

Physical Isolation and Viral Information in Mira Grant's Newsflesh Stories

JENNI G. HALPIN

Abstract. Set in the ongoing Kellis-Amberlee pandemic, Mira Grant's zombie adventure series *Newsflesh* (2010–2016) conjoins knowledge-power with the physical and technological apparatuses of control for a group of narratives that place citizens against the government. The ongoing apocalypse is untenable, as exemplified in the radically constricted lives most people live in efforts to protect themselves from people or other mammals who have been transformed into zombies by the virus. This constriction, and therefore the extension of government framing of the pandemic as a crisis condition, consolidates power in the hands of a CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) that is actively and secretly working to eliminate human adaptive responses to the virus.

“Physical Isolation and Viral Information in Mira Grant's *Newsflesh*” explores the connections between knowledge, scientific authority, physical distancing, and collective action. Given the figural power of zombies, the apparatuses for control of the vulnerable and dangerous bodies in this uncontrolled pandemic substitute – and obscure the need for – widespread sharing not only of facts but of understanding the implications of those facts. Two decades of misinformation and fear campaigns, in *Newsflesh*, trampled the legacy of “the Rising” and transformed the survivors from collective actors who shared what they learned in their attempts to stay alive into fearful isolationists who lack the knowledge to exercise power or enact community. The abuses of power discovered by the characters in these texts point to possible ways of not merely surviving but of living amid the zombie pandemic.

Keywords: knowledge-power; collective action; community; governmentality; pandemic

We are a nation equally afraid of gathering together and being alone. Is it any wonder that the average American is in therapy by the age of sixteen? (Grant 2010: 135)

You'll never feel safe, not all the way, because every time you narrow the cracks that danger can come in through, the cracks that remain will seem just that much wider. (Grant 2016a: 280)

In her *Newsflesh* series Mira Grant has comprehensively articulated a nexus of viral threat, physical distancing, and knowledge–power.¹ The first of the novels is set amid a major party's campaign for the presidency and follows a group of journalists recruited to its press corps; here and in the sequels Grant articulates an America after a super-virus (Kellis-Amberlee) has fundamentally reorganised daily life, especially monitoring and restricting contact between humans.

Chapter three sees Shaun and Georgia Mason returning home after a self-consciously action-packed *in medias res* beginning. They drive into their family's garage, bearing personal identification badges for which the door remotely registers and opens. Narrating, Georgia remarks,

Our sensors get us in, but only a clean blood test and a successful voice check gets us out. If we ever fail those tests, we'll be incinerated by the house defense system before we can do any further damage. (Grant 2010: 33–34)

Twenty-five years after Kellis-Amberlee turned up in the general population, the standard response to its manifestation is to kill. Even being in the garage that serves as a family entryway while infected would 'damage' the space, according to Georgia's rhetoric, signalling not that the infected person had been damaged but rather that they are contaminating the garage by their infected presence, rendering the space dangerously unfit for human inhabitation without radical sterilisation efforts. Entering the house, Georgia and Shaun are greeted with an empty laundry basket and an unnecessary reminder from their adoptive mother that they are to go immediately up to decontaminate: using black light to check their clothing carefully for any sign of blood before sending it to be bleached clean of any lingering virus and taking a shower that begins with a legally mandated half a minute of mostly bleach (Grant 2010: 36–43). The narrative concurrently normalises and remarks upon the extreme measures, detailing them, justifying them, and framing them as only moderately above-average sterilisation processes that are required due to the risks Shaun and Georgia (and their adoptive parents) regularly take but not really noteworthy or excessive given the circumstances.

The people of this post-Rising world live behind walls, guns, blood tests, and bleach. They do so because any mammal over 40 pounds is susceptible to becoming a zombie, either resurrected by the Kellis-Amberlee virus upon

¹ The *Newsflesh* trilogy is *Feed* (2010), *Deadline* (2011), and *Blackout* (2012). Following the novels Grant published numerous novellas and a short story, subsequently collected in *Rise: The Complete Newsflesh Collection* and telling stories outside the main action of the trilogy. A further novel, *Feedback*, concurrent with the events of the first, was published in 2016 (the same year as the collection of shorter works).

death or converted directly to a zombie state through contact with the active virus (for example, being bitten by a zombie) (Grant 2010: 29, 40). Everybody has Kellis-Amberlee in their systems; it is an experimental cure for cancer and a separate experimental cure for the common cold, released by misguided crusaders who feared the cure for the cold would be restricted only to the rich, not understanding how a viral cure would spread (Grant 2010: 72, 111–113). The two viruses combined and spread rapidly around the world (Grant 2010: 327). Fear, knowledge, and disinformation spread along with it, wildly contagious. And just as the transition from harbouring an inactive population of Kellis-Amberlee to being a zombie animated by the virus is “amplification”, so are the signals and noise of truth and lies, and the fears to which these give rise. The deathly response to information control is fear, driving people to abandon their own engagements with life lest they lose their lives to the zombies.

Lockdown

What counts as ‘normal’ more than two decades after the Rising? Not recovery but post-apocalyptic restructuring: blood tests everywhere; no large pets; no animal proteins from large mammals; widespread gun use; virtually no large gatherings of people; an entire generation of people predominantly named for George Romero; Romero himself, reanimated as a zombie, maintained as a government test subject to learn more about Kellis-Amberlee; the virtual end of the death penalty; entire towns (as well as the state of Alaska) ceded to the zombies as too devastated to be worth the danger of reclaiming; and, most pointedly, an American society in which the vast majority of the population simply stays indoors (Grant 2010: 23, 99, 129–130, 24, 63). Reading *Newsflesh* and other zombie narratives, Christian B. Long has offered that

The war will be won and the [post-war] apocalypse over when the infrastructure that supports *life as it was before the zombies appeared* is in place (Long 2016: 187, emphasis mine).

By reorganising to limit gatherings and measure risk, abandoning entire regions and effectively abandoning the outdoors itself, the people of *Newsflesh* have chosen not to move beyond the apocalyptic consequences of the Rising but to harden themselves into an ongoing apocalypse. Long reads zombie narratives as making an “appeal to a current of anxiety about the danger the crumbling US infrastructure ... poses” and reads the barricades of the texts both as metaphors for crumbling roads and bridges and as real objects shaping the apocalyptic society within the texts (Long 2016: 181, 193). The infrastructural

commitment to physical distancing from zombies in *Newsflesh* not only seeks to keep the infected out but especially concentrates on keeping everybody else in; when trips to the grocery store require extraordinary measures, the rebalancing of the infrastructure has clearly been in pursuit of a lockdown of the uninfected while the zombies roam relatively freely in the terrain formally or informally ceded to them. The dangerous wilderness has expanded right to the front door.

As a series predicated on the viral spread of information about zombies, *Newsflesh* unsurprisingly returns regularly to Romero's legacy. He is lauded, not so much as a hero for any personal actions but as the source (in his films) of what turned out to be generally effective strategies for surviving the Rising. Entertainment is become knowledge-power. But there is a sequel to Romero's filmic career: he "left his body to the government", knowing that the government would be using his reanimated zombie body as a test subject for further developing responses to the virus (Grant 2010: 99). Here Grant creates a second channel of knowledge arising from Romero's choices. Though by far a much lesser contribution, in that his reanimated remains are no longer himself and in that the government has a significant number of zombie subjects of which he is only one, his bequest is briefly but clearly read as in continuity with his inadvertent filmic contributions to the survival of humanity. There is a unity in his dual legacy, first in providing the knowledge to survive the Rising and then in providing for further knowledge-formation in the ongoing effort to understand it.

While a movie maker has become a powerful educator in survival, children have become dangerous free range animals in their potential to amplify into zombies. When all of America's outdoor spaces have been classified by hazard level, the safest would be immediately rated more hazardous if there were "children play[ing] outside" (Grant 2010: 39). The present wellbeing of children who might like to play outdoors is outweighed by the possibility not of zombies coming to threaten them but of them *becoming* the zombie threat; any danger to the children themselves is bypassed in this structure by the hazard rating system itself, one which centres the potential actions of infected bodies. In this America, Shaun notes with astonishment that people used to go outside without "fil[ing] paperwork or put[ting] on body armor"; he calls this loss "the single biggest casualty of the Rising" (Grant 2011: 42). Treating the outdoors and children as urgent threats are of a piece with the culturation of fear practiced in American society, fear that reconstructs those spaces as sites of regulation.

This reconstruction becomes an active focus of the core trilogy. Safety precautions in the form of active preparation (possibly over-preparation) for travel to or through open spaces that are likely to harbour zombies are generally approved throughout the novels, from keeping vehicles in good maintenance

for a fast escape to wearing reinforced clothing that amounts to armour and carrying guns as a matter of course. However, the precautions that harden home security increasingly come in for criticism, sometimes as producing a false sense of security through inadequate defence and detection but usually as measures that do more to render those lives of protection lives of imprisonment. Far from measuring and preparing for risk or maintaining effective barriers for a secure retreat, well over 80% of the population seem, to Georgia, to “have embraced the cult of fear” instead of “get[ting] on with [their] li[ves]” (Grant 2010: 63, 186). The zombie virus of *Newsflesh* can kill through infection, can reanimate through activation of the virus already carried in the host, and does produce such fear that the human hosts prophylactically deny themselves life.

Although most people, living their indoor lives, are distanced from the risk of encountering a zombie, the borders are significantly managed, with blood checks to enter vehicles, buildings, compounds, and even neighbourhoods. In one instance Georgia is tested as she exits a building into a large, enclosed parking lot, escorted to a fenced compound within that lot by the guards who administered her test, and then tested again to enter the compound, all as a matter of routine despite the redundancy of all of these security measures (Grant 2010: 136, 138). These tests, with known rates of inaccuracy, work to establish an accepted standard for who counts as human, reducing its subjects repeatedly to potential zombies and denying any human capacity to make better judgements about who counts as human by requiring testing even when amplification is manifestly implausible.²

In line with the subordination of human judgement to mechanical testing, Georgia and Shaun’s America is also a highly automated society: security systems are frequently both networked and responsive to natural-language interactions, linking together voice-activated (and voice-analysing) testing pads at building entrances, the reporting of testing out to the CDC in the event of a failed test, and even appropriate settings for decontamination showers. Georgia notes there has been deliberate effort to make those systems sound as human as possible because this

increases comfort and acceptance and prevents nervous breakdowns stemming from isolation anxiety – in short, people don’t get cabin fever as much when they think they have more people they can safely talk to. I think that’s

² Although a number of plot points hinge on the Masons’ understanding that the different testing units have different reliabilities, the society at large clearly treats blood testing units, even with known and significant false-positive rates, as absolute determinants of safety, proxies for the scientific expertise and cultural power of the CDC, the organization to which positive test results are transmitted by the testing units.

bullshit. If you want to avoid cabin fever, *go outside*. (Grant 2010: 34, original emphasis)

The human façade is meant to support people in ongoing isolation by circumventing ‘isolation anxiety’, facilitating the ongoing separation of people from actual ‘people they can talk to’ and from the ‘outside’ itself. Absent human interaction, absent natural interaction, the space of the machine opens onto the social and becomes a locus of ‘comfort and acceptance,’ neither of which would be in such short supply if people could stop cowering at home in fear.

This contrast between the fear of losing one’s life to an attack by zombies and the failure to have a life in the more colloquial sense chimes with the both/and essence of zombies that Sarah Juliet Lauro demonstrates throughout *The Transatlantic Zombie*. Lauro connects them to

both slavery and rebellion, capture and resistance, confiscation and the work of conjure that combats it. (Lauro 2015: 186)

Understanding public spaces as both endangered by the potential presence of zombies and impossible to fully safeguard, the majority presume there is no way to engage in life as it had been, enacting that death in the lives they would say they chose. From Georgia’s standpoint, the massive apparatus for engaging in life at a distance is at best a simulation, offering the semblance of life to the fearful already-dead.

Fear, in this extensively armed society, focuses upon everybody as a potential threat, not only the zombies. Perhaps even the not-yet-zombies more than those who are actively threatening, for, as Elana Gomel writes, “Zombies ... are as innocent as houseplants because they have as little sentience” (Gomel 2017: 138–139). Although they are dangerous, and, in *Newsflesh*, capable of tactical intelligence that can equal a human’s, they nonetheless remain thoughtless vectors of infection and death. People who have not yet become zombies are not so ‘innocent’. Legally, they might as well be deadly threats in their fully human condition, as it is impossible to distinguish between a healthy human killed by destroying their brain and an active zombie destroyed in the same manner, and an untold number of murders have been ignored in this elision (Grant 2010: 228).

Life itself is held so far away that it is denied rather than admit the possibility that not all people are threats to be shot down for their mere presence. Thus the zombie-inflected culture of fear, death, and reanimation contrasts repeatedly with the lives chosen by the small minority of Americans who undertake such dangerous pastimes as dining out or campaigning for public office. Rather than figuring human life as a dualism of body and soul, the world of the Rising

treats humans as tripartite: a body often figurally dead through confinement and fear, a self (feeling the fear or, more rarely, acting beyond it), and the virus itself (either passively supporting the immune system in its original purposes of ending both cancer and the common cold or commandeering the body in full amplification). Considered this way, the zombies live much more similarly to people before the Rising: going outside without filing paperwork, ignoring safety guidelines and regulations, and choosing face-to-face interactions with embodied people rather than mediated or artificial substitutes. Uncannily, this concords with the actual George Romero's assertion that in the case of a zombie apocalypse he would seek to become one of the zombies because, he said, "That way I could live forever" (cited in Lauro and Embry 2008: 88). When confinement is a loss of life, the zombies themselves are in at least one respect achieving more living than the people who lock themselves away in fear. Certainly in the *Newsflesh* series the late George Romero, his body willed to the government for further study of the animating virus, lives on, enviably well-fed and continually admired (Grant 2010: 99, 97).

Information Might Want to be Free; Viruses Do Want to Spread

The reason Georgia and Shaun's family are such risk takers is that they are all journalists, specifically bloggers, a mode of journalism that has made a major leap into professionalisation and respectability, whether aiming for unbiased reporting or raising the ratings with footage of bloggers taunting zombies for the entertainment of the masses. Georgia and Shaun, representing their site (*After the End Times*), join the press corps of Senator Peter Ryman's presidential campaign of 2039–2040, an inclusion the candidate intends as a signal that Ryman is hip with the young people by recognising the legitimacy of the relatively new style of journalism. *Newsflesh* thus, interested in journalism and explicitly grounded in the genre conventions of zombie films, unsurprisingly trades in the transmission of information, treating both fact and fiction as viral infectants with communicability and lethality that are comparable with if not necessarily greater than those of the Kellis-Amberlee virus.³

The knowledge-power to survive the Rising emanated from the blogs (Grant 2010: 99). Georgia's inability to lie (both by personal proclivity and by lack

³ It is worth noting that the government suppression of the scientists working to verify what Kellis-Amberlee was in the first months of the Rising was broken by a scientist who posted the information on his tween daughter's blog, capitalising on its then having been a medium not considered worth policing (Grant 2010: 48). Information has to achieve a virality to compete with Kellis-Amberlee.

of skill at deception) is tied to her insistence on feeding the people's hunger for information. Widespread communication through the variously regulated channels of blogs, juxtaposed to a massive government conspiracy operating through an ongoing disinformation campaign, explicitly offers a weighing of the benefit of freely circulating information against the cost of evaluating the accuracy of that information. Part of what makes quality objective journalism valuable is its capacity to inform people's behaviours. This is, of course, part of the value of widespread disinformation as well.

The disinformation campaign of the American government and the CDC makes the bodies of the people sites of negotiation, not between their own immune systems and Kellis-Amberlee but between Kellis-Amberlee and the government. Providing, as its component parts were designed to do, effective immunological eradication of both the common cold and all forms of cancer, while being a virus that wants to spread, Kellis-Amberlee in its dormant state encourages more engagement with the world by making such engagement safer (in terms of colds and carcinogens). Threatening them with viral amplification and with the possibility of encountering zombies, the government encourages people to huddle in fear. That Kellis-Amberlee in its dormant and amplified states provides such opposing motivations is another both/and of the zombie: threat to and guarantor of a status quo.

The zombies and the virus have become major tools to maintain a controlled population, one that defines itself in terms of its vulnerability. This works because, as Kari Nixon writes, comparing zombies with viruses,

The virus sits on the liminal line of existence, silently yet insistently challenging our most basic assumptions about the categories that make up life and death, animate and inanimate, thereby worrying away at the boundaries of individual and national identity. (Nixon 2016: 39).⁴

⁴ Relatedly, Jon Stratton reads a connection between literary zombies and displaced peoples through the lens of Giorgio Agamben's 'bare life', noting an increase in zombie narratives in film, video games, and novels over the last thirty years alongside "increasing anxiety in western countries over the numbers of displaced peoples attempting to gain entry" (Stratton 2011: 266). He notes that both zombies and displaced peoples are in in-between categories, zombies between life and death and displaced persons between the places from which they are displaced and the places in which they are not (yet) welcome; in both cases these liminal states provoke a heightened pressure on the minimal elements necessary to maintaining existence, a pressure Stratton argues identifies both groups as 'bare life' (267).

Zombies are a privileged sort of feral animal: dead, moving, infected, and posthum/ous/an. The surplus of danger posed by a once-human zombie is its access to the spaces considered safe; this is why children playing outdoors count toward a significant reduction in a neighbourhood's safety rating: humanity itself is a horde of potential zombies.

By coming down on the fearful side of the line, human beings become isolated in contrast to the collective assemblage of the zombies or to the government network of power.⁵ Dr. Shannon Abbey, a renegade scientist who left the CDC in part because it had become complicit in the state's use of the dangers of Kellis-Amberlee as an apparatus of control, reflects that zombies

don't have to be the kind of problem that we make them out to be. They could just be an inconvenience. Instead, we let them define everything. (Grant 2011: 205)

Though Gerry Canavan is thinking of more obvious forms of violence, in "We Are the Walking Dead" he observes that

in zombie narratives [beginning with killing enemies *qua* zombies transitions such that] the violence inevitably spreads to other, still-alive humans as well. Anyone outside the white patriarchal community ... is a potential threat. (Canavan 2011: 445)

Zombies do 'define everything'; most especially, everyone who is not supported by the power of the CDC becomes zombie-like in subjection to death or subsumes themselves under that authority by locking themselves into secure facilities, be they homes or guarded compounds.⁶

In *Newsflesh* information, journalists, and zombies resist confinement, while the government and the majority of the population seek it, engineering their environment to facilitate disinformation and disengagement, distancing themselves by telepresence, by walls and barbed wire, by doors unlocked only by clean blood tests, and by a reliance on those outside to provide whatever

⁵ In *Newsflesh* zombies in groups have higher tactical intelligence the larger the group is (Grant 2010: 7).

⁶ Gerry Canavan's "Fighting a War You've Already Lost" compellingly explores becoming-zombie as "a latent Utopian form" offering "an unexpected vision of what the negation of the biopolitical state might look like" (201). His argument focuses on the disruptive power of zombies; *Newsflesh*, conversely, offers repeated connections between the virus taking over zombies' bodies and fear controlling not-yet-zombies' choices.

facts might be deemed necessary. Late in the first novel, Georgia produces a manifesto with the tag line “rise up while you can” (Grant 2010: 518). Her rhetoric is shaped in part by the diction that has come to describe the arrival of the zombie apocalypse: the Rising. This, naturally, comes from longstanding cinematic horror traditions that zombies are the *risen* dead and the fairly obvious observational figure of a body *getting up* from an enervated posture of death to walk (or shamble) in the direction of the living. She calls on people not to let a zombie rise up in their bodies, but to join in a civil revolt, ‘rising up’ not upright but against: against the government conspiracy *not* to find a cure. Since she is also writing amid a significant zombie attack, ‘while you can’ offers a fairly obvious contrast to the rising as zombies many around her are experiencing.

Governmentality and Death

As Rick Cousins (and old friend, a former reporter, and now implausibly the Vice President) says,

It started out with good intentions ... They thought they were taking steps to protect the country. In the end, no one noticed when protection turned into imprisonment, or when ‘for the good of the people’ turned into ‘for the good of the people in power. (Grant 2012: 579)

Passing over the presumption that ‘protection’ and ‘the good of the people’ can be well-intended goals, what is particularly noteworthy here are the parallel transformations into ‘imprisonment’ and ‘the good of the people in power.’ What does it mean to place these side by side? Conjoining protection and ‘the good of the people’ suggests that protection is a good; if so, it is a negative one, operating by holding off harm. So, if people don’t go outside, if people may not go outside, if people are socialised so that they are not comfortable about going outside, then, as long as the outside says outside, the people will not be harmed by encountering it. As is obvious to everybody reading this, that does not mean the same thing as not being harmed.

Laying this notionally protective incarceration at the feet of the CDC, *Newsflesh* centres the ‘control’ in the organisation’s name, showing how government control is exercised primarily from the CDC through its aura of scientific power against the zombies and narrating the discovery that, far from working to eliminate the virus, the CDC has been working to make it more efficient. Hoping to end the natural immunological responses that have begun to confer immunity in a fraction of the population, the CDC plans that

Once it's been normalized, once it conforms, we can finally get to work on a virus that does what we want it to do ... We'll save the world the way we want to, in our own time, and we'll get the proper credit. (Grant 2011: 446)

This perversion of priorities is an example of the

zombie narratives[?] fear ... that the institutions holding our culture together ... will break down or reveal themselves to be false in the face of catastrophe. (Zani and Meaux 2011: 101)

In the expectation that 'culture' will either fall apart or lose even the appearance of having 'held together', the zombie threat is again to the character of life. Steven Zani and Kevin Meaux are focused on structures for interpersonal relations, such as religions, legal codes, and kinship groupings, which all work to define communal lives together. Moreover, their analysis is extendable to cover the falsity of the CDC in *Newsflesh*. Redefining success 'the way they want to' and doing so secretively aligns the CDC with the virus it is meant to be curing, both behaving to keep humanity in their control.

The CDC is also at the centre of a virtual panopticon. Commonly, and so pervasively that it may not even be an error any more, we refer to a panopticon when we mean a context in which everyone can see the same vantage, as though Georgia and her colleagues put themselves inside one when they turn on their cameras and transmitters. Certainly the journalists who record their adventures with unsafety for the entertainment of the more fearful qualify as widely viewed subjects, and the fundamental measurement of the *After the End Times* team's performance by their site's share of internet traffic works to centre being-observed, whether it be in one's person or through one's work. Yet the fullest panopticon of *Newsflesh* is the networked blood testing units. Though only positive tests are supposed to be automatically uploaded to the CDC, the sheer volume of data – location tied with infection status – producing a license to kill everyone present for a single report of an actively infected individual if the location is outside a city, puts the CDC in a unique position of knowledge, coupled with the widespread reverence afforded the organisation believed to be working on a cure (Grant 2010: 379, 359). The nearly panoptic view enabled by the receipt of so much data parallels the much-viewing eyes of stay-at-home audiences consuming news and other entertainments.

Briefly in *Newsflesh* Shaun and his team become the consumers, on the side of what John Rieder has characterised as the "colonial gaze", watching news out of Florida and its neighbouring states from the safety of California (Rieder 2008: 7, quoted in "We Are the Walking Dead", Canavan 2011: 437). Having seen towns and cities (and even the state of Alaska) abandoned during

the Rising or following subsequent outbreaks, preparations “to mark the entire damn Gulf Coast as a Level 1 hazard” and abandon the millions of uninfected still sheltering there are entirely precedented: horrifying, but not shocking (Grant 2011: 506). These plans are entirely unknown to the refugees from the tropical storm and the zombie outbreaks carried with it, even as refugee centres disproportionately occupied by orphans, the poor, and journalists remain fully occupied and under-staffed (Grant 2012: 63). As Canavan argues,

the second way in which the zombie infects us [...is that] they infect us with their vulnerability, their killability makes us ‘killable’ too. (Canavan 2011: 445)

The planned abandonment of these refugees, for their vulnerability or against their knowledge–power, heightens the always-already condition of killability shared by all mammals (for they have either become zombies or are playing host to dormant Kellis-Amberlee that even in a latent state has been viewed as a hazard). This struggle over death is a struggle in part to ensure the ongoing lifelessness of the fearful, uninfected population.

Although most of the *Newsflesh* stories treat the American context as representative, there is a population who go out in the world much more freely. As if to underscore that the colonial gaze is a choice of power and disempowerment while also casting light on the extent to which most of the world has embraced security theatre in lieu of genuine safety precautions, Australia has foregrounded wildlife conservation, granting extensive rights to various mammals regardless of their infection status. Mahir Gowda, one of the reporters from *After the End Times*, makes an investigative trip to the continent. His hosts, local reporters, are taking him to see some of the key features distinguishing their national responses, and shortly after arrival Mahir discovers, in his review of the vast array of permits they have received, that one of these “clear[s them] from prosecution in the event that [they are] forced to injure an attacking koala” (Grant 2016a: 196–7). In America the koala’s attack would be evidence that it was infected and killing it would be expected. To his surprise, Mahir’s Australian colleagues emphasise that the scarcity of koalas means giving them a wide berth and generally treating them as valuable parts of the ecosystem rather than – in the case of the largest individuals – possible amplification threats:

at the end of the day, we can always get more people. ... But we can’t get more koalas. (Grant 2016a: 196–7)

Not entirely devaluing human survival but deprioritising it in favour of conservation of an entire ecosystem is foundational to the differences between Australia and the governments with which Mahir is familiar.⁷

The policies and practices enforced by law and emerging social norms constrain behaviours; in *Newsflesh's* America (and much of the world) this means liberalising the use of deadly force while normalising isolation to preserve a society over which governance might be exercised. Isolation and fear become the solid ground on which people base themselves because the meaningfulness available before the Rising seems to have been fractured. Zani and Meaux complicate their analysis of the failure of our cultural touchstones in noting that zombie narratives are more concerned with breakability as such, “the dissolution of certainty and meaning”, than with which presumed solidities fracture (Zani and Meaux 2011: 101). After the Rising, sociality itself has proven uncertain, replaced with belief in blood testing and a future return to normal after the good people of the CDC discover a cure.

Getting Here; Moving on

Crucially, Grant tells the story of the Rising and its aftermath at arm’s length from the transition: young adults, mostly too young to remember life before the Rising, narrate the novels, which are set twenty-five and more years after Kellis-Amberlee made its appearance. The novellas that are not set concurrent with or subsequent to the novels are mostly stories *of* the Rising, detailing how it happened and the responses of people in the year in which the problem was beginning to be recognised. In contrast, the short story “All the Pretty Little Horses”, published in the short fiction collection *Rise* is set after the Rising, as new laws and social standards are beginning to emerge. In her introduction to the text, Grant characterises it as

one of the most difficult, emotionally challenging pieces I’ve sat down to write.
(Grant 2016a: 477)

⁷ Lest one take Grant’s Australia as an entirely positive example of absolute value for nonhuman life, protecting the wildlife at the expense of humans extends so far that the Australians approved a law which criminalises people “shot by a licensed fence guard within the zone that had been legally defined as ‘on the fence line’”: the fact of their having been shot by such authorities in such a place retroactively establishes their engagement in “disorderly conduct” (Grant 2016a: 267).

Though I suspect Grant is focused on the unrelenting *pathos* she brings to the death and destruction of the Rising as seen through the perspectives of a couple of characters she has given significant effort to presenting as the destructively self-interested and self-aggrandising adoptive parents of Shaun and Georgia, part of the technical challenge represented here is in presenting the transformation: not the initial shock of zombies rising nor the daily life under a new normal but some of the specific process by which a society goes from the one to the other.

How, in the mass death of the Rising, did blood testing units come to be widely available? How many were the events informing the case law for the legality of shooting suspected zombies rather than investigating such killings as possible murders? What made it seem like a good idea to ensure that flight attendants and elementary school teachers be heavily armed? “All the Pretty Little Horses” walks its readers through the logic of legally terminating parental rights over presumed “Orphans of the Rising” (such as Georgia and Shaun) and outlines the arduous processes of clearing away “makeshift barriers”, emptying and sanitising “makeshift morgues”, and destroying all possible infection hazards house by house once humanity had sufficiently regrouped to pursue a new normal after the years-long events that became the Rising (Grant 2016a: 535, 484, 487). The story provides a hard contrast between people who survived the years of the Rising in groups that had contact with the larger community and those who had been cut off, highlighting the manner in which communication and information are crucial survival equipment. These feed into the rebuilding of communities – the redesigning of communities – with more formal instantiations of what had been ‘makeshift’ survival tactics, now that the crisis has become chronic. Time and material resources are committed to hardening the infrastructures of separation and communication.

As always, upgrades are easier with wealth. Within the main trilogy, another key transition, compared in scale to that of the Rising, follows the CDC’s release of genetically engineered mosquitoes (altered to be large enough to carry Kellis-Amberlee). Having been on a road trip when the mosquitoes were released, Shaun and his team arrive at Maggie’s home and go through the usual security only to discover at the last step, which used simply to be parking the car and walking in, “an emergency air lock, the kind that can be slotted into place to block any standard hallway or door frame” (Grant 2011: 491). Shaun, Becks, and Mahir do not yet know that the virus has become mosquito-borne or that it was spread on the winds of tropical storm Fiona, but the set-up in Maggie’s house signals to them that somehow the standard response is shifting to a consideration of the open air itself as inherently dangerous, capable of contaminating people, clothing, and equipment, where before reasonable

caution had been attached more narrowly to the mammals capable of rising. While wealth and technological development obviously both facilitate Maggie's addition of an airlock as quickly as she acquires it, Shaun's familiar description of the technology suggests it is as recognisable and plausibly available as we might consider a portable generator or screened porch. Given the equipment of the air lock with blood testing panels, one can readily see that even without a mosquito vector for the disease some of the more worried people might see this as comparable to the garage at the Masons' house: a safety-ensuring interstitial space, one step away from the dangers of the outdoors but still protecting the indoors from what might be dangerous, all in a way that is worthy of foregoing the regular use of some of that indoor space.

In the end, this is neither the end nor much of anything new. As Shaun says,

We're in the same place now that we were in twenty years ago – the dead are rising, the situation looks grim as hell, and no one really knows what's going on. (Grant 2011: 546)

The first zombie apocalypse was a beginning of sorts for the people of the main body of stories whose lives were fundamentally transformed alongside the apparatuses of control developed over the decades since. And, despite significant difference between zombies being fiction and being fact, the reactions to it are always already there, embedded in modern techno-culture and available to be put to this (or many other) uses. The hope Georgia wants to offer – that

we have had time to learn and grow since the Rising. We are smarter now. We have adapted. (Grant 2012: 621)

– is integrally connected to having sufficient information to act against both the fear-based manipulations of the government and longer-standing habits of self-protection accomplished through the sequestration and de-resourcing of others. Though Georgia rightly suggests that there has been enough time for them to 'learn and grow', the clearest examples of these in the novels may be that the CDC has been learning how to produce new, deadlier variations of the virus and growing large mosquitoes to carry it. The lesson of sharing knowledge as it is discovered – the lesson at the heart of blogging's transformation into a major, legitimate branch of journalism – struggles against two decades of learning to be controlled by misinformation and fear. The development required to live beyond this newest transformation of disease is, as Georgia calls for in her manifesto, to "rise up while you can", living above the control of

the virus or of the fear of its effects (Grant 2010: 518). They will need to live as do myriad off-grid communities: with fewer barriers between people.

Jenni G. Halpin

jennihalpin@gmail.com

Savannah State University

U.S.A.

Bibliography

- Canavan, G. 2011. Fighting a War You've Already Lost: Zombies and *Zombis* in *Firefly/Serenity* and *Dollhouse*. – *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 4:2, 173–204. <https://doi.org/10.3828/sfftv.2011.12>
- Canavan, G. 2011. "We Are the Walking Dead": Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative. – *Extrapolation*, 51:3, 431–453. <https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2010.51.3.7>
- Gomel, E. 2017. The Zombie in the Mirror: Postmodernism and Subjectivity in Science Fiction. – P. Geyh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern American Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge, 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316216514.010>
- Grant, M. 2012. *Blackout*. New York: Orbit.
- Grant, M. 2011. *Deadline*. New York: Orbit.
- Grant, M. 2010. *Feed*. New York: Orbit.
- Grant, M. 2016a. *Rise: The Complete Newsflesh Collection*. New York: Orbit.
- Grant, M. 2016b. *Feedback*. New York: Orbit.
- Lauro, S. J. 2015. *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.
- Lauro, S. J., Embry, E. 2008. A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism. – *boundary 2*, 35:1, 85–108. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2007-027>
- Long, C. B. 2016. Infrastructure after the Zombie Apocalypse. – *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture*, 1:2, 181–203. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jasiapacipopcult.1.2.0181>
- Nixon, K. 2016. Viral Virulence, Postmodern Zombies, and the American Healthcare Enterprise in the Antibiotic Age. – L. Servitje, S. Vint, eds., *The Walking Med: Zombies and the Medical Image*. University Park, PA: PA St U P, 39–53.
- Rieder, J. 2008. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP. Cited in Canavan.
- Stratton, J. 2011. Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life and Displaced People. – *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14:3, 265–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549411400103>

Zani, S., Meaux, K. 2011. Lucio Fulci and the Decaying Definition of Zombie Narratives. – D. Christie, S. J. Lauro, eds., *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*. New York: Fordham, 98–115. <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823234462.003.0008>