to look out for us – that'll pretty much seal your doom.

What training tactic would best prepare for zombie apocalypse?

Just the ability to move quickly. The thing about the zombies is that they don't have to stop to eat, they don't have to stop to go to the bathroom, they don't sleep – they just keep coming. So moving quickly, and staying ahead of them.

I mean you could get up high but you don't want to get trapped because they won't go anywhere; they'll just sit there and wait for you to come down. It's mixture of self-sufficiency and being nimble.

Describe your ideal renegade, zombie-annihilating character.

Sensei Tomonaga Ijiro from *World War Z*. Having lost his sight in the (World War II) bombing of Japan, Tomonaga seeks out death so as not to be a burden to his family or society. He finds his purpose in killing the living dead with his sword via a blow to the head delivered to destroy the brain. He buries each of his victims to honor who they once were. For him, there is no joy in the killing and his purpose is to serve the Earth, which the living dead pollute. Legend has it that he once took on over 40 creatures single-handedly.

Why do survivors always seek the remotest locations to escape to?

Ultimately, the most dangerous aspect of any apocalypse is other people. Once the rules no longer apply – and for many they will not – the fragile social contract will be broken. While zombies are pretty predictable, other humans under stress, in terror, and unthinking will become the greatest danger.

Human greed, arrogance, stupidity will be amplified by the conditions. Look at recent disasters for an indicator – hurricanes, power failures, etc. Consider that in a zombie apocalypse you will see the social machinery grind to a halt – all those things people take for granted as being *entitled to* – cheap, easy fuel and food, basic security, access to goods and services – these all become threatened. People will turn on each other in droves.

This isn't to say that the apocalypse won't also bring out the best in some people. It certainly will. But again, I'm a glass half-empty guy – I don't believe it will be most people.

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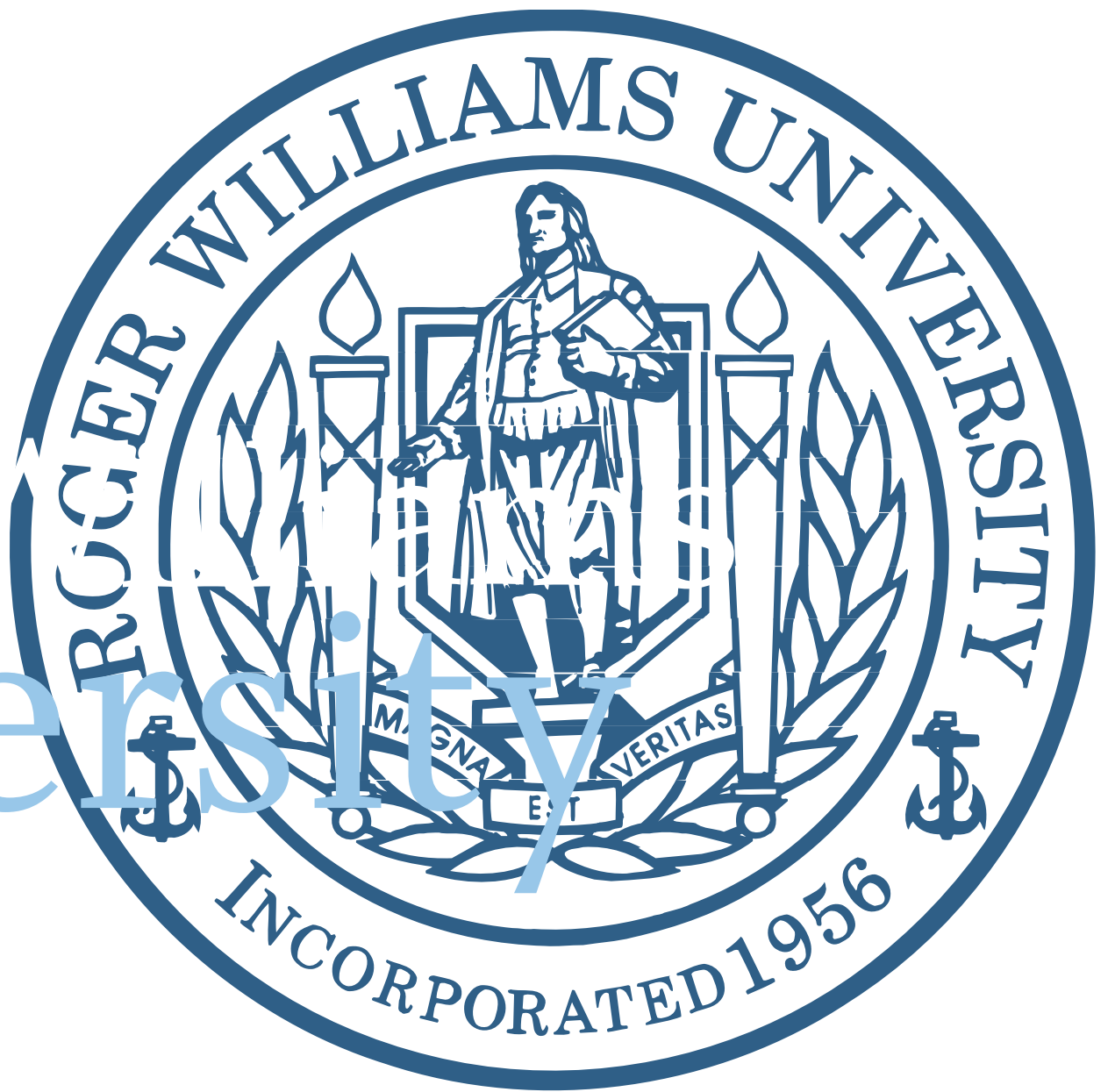
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