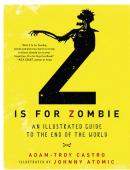


V IS FOR VAMPIRE: AN ILLUSTRATED ALPHABET OF THE UNDEAD (Harper Voyager) debuted in early June following the February release of Z IS FOR ZOMBIE: AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO THE END OF THE WORLD. Both books are humorous A-Z looks at the phenomenon of the undead and are written by Adam-Troy Castro (pictured) and illustrated by Johnny Atomic.

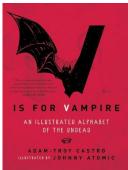
Castro is the author of 20 books and close to 100 short stories in the genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy. His works have been nominated for six Nebula, two Hugo and two Stoker awards. Atomic is the art director, lead illustrator and co-owner of League Entertainment. He is the co-creator of the CHOOSE YOUR OWN DOOM interactive story series, which was recently nominated for the World Fantasy Award.



FANGORIA: The zombie genre has gained a tremendous following in recent years, making the zombie apocalypse a pervasive cultural meme that has inspired zombie walks, a flood of media, a CDC preparedness guide and even a zombie car commercial. What is it that makes zombies so appealing to us now?

CASTRO: I believe there's a certain perception that the world is breaking down, that the breakdown is accelerating, and that other people are the problem. We all think that we could fix all the world's problems if all those grasping, unreasonable, patently other people would just go away...and if the breakdown just went ahead and happened so that we could get on with being in charge. (There are entire political and religious movements based on this premise.) Zombie stories come from the tension between that perception and the common-sense realization that the world falling to pieces is a very bad idea, and that the allies you're stuck with are almost certainly going to be part of the problem, which is one reason why so few of the genre's offerings end on an optimistic note.

ATOMIC: I've always thought that they served a dark but useful purpose for us as an emotional release valve. They allow us the idea of actually, brutally killing what scares or threatens us, without any form of moral or social repercussion. My wife, who hates violence, guns and morbid conversation will play a zombie killing video game and laugh the whole time. The living dead really let you blow off some steam.



FANG: In V IS FOR VAMPIRE you take some time to talk about the historic Dracula, Vlad Tepes. In his life, he was a brutal killer. Do you think that legend made him a vampire to explain his inhuman acts? Do you think that modern people might explain 20th or 21st century villains in similar terms?

CASTRO: Humanity is so capable of brutality that the supernatural explanation actually makes it easier to process. As for 20th and 21st century villains—it's already happened. It's not hard to find stories, Charles Beaumont's "The Howling Man" among them, that posit Hitler as an actual, otherworldly demon. There have also been stories that posited him as alien, and so on. I suppose we'll be seeing the supernatural Osama bin Laden before long.

FANG: Many fans of the zombie subgenre explain their interest in zombies because of what they represent. Some say zombies are symbols of our fear of death while others say that zombies are representations of general xenophobia. What do they symbolize in Z IS FOR ZOMBIE?"

CASTRO: They symbolize zombies. Sorry. The book, as I see it, is about the trope, not the subtext. I'll save the subtext for other places.

ATOMIC: Everything, all the above. The zombie really seems to be a placeholder for any torment or frustration.

FANG: You also talk about the "rules" for vampires in V IS FOR VAMPIRE and how those rules differ for different bloodsuckers. Are there any hard rules that apply to all vampires?

CASTRO: When we have already been provided with one group of vampires that sparkles in daylight and plays softball for fun [the TWILIGHT vamps], and others who are essentially zombies with stinger tongues [the STRAIN novels by Chuck Hogan and Guillermo del Toro], I think the concept of "hard rules" has gone out the window. But that battle was lost more than a century ago, when NOSFERATU introduced the concept of vamps being allergic to sunlight. It's the reason that every story now has to set up its rules. The same is true of zombies, when some are fast and some are slow, some want to eat us in general and some just want our brains, and, thanks to 28 DAYS LATER and so on, we can't even count on them being dead. In both cases, I frankly believe the variety is a good thing. Too many hard rules and it's no longer fiction, but ritual.



FANG: Some may see V IS FOR VAMPIRE as setting the record straight for the TWILIGHT-type vampire fans. What was the inspiration behind Z IS FOR ZOMBIE?

CASTRO: The direct inspiration was the ambition to provide a format where my words could appear alongside Johnny Atomic's spectacular art. Literarily, I must cite the stories produced by Harlan Ellison that also used the alphabet format as a springboard [HARLAN ELLISON'S CHOCOLATE ALPHABET].

ATOMIC: The inspiration for the art is Adam's work, which is the most poetic and evocative prose I've ever read. I have followed his work for years, and I think that only recently has his genius really been brought into the spotlight. Z IS FOR ZOMBIE is just one more in a long line of evolving works that chill, thrill, challenge and, of course, entertain.

"V IS FOR VAMPIRE," A is for Authors

Written by Alondra Rogers Sunday, 26 June 2011 09:02

FANG: The very first vampire folklore described them as nearly mindless ghouls who returned to their villages nightly to prey upon family members. How, or perhaps why, do you think the vampire evolved into a suave ladies' man or enchanting seductress?

CASTRO: Bram Stoker knew what he was doing. That was essentially it. He knew he was sublimating sexual images in the Victorian age. When the stage production of DRACULA proved that acting like a vampire could make a funny-looking middle-aged man like Bela Lugosi a sex symbol, the handwriting was on the wall.

FANG: If you had to choose between facing a horde of zombies or horde of vampires which would you prefer to battle?

CASTRO: Again, it depends on what rules we're going by, and what time of day. Sun-phobic vampires after sunrise...why not, as long as there's a dry cleaner handy? Slow zombies in rural America? Better than fast zombies in a locked missile silo. I suspect that if we went with "fast" anything, I'd be toast.

ATOMIC: It's funny, after working on Z and V back-to-back, I feel like I've actually been doing battle with the undead, so it's no longer speculation! The zombies were definitely the hardest. Take away the smell and walk and fear and you're basically drawing "dirty" people, over and over again. Try to make that seem fresh after the tenth one... The vampires offered greater range of behavior, so that part seemed to go smoother and occasionally yielded more creative results. As for real monsters? Bring 'em all on! I'm game for anything.



FANG: Where Max Brooks' ZOMBIE SURVIVAL GUIDE is a guide to physical survival, Z IS FOR ZOMBIE is more about psychological preparation and coping with the inevitable. Aside from sheer entertainment, what would you like readers to take away from Z IS FOR ZOMBIE?

CASTRO: The sense that being trapped in a war against ambulatory corpses isn't the bad part; losing all reason to keep on fighting is the bad part. That, at a certain point, post-apocalypse, survival is nothing more than a reflex. The worst zombie stories (or post-Holocaust stories in general) make the end of the world look like a great shooting gallery for those fortunate enough to have access to ammunition and leather goods; somehow, starving, freezing, dying of thirst, expiring of agony from an abscessed tooth and life reduced to matters of subsistence when all the books and movies and music and other benefits of civilization are gone, rarely comes up. It wouldn't be liberating, people. Life would suck.

ATOMIC: My end of this was to make the reader feel that this could really be them. Each image was hand drawn from photo reference to ensure that the nuance of expression was totally believable. My hope is that between the engaging text and the immersive art, people feel like they have sort of visited the apocalypse.

FANG: Do you agree with the position that if a person is ready for zombies, he or she is ready for catastrophe?

CASTRO: In the short term. I suspect that the number of direct zombie casualties in any extended outbreak would be dwarfed by the number of people who died from other reasons: friendly fire, opportunistic infections, lack of medicine, the breakdown of society, etc.

ATOMIC: Of course. I would definitely count the zombie apocalypse as a catastrophe!

FANG: Adam, you once told an interviewer that George A. Romero's NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD is one of the few films that actually scared you. What was it about that movie that affected you?

CASTRO: Well, it helped that I was about ten years old at the time and that the movie featured a kind of horror nobody had ever seen before. It wasn't comfort food, like the '50s alien-invasion and rubber-suited dinosaur flicks that I loved at the time—many of which featured tough military heroes and their friends the white-coated scientists who could be trusted to come up with a last-reel solution. It was as far from comfort food as could be imagined, in that—among other reasons—the protagonists of NOTLD were raggedy everyday people who weren't in control of their destinies, and never quite understood what was happening to them.

I knew right away that the standard contract filmmakers of this kind made with their audiences, that somehow all the right people would live and that everything would turn out to be all right, had been ripped to shreds before George filmed frame one. It may be hard to believe in the age of SAW and HOSTEL, but the revelation that a horror movie could be genuinely disturbing was like a bolt of lightning to those of us who thought we knew that all horrors had an off switch. It was, narratively, a revolution.

FANG: Why did you choose the alphabet theme of the chapters in Z IS FOR ZOMBIE, assuming it wasn't in an effort to teach preschoolers the ABCs?

CASTRO: Oh, I dearly, dearly hope that pre-schoolers aren't being shown this book, or its companion VAMPIRE volume. It was just a device for coming up with great ideas for Johnny's illustrations, and for my own contributions.

FANG: What is your personal zombie survival plan?

CASTRO: Cold weather. Let 'em freeze solid and then get an ice-sculptor. Of course, I live in Florida, so the first issue is getting a ride north!

ATOMIC: Feed on my neighbors while they are still fresh, because everybody else is going to be getting killed fighting over canned beans at the supermarket...



FANG: When the power unexpectedly goes out in the Castro home, what is it that you fear may be lurking in the dark?

CASTRO: Again, I live in Florida. Palmetto bugs.

ATOMIC: Me.

FANG: Can readers anticipate seeing a W IS FOR WEREWOLF or D IS FOR DEMON?"

CASTRO: We're game if sales permit!

ATOMIC: I can't pretend to know what goes on in the mind of a madman like Castro, but I personally hope it's giant monsters of some kind. Big giant Godzilla or CLOVERFIELD type stuff.

FANG: The images in both Z IS FOR ZOMBIE and V IS FOR VAMPIRE can look both hand drawn and graphic, sometimes photographic. Can you tell me about your technique?

ATOMIC: All the images were hand drawn using photography as a reference, especially for facial expressions. It also allowed me to put "likeness" images in for friends and family. After the sketch part was done, the pieces were taken into Photoshop and painted digitally using very high-end custom brushes that can simulate almost any texture to a photo-real level. There is, however, one photograph that was simply "painted over" for the sake of the deadline. I'll let fans figure out which one.

FANG: What about the models for your images? Some of the illustrations have people in them who look pretty familiar.

ATOMIC: Using the methods I described, I snuck in the likenesses of my daughters, wife, several friends and even Adam himself. Contrary to all speculation, there's no image of me in the book.

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FANG: The images in both books are very creative. Some could even be described as vignettes. Which came first, the text or the illustrations?

ATOMIC: Text, definitely text. Adam wrote the various entries and even provided a couple of sentences of description for me to start from. The whole process was very much shepherded by Adam. Occasionally I deviated from the script and he was good enough to let me run with it, but the drive and focus is Adam's awesome writing.

Both V IS FOR VAMPIRE and Z IS FOR ZOMBIE are currently available in bookstores and on-line.