

Florida college professor teaches a philosophy course about zombies

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Image 1. A character runs from a zombie in the comedy movie "Zombieland." Professor and zombie expert Eric Smaw teaches a course on what he calls "neurological zombies" at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. Photo: Glen Wilson

Reporters get a lot of offers for interviews with experts, but a recent email offering help from a zombie expert was definitely a first.

Eric Smaw teaches at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, where he has to turn away students from his "Zombies, Serial Killers, and Madmen" course every semester.

Courses on zombies pop up with some regularity on American college campuses.

Michigan State, George Mason University and Wright State all have had courses about zombies in different parts of culture.

What makes Smaw's course unique is that it's offered through Rollins' philosophy department. Zombies are not thought to have much of a philosophy.

They do, however, kill people without worrying about morals, and that's what interested Smaw.

Smaw was researching murder and consciousness. Smaw says that "to be guilty of murder, you have to have conscious intent." You can't be convicted for just accidentally firing a gun and hitting someone. You also can't be convicted if you have "diminished capacity."

Diminished capacity is a mental condition in which someone's judgment is so low that he or she is no longer able to have specific intent to commit a crime.



Can Sleepwalkers Commit Murder?

Usually it comes into play when an accused killer is under the influence of drink or drugs. But Smaw discovered a few cases where people were barely more awake than sleepwalkers.

The concept is controversial, but it's been used in court at times and even resulted in an acquittal in a 1987 Canadian murder case.

In that case, a Canadian man had recently gambled away all his family's money. One night he drove to the home of his wife's parents, killed his mother-in-law and tried to strangle his father-in-law.

A jury accepted his defense that he was sleepwalking and let him go.

"What the case established is that it's possible that a sleepwalker could do complex things like drive a car or commit a murder," Smaw said. "I know it's hard to believe. But think of it like this: Have you ever been driving a car and suddenly realize that you've traveled 20 miles with no memory of how you did it?"

"Your level of neurologic energy is not static — it goes up and down all day. And while performing a mundane task like driving, it can drop down a long way."

Smaw began thinking of people whose brains were in the lowest energy state as "neurological zombies."

Zombies Have Very Low Brain Waves

"Brain waves are measured in electrical frequencies called hertz," Smaw says. "Normal consciousness is about 40 hertz. Neurological zombies like the man in Canada are about 37 hertz. And the zombies in 'The Walking Dead,' those are maybe 5 hertz."

So naturally they had to be added to Smaw's course.

"The course meets three times a week," he notes. "And for the first week and a half or maybe two, it's all blood and gore."

"So after a while, when they've seen a lot of bloody entrails, I show them an episode of 'The Walking Dead' where some of the survivors of the zombie apocalypse go to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. There's a doctor left there, and he talks to them a lot about neurological capacity, the evolved brain and the unevolved, and it starts moving the discussion toward science.

"I say to the students, 'Hey, what do you think about these zombies, could something like that ever happen? Could a person turn into a zombie?' They always say no at first, no, human beings have a moral sensibility. And then we go over the Canadian murder case, and they start to settle down and think."

The students love all the gore at first sight, but this was not necessarily the case with Rollins administrators.

Smaw had to convince the department chairman that zombies were worthwhile subjects for a philosophy class.

Favorite Zombie Movies

Now Smaw's faculty colleagues ask to be briefed on breaking zombie news in movies and books. One of his favorites is the 1968 film directed by George Romero that began the modern obsession with zombies, "Night Of The Living Dead."

Then there's Romero's 1978 sequel, "Dawn of the Dead," in which zombies attack a shopping mall and "28 Weeks Later," with really fast zombies instead of the lumbering clods of the Romero movies.

He even likes some of the offbeat newer films, like 2013's "Warm Bodies."

He absolutely hates "Land of the Dead," one of George Romero's last films, a peculiar allegory in which the zombies are the melancholy victims of an oppressive human ruling class.

Still, he acknowledges that politics will of course encroach on the world of the zombies.

Smaw said he talked to a filmmaker in China. "He told me all their zombie movies are about politics and China's ruling regime. I wouldn't be surprised if that happens here, and this time next year we have a Trump zombie movie."

Zombie Survival Tactics

One question Smaw gets often is "What do I do when the zombie apocalypse breaks out?" His answer:

"Make sure you have enough food, water and ammo on hand."

"My students say that when you lazily fail to do that, just run to Walmart and hunker down, because Walmart has tons of all that stuff."

"Maintain a strong wireless connection, so that as the zombies swarm in, you can visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's zombie apocalypse web page. Which, believe it or not, is a real thing: [cdc.gov/phpr/zombie/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombie/index.htm)."

Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article BEST explains what it is like for students when they take Professor Eric Smaw's course about zombies?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-8]
 - (B) "Can Sleepwalkers Commit Murder?"
 - (C) "Zombies Have Very Low Brain Waves"
 - (D) "Favorite Zombie Movies"

- 2 Which of the following MOST influenced Smaw's decision to create a class about zombies?
- (A) his interest in other college courses on zombies
 - (B) his research on murder and consciousness
 - (C) a question he was asked about the zombie apocalypse breaking out
 - (D) a conversation he had with a filmmaker from another country

- 3 How did a Canadian murder case affect students in Smaw's course about zombies?
- (A) It made them think about whether a person could turn into a zombie.
 - (B) It helped them to understand how drinking can influence zombies.
 - (C) It helped them to understand that zombie cases often go to trial.
 - (D) It made them think about whether zombies have morals.

- 4 Read the following paragraph from the section "Zombies Have Very Low Brain Waves."

"Brain waves are measured in electrical frequencies called hertz," Smaw says. "Normal consciousness is about 40 hertz. Neurological zombies like the man in Canada are about 37 hertz. And the zombies in 'The Walking Dead,' those are maybe 5 hertz."

What conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) The energy state of zombies' brains is constantly fluctuating.
- (B) The energy level of zombies' brains ranges from 40 hertz to 5 hertz.
- (C) Scientists report that the electrical frequencies of zombies' brain waves are increasing.
- (D) Scientists cannot say for sure what the electrical frequencies of a zombie's brain waves are.