

Review: *Corpse Crusaders: The Zombie in American Comics*

By Chera Kee

University of Michigan Press (2024)
ISBN: 0472056859
216pp. \$41.60 (Paperback).

Douglas Clarke, Wilfrid Laurier University

Another book about zombies? Why would you want to read another take on a creature that has been creeping (or running) into every facet of popular culture for the past five decades or more? The answer to that question lies in the deft hand that Chera Kee has in not only explaining a complicated, often maligned history, but also the way that she weaves that history by centering comic books as the medium of choice. This work does something that not many other works on zombies have done, and that is to explain history while paying close attention to the zombie's literary and visual representation. The addition of visual elements makes this work not only unique and interesting, but a useful guide for those who want to better understand an undertheorized aspect of zombie pop culture.

Kee starts her work by explaining that comic book authors have been making use of zombies since before the horror genre took them over and turned them into shambling brain eaters, arguing that zombies were often characters employed to stabilize the world of the living (p. 3). In many ways, the zombie in comic books was the voice of conservatism, showing that superheroes were not the only visual-mythical representatives of societal protection. This opening section sets up the rest of the work to discuss the history of zombies in comics, the history of horror in comics, and finally the two essential types of zombie: the enslaved and the cannibal (p. 22).

Kee's historical analysis begins by introducing the reader to the embodied aspect of the zombie. In this discussion she makes mention of how colour (green, pale) and race (Black) intersect to create an 'othering' of the creatures and, by proxy, the people that have been turned into them. This section discussing the history of zombies in comics was well researched and fascinating. While Kee explores some tropes that are familiar to those who study zombies (or race), the way that she centers the body of the zombie is unique in that she can demonstrate several aspects of intersection with clarity and wit, but also with a critical examination of both visual aspects and historical argumentation. This will continue throughout the rest of the text when she moves from the body of the zombie to its use as a tool (Chapter 2), the conscious

zombie who suffers from thinking about their condition (Chapter 3), the undertheorized and often overlooked female zombie (Chapter 4), and finally the zombie as superhero, or superhero as zombie (Conclusion).

Throughout the book Kee follows the history of the zombie from 1950s American media to the present day. Her work follows a chronological scheme, beginning with comics like *Adventures into the Unknown* (1948-1967), *Detective Comics* (1937-2011) and *Regular Fellers Heroic Comics* (1917-1949), which may or may not be familiar to all readers. By digging this deeply into the history of American comic book publishing, Kee shores up her argument that the zombie has been around for a long time and has occupied many different symbolic and heroic roles. This tracing of the history of the zombie figure is also a tracing of the American popular cultural imagination and what it has created out of the real life Caribbean religious traditions that initially gave rise to zombies. Not to say that Kee delves only into the esoteric and historically remote; she sums up her discussion with an analysis of popular culture icons like *The Walking Dead* (2003-2019) and *Marvel Zombies* (2005-2006), as well as touching on television adaptations of *iZombie* (2010-2012) along with its source material. In short, this book has something for everybody: the expert and the novice, as well as the casual comic reader and the historical hoarder.

One criticism might be that Kee makes a considerable number of references to her earlier book, *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks* (2017); while these references are not inappropriate, they occasionally become obtrusive, distracting from the unique perspective offered by this study in so frequently restating and (re)centralizing the claims of its predecessor. Ultimately, however, this is an informative—even fascinating—book, one that will have staying power as a standalone study of both zombies and comic books, offering a jumping-off point for further scholarship. The way that Kee has broken down history and the body into manageable chapters by focusing on one or two important themes will allow scholars to pick up on these threads and continue to unravel them to find more history, more theory, and more appreciation for a creature that has had its life and afterlife mined by scholars and thinkers across several disciplines for many years. In *Corpse Crusaders*, Kee has shown that the zombie is not dead yet, and what's more, it forms an important part of American visual, cultural, and literary history. While this book does not give a fulsome Caribbean history of the zombie, it was never meant to do so; rather, it demonstrates that the polysemic zombie, in the hands of American comic authors, has helped to influence horror, superheroes, and the cultural imagination in general.