

#19

I Am Legend

Richard Matheson, 1954

Christopher Priest hangs out with the last man on Earth

Richard Matheson's first novel, written when he was in his mid-twenties, is a fine example of American SF, written unselfconsciously as commercial fiction in a no-holds-barred narrative that grips the reader from the first page to the last. It almost entirely lacks slow or introspective passages, even though the story takes the form of an internal monologue. *I Am Legend* is also unusual in that it has not only been filmed three times (the latest version, starring Will Smith, is in cinemas now), but also appears to have created or influenced the entire genre of Hollywood zombie movies. It's rightly regarded as a classic.

The novel has several remarkable features. The first is the most obvious: it's a novel about vampires that is *not* a fantasy. *I Am Legend* is pure science fiction, with an intriguing idea at its heart: suppose vampirism was a medical condition, a plague, and in these days of global communications everyone contracted it? Except one man, that is...

Although this is on its own an effective notion for a story, Matheson goes on to explore it diligently. He investigates a series of scientific or quasi-scientific mysteries. Why does garlic seem to repel vampires? Why is daylight anathema to them? Mirrors? Running water? A silver bullet? Why is a stake through the heart necessary to lay a vampire to rest, and (perhaps more to the point) why does the man wielding the stake always manage to hit the heart first time, every time?

At the same time, Matheson dismisses or ignores some of the wilder fantasies: humans don't change into bats and flit about, their teeth do not grow into fangs, and so on.

Matheson's bands of lamenting, vengeful vampires, clustering nightly around the fortress that used to be the house of Robert Neville (apparently the only surviving normal human) make a shabbily memorable crowd. But if they held flaming torches and pitchforks they would not be so different from villagers in Transylvania, howling outside the castle for Count Dracula to surrender – an irony Matheson puts to brilliant use.

Now look at the publication date: the mid-'50s. Notice that this is a '50s



Matheson goes for broke: civilisation has vanished, the handful of survivors exist in what's left behind

American novel describing Everything Breaking Down that is *not* about the Red Menace, even indirectly. Matheson goes for broke: civilisation around the world (well, alright, in LA...) has vanished, and the handful of survivors exist in what's left behind. But refreshingly the enemy is not communism thinly disguised as "an invasion of body snatchers", or arriving in "flying saucers from Mars". The unstoppable foes in *I Am Legend* are good old American vampires, who sleep during the days in suburban duplexes, who haunt abandoned supermarkets and who know how to pack a gun or throw an air conditioning unit at someone.

The way it's written is also a clue to

the unique hold the novel has had on readers for 50 years. Although Neville is resourceful, energetic and motivated – a familiar protagonist in American commercial fiction – he's stricken with self-loathing, fear, feelings of inadequacy. He's almost always depressed, and spends most evenings getting drunk.

But he's not unfeeling about what he has lost. When Neville visits his wife's casket, the novel touches one of its rare moments of stillness: "Silence held him in its cold and gentle hands." At another point he settles down for an evening with the bottle: "The cold liquid trickled down his throat and warmed his stomach." That short sentence, phrased in spare, unadorned language, also fortuitously sums up the general effect of the novel.

I Am Legend is at its best in its scenes of suspense and action: thrill to Neville's attempts to reach the safety of home before nightfall, as the evening clouds gather and the hordes start massing in the street outside his house. Matheson always writes suspense well, and the cliché about not being able to put a book down might have been coined for him. His short story, "Being", was almost unbearably tense, and the suspense in "Duel" was always present in the story, not added later by Steven Spielberg when he directed the film version.

Finally, *I Am Legend* has the unusual merit of brevity. The current paperback edition consists of 160 pages. It's a fast, taut and memorable read, endlessly innovative and with more than a few shocks held in reserve. They did indeed used to write 'em like this, and Richard Matheson was setting the pace. **SFX**

Three-time BSFA award winner Christopher Priest's works include The Separation and The Prestige – plus two never-filmed Doctor Who scripts which we'd happily lose a finger to read...

Like This? Try These!

The Shrinking Man by Richard Matheson (1956)

Another immensely readable Matheson novel that was later filmed, as were *A Stir of Echoes*, *What Dreams May Come*, *Bid Time Return* and *The Legend of Hell House*.



The Last Man by Mary Shelley (1826)

Frankenstein wasn't her only fantasy book, y'know. Set in 2073, this precursor to all post-apocalyptic novels depicts a world decimated by a plague which, ultimately, only one man survives... sound familiar?



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>> "If you wanted to sum this up in one line then this from chapter 14 should do: 'Horror he had adjusted to. But monotony was the greater obstacle.' And then of course there's *that* ending. Bloody brilliant. This book is in my top five of all time. If I were ever forced to put those into a specific order *I Am Legend* might possibly be number one..."
DocSavage

>> "I could read this until the vampirised cows come home. It's that good."
count_libido

>> "It was one of the first SF books I ever read, aged 10. It scared the shit out of me. The mood, the way Neville grows to be paranoid, but also a lonely and sympathetic 'vigilante' is heartbreaking."
Gaspar

>> "Very impressed, Matheson's style is lean without feeling thin. Great sense of atmosphere."
SpaceSquid

>> "The sense of isolation is palpable and Matheson does a wonderful job of letting you see inside Neville's head. You've got to give him bonus points for making vampirism proper sci-fi and the final line cements this as a classic, more than worth its weight in garlic."
Midget_Yoda

>> "This has one of the most unsettling endings ever, and it doesn't get any less so because it's so appropriate. What makes it worse is that you can almost see their point."
SpaceSquid

Get Reading!

>> In SFX168 Geoff Ryman will be looking at John Brunner's 1968 novel *Stand on Zanzibar*, set in an overpopulated 2010.
NEXT ISSUE: Joe Abercrombie (author of *The Blade Itself*) will be discussing George RR Martin's epic fantasy *A Game of Thrones*.