

Where to go when the zombies come? Ask this expert on the undead

By Glenn Garvin, Miami Herald on 10.30.18

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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 deluged all day long with news releases offering interviews with supposed experts on everything from Japanese whale hunting to polygamist religious sects of the American Southwest. So it's kind of hard to surprise us.

But a recent email offering help from a zombie expert — a zombie expert teaching at an actual Florida university — was definitely a first, even during Halloween season. Possibly a last, too.

"I don't know if there are a lot of other zombie experts in American academia," Eric Smaw admitted in a phone interview. "Actually, I don't know if there are any."

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. "The registrar's office told me it's one of the most popular courses on campus," Smaw said. "I guess the students just love zombies."

Actually, Smaw may have some competition when it comes to expertise in zombie studies. Courses on zombies pop up with some regularity on American college campuses.

Michigan State a few years back used the idea of a zombie outbreak as the precept for an online course in disaster planning. George Mason University in Virginia has an anthropology course that focuses on zombies in non-Western religions. ("May not be repeated for credit," the course catalog warns somewhat ominously.) And media-study courses on zombies in movies and TV shows like the one at Wright State in Ohio are not uncommon.



What makes Smaw's course unique is that it's offered through Rollins' philosophy department. Zombies like the ones Americans see in "The Walking Dead" are not generally thought to have much of a philosophy beyond "I want to eat your brain," even that expressed mostly through grunts and snarls rather than through Aristotelian logic.

They do, however, kill people rather profligately. And that's what interested Smaw.

"I was doing research on the subject of why people engage in murder," he recalls. "And to figure out that, I had to look into the subject of consciousness — to be guilty of murder, you have to have conscious intent, not just accidentally fire a gun and hit someone — and then diminished capacity."

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

Usually it comes into play in the courtroom when an accused killer is under the influence of drink or drugs. But Smaw discovered a few cases where people had simply slipped into a level of brain activity so low that they were barely more conscious than sleepwalkers.

"There really are people in that state who commit murders without being conscious of it," Smaw said. "There's even a term for it, homicidal somnambulism." The concept is controversial, to put it mildly, among law-enforcement people. But it's been used in court at times and even resulted in an acquittal in a 1987 Canadian murder case.

A 23-year-old Canadian man who gambled away not only his family's savings but money he embezzled from the company where he worked drove 13 miles to the home of his wife's parents, where he beat his mother-in-law to death and tried to strangle his father-in-law.

Afterward, blood dripping from his clothing, he went to a police station to report that "I think I have just killed two people." A jury accepted his defense that he was sleepwalking and acquitted him, in a decision that was upheld by Canada's Supreme Court.

"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?"

"That's very similar. You went into a state of low neurologic activity, yet you drove a car through traffic and arrived safely. 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," and from there it wasn't a long way to just plain zombies, whose sole purpose in life is eating brains.

"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. They are zombies."

So naturally they had to be added to Smaw's course. And pretty quickly they became the first part, if not necessarily the most important, of his lectures.

"The course meets three times a week," he notes. "And for the first week and half or maybe two, it's all blood and gore. The students, I know they want to see zombie movies and scream and be terrified, so I get it out of the way early. I used to even start the course at midnight."

"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 pretty much love all the scrambled brains and gnawed livers at first sight. This was not necessarily the case with Rollins administrators, who were not immediately certain that bone-marrow-sucking was an integral part of a classical education.

"My first conversation with the philosophy department chairman was, ummm, interesting," Smaw said. "He wanted to know exactly what was going to go on in this class. 'Are you going to show zombie movies in the philosophy department?' he asked. 'What do zombies have to do with philosophy?' So I gave him some books about neurological zombies, and eventually he came around."

Now Smaw's faculty colleagues check in with him regularly to be briefed on breaking zombie news in Hollywood and the New York publishing world. His advice is usually to stick to old-school zombies. Some of his faves are old-school, including the 1968 film directed by George Romero that began the modern obsession with zombies, "Night Of The Living Dead," a cheapie B-movie that turned into a national sensation when a horrified review by film critic Robert Ebert ("One ghoul ate a shoulder joint with great delight ... Another ghoul dug into a nice mess of intestines ...") was reprinted in Readers Digest and sent tantalized American teenagers racing to the drive-in to see it.

"Right near the beginning, there's a newscast that says a satellite has exploded in the atmosphere and the contaminated debris is making the dead come back to life," Smaw said. "So it tapped into a

lot of fears from that time, about science and space travel. A lot of people think it's the scariest movie ever made."

Then there's Romero's 1978 sequel, "Dawn of the Dead," in which zombies attack a shopping mall ("A shopping mall!" exclaims the eternally delighted Smaw) and "28 Weeks Later," with really fast Olympic-track-hero zombies instead of the lumbering clods of the Romero movies. "I took my students to see that one, and I don't think some of them ever slept again," says Shaw, not sounding at all regretful.

He even likes some of the offbeat newer films, like 2013's revisionist epic "Warm Bodies," in which a decaying zombie's flesh is heartwarmingly un-rotted by the power of love.

But there are limits to Smaw's tolerance. He absolutely hates the 2005 "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. "I couldn't figure out if it was satire, or what," complains Smaw.

Still, he acknowledges that politics will inevitably encroach on the happy, homicidally hungry world of the zombies.

"I went to China last year, and while I was there, I talked to a filmmaker," Smaw says. "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."

How To Not Get Your Brain Eaten When The Zombies Come

As Florida's greatest zombie expert, Rollins College Professor Eric Smaw gets asked a lot of questions. After "Couldn't you change my grade to an A?" the most frequent one is, "What do I do when the inevitable 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 an actual, real thing: [cdc.gov/phpr/zombie/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombie/index.htm)."

Quiz

1

Read the following selection from the article.

The students pretty much love all the scrambled brains and gnawed livers at first sight. This was not necessarily the case with Rollins administrators, who were not immediately certain that bone-marrow-sucking was an integral part of a classical education.

"My first conversation with the philosophy department chairman was, ummm, interesting," Smaw said. "He wanted to know exactly what was going to go on in this class. 'Are you going to show zombie movies in the philosophy department?' he asked. 'What do zombies have to do with philosophy?' So I gave him some books about neurological zombies, and eventually he came around."

What conclusion is BEST supported by the selection?

- (A) College administrators agreed that Smaw's class about zombies could be part of the philosophy department because they knew students would love the class.
- (B) College administrators were at first reluctant to include Smaw's class about zombies as part of the philosophy department.
- (C) College administrators were quick to agree with Smaw that a class about zombies was a perfect addition to the philosophy department.
- (D) College administrators added Smaw's class about zombies to the philosophy department after he agreed to teach only about neurological zombies.

2

How is a 1997 Canadian murder case involving a 23-year-old man connected to Smaw's course about zombies?

- (A) Zombies were responsible for murdering the 23-year-old man.
- (B) Smaw begins his course by talking about the murder case.
- (C) The 23-year-old man committed a murder while in a zombie-like state.
- (D) Smaw uses the murder case to prove that zombies still exist.

3

How are American zombie movies different from Chinese zombie movies?

- (A) American zombie movies are no longer being made, but the Chinese are still producing zombie movies.
- (B) American zombie movies will soon involve politics, but the Chinese avoid politics in zombie movies.
- (C) Chinese zombie movies include blood and gore, while American zombie movies do not.
- (D) Chinese zombie movies focus on politics, while American zombie movies do not.

4

Which piece of evidence from the article BEST supports the idea that many people believe zombies are real?

- (A) Now Smaw's faculty colleagues check in with him regularly to be briefed on breaking zombie news in Hollywood and the New York publishing world.
- (B) Then there's Romero's 1978 sequel, "Dawn of the Dead," in which zombies attack a shopping mall ("A shopping mall!" exclaims the eternally delighted Smaw) and "28 Weeks Later," with really fast Olympic-track-hero zombies instead of the lumbering clods of the Romero movies.
- (C) He even likes some of the offbeat newer films, like 2013's revisionist epic "Warm Bodies," in which a decaying zombie's flesh is heartwarmingly un-rotted by the power of love.
- (D) As Florida's greatest zombie expert, Rollins College Professor Eric Smaw gets asked a lot of questions. After "Couldn't you change my grade to an A?" the most frequent one is, "What do I do when the inevitable zombie apocalypse breaks out?"