BOOK REVIEW:

I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations

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Although Ransom's previous work in Canadian SF has won the Pioneer Award offered by the Science Fiction Research Association, *I Am Legend as American Myth* unfortunately lacks the same ambition or cohesiveness. Still, it offers a wonderful opportunity to follow through on the changes in the many adaptations of Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* (1954), which Ransom examines using gender, race, and adaptation theory. Ransom's study is a timely one due to Richard Matheson's great influence on North American SF – in fact, George Romero wrote the screenplay for *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) after encountering the novel; Matheson's story may thus be considered the starting point for the modern zombie genre. Yet, even if Matheson's contributions to the genre are clear, fewer studies on Matheson have appeared than one might expect (despite a slight uptick of interest since the Will Smith film version in 2007). Ransom's book is therefore a welcome, detailed comparison of Matheson's novel and its four full-length film versions.

    I Am Legend as American Myth situates Matheson's original narrative in the historical context of time it was created: World War II and the Cold War period immediately following. Ransom analyses the novel and the four films in chronological order. Because the novel was published in 1954, it would be natural to consider it a Cold War text; instead, Ransom reads it as a result of

the trauma evoked by World War II and the Korean War. Chapter 1 therefore examines the original novel within the context of post-war America while keeping in mind the fact that Matheson served in Europe. This is a refreshing approach, as most 1950s SF is read – forgetting the traumatised veterans of the previous war – as a product of the Cold War atmosphere. Some of Ransom's better observations include how Matheson's experiences in the army are reflected in the story, including how the protagonist's behavior resembles that of a traumatised veteran. This shows, for instance, in the detailed descriptions of Neville's vampire-hunting scenes, which reflect how trained soldiers might have reacted in a similar situation.

This focus on historical context remains the most successful part of *I Am Legend as American Myth.* Unfortunately, the other theoretical perspectives that Ransom brings to the text lack the same depth. Ransom probably brings these other theoretical elements to her reading because early scholars on Matheson, such as Kathy Patterson, mostly concentrate on racial and gender issues through the concept of the Other; in contrast, Ransom seems to feel that these issues must be addressed as well in order to write a full analysis of Matheson's novel. However, mixing historical context, gender theory, race theory, and queer theory together does not leave enough space for Ransom to build a solid argument from any of her chosen theoretical perspectives. For instance, one of Ransom's more controversial readings concerns the latest movie adaptation, *I Am Legend* (2007), which combines a superficial and old-fashioned Freudian theory with an emphasis on the lead actor's skin color. For example, in the movie, Neville (played by Will Smith), hoping to find a cure, gives one of the monsters an injection to turn her back into a human woman. Ransom repeatedly interprets this needle-based injection as symbolising rape. As she writes, "Bakke specifically likens Neville's injection of the female dark seeker with a phallic needle to a form a rape, an accomplishment of the sexual intercourse .... If we note that the legendary large penis of the black man is substituted with a needle ... a metaphor for a small penis ...." (168), and so on. Ransom cites previous work by Gretchen Bakke, but she also takes Bakke's interpretation without a grain of criticism, even though this would have been a wonderful opportunity to further examine binaries like black/white and male/female in greater depth. Unfortunately, Ransom's core idea simply needs more argumentation than a passing reference to Freudian interpretation (needle = penis) or racial stereotypes (black man raping a white woman). These kinds of notions and flippant references to other studies can ruin an otherwise good analysis. If not *proven* otherwise, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

In her analysis of the novel and the adaptations, Ransom pays the most attention to the lonely protagonist, Neville (or "Morgan" in *The Last Man on Earth*). To examine the protagonist in the films, Ransom employs scholar Richard Dyer's star theory, which emphasises the actor playing the lead role. In this case, the leading men are Vincent Price in *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), the ultra-masculine Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man* (1971), and Will Smith in *I Am Legend* (2007). These three actors are thus icons, symbols of the last man. The fourth film, *I Am Omega* (2007), is less well known; so is its leading actor, Mark Dacascos. Ransom taces how the main character changes from one adaptation to another. For Ransom, the key is to examine race and race relations, the contrast between masculinity and femininity, and even the idea of closeted queer sexuality. Still, although it would be interesting to reflect on

how lesser-known films and actors fit into star theory, *I Am Legend as American Myth* does not attempt to answer that. Instead, Ransom focuses on the two older films, *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man*, linking the former to the Cold War. Because *The Last Man on Earth* stars Vincent Price, who was rumored to have had relationships with both sexes, Ransom considers an application of queer theory appropriate. Yet, although the Cold War context seems quite acceptable to a modern reader, why base an entire argument on *rumors* of a leading actor's sexual orientation? While such rumors might be interesting in a historical overview, it is here merely confusing to combine older methods of biographical studies with more contemporary theoretical paradigms that involve gender, race, and sexuality. The mixture ends up reinforcing old stereotypes instead of trying to evoke new ways of thinking. For instance, contemporary theoretical paradigms might have done highly interesting things with the two more-recent film adaptations, but these chapters are Ransom's shortest, and Ransom only focuses on the race of Will Smith's character, whom earlier film adaptations had identified as the last *white* man on earth.

Overall, Ransom's book promises to fill a critical gap by studying Matheson's most influential work, *I Am Legend*, as a contemporary American myth, and the monograph certainly succeeds as the secondary literature's first full-scale attempt to examine how adaptations of Matheson's text reflect cultural change. Methodologically, *I Am Legend as American Myth* is an inclusive attempt to follow one narrative changing over time and through multiple (re-)interpretations. The narratives' historical context, the author's biography, historical events such as wars, and the backgrounds of each movie are explained in minute detail. Ransom starts out by asserting that her "study's goal is to reassess Matheson's significance as a major figure in SF, fantasy, and horror literature, film, and television" (4). At some points, she hits this ambitious goal, but at other points her analyses lack nuance when it comes to important issues like race and gender. The *I Am Legend* narratives could just as easily be read as telling "universal" stories about loneliness and paranoia. Although Ransom does mention that the narrative's mythic background resembles the story of Robinson Crusoe (186), one would expect her to address the idea of a *contemporary myth* in more detail than one mention. There is no solid definition of *I Am Legend* as a myth; instead, Ransom sees the narrative as achieving a mythological *status* to be read from its surrounding context. Perhaps it would have been more fruitful to read *I Am Legend* as a represent-tation of an older myth or a text that creates its mythopoeia.

Likewise, since Matheson's novel undoubtedly played a role in creating the zombie genre, perhaps Ransom could have paid more attention to the post-apocalyptic and mythical dimensions of the story, studying its lonely protagonist as a mythical hero or observing Neville's journey as an example of the monomyth (or hero's journey). To some extent, we can read this kind of argument between the lines of Ransom's text, but the idea of Neville as a mostly white (except for Will Smith) and mostly heterosexual (except for Vincent Price) mythic hero gets sidetracked by all the fascinating details of actors, filmmaking, and authorial biography. As political and controversial as Ransom's reading may be, it does not highlight – as Ransom wants – the im-portance of *I Am Legend*. Rather, it uses the narrative to express the imbalances within the time period and society *American Myth* should be considered an

indispensable study for anyone interested in Matheson's novel and its adaptations. Not only does Ransom succinctly summarise previous studies on Matheson, but she shows an admirable ambition in analysing how a written narrative can interact with film narratives, and how those narratives can be affected by cultural context.

Biography: Marjut Puhakka is a PhD student at the University of Oulu, Finland. In her upcoming thesis, she studies the concepts of subject and consciousness in transmedia stories about self-aware zombies, *I Am Legend*, *The Girl with All the Gifts, iZombie,* and *Metro 2033* by examining the border between human and monster. She has been interested in horror fiction since she was a child, and her previous work combines philosophical theory and literature studies. Currently, she works as a literature teacher.