

I AM LEGEND: A BATTLE OF HEART AND MIND

AN ESSAY BY KEN PROVENCHER

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* is, at heart, the story of a man and a dog.

I know this is a vampire novel. There are vampires everywhere in it. They're on the cover of the paperback version, hundreds of them: white-faced, shadow-eyed, open-jawed, looking to tear my throat out. The only living beings in the story who *aren't* vampires are Robert Neville and the dog. But it is their story. If Matheson intended for this to be an epic struggle between man and vampire, he would have given us a better hero:

"On those cloudy days, Robert Neville was never sure when sunset came, and sometimes they were in the streets before he could get back."

The story opens, we meet the last man alive, and we are not impressed. Doesn't he wear a watch?

"If he had been more analytical, he might have calculated the approximate time of their arrival; but he still used the lifetime habit of judging nightfall by the sky, and on cloudy days that method didn't work. That was why he chose to stay near the house on those days."

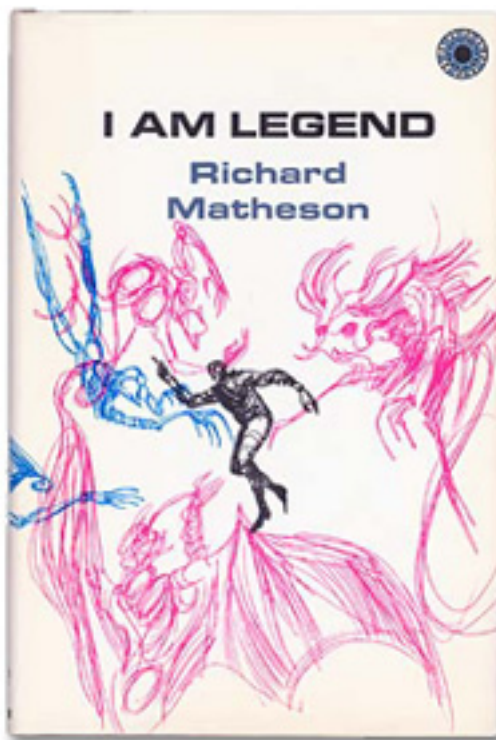
Right away we know that Neville is more emotional than rational, more cowardly than heroic. He is a smoker, a drinker, and not much of a thinker. He is our only hope.

In *I Am Legend*, vampires are the threat, but Neville is the problem. He appears to be normal: "a tall man, thirty-six, born of English-German stock, his features undistinguished except for the long, determined mouth and the bright blue of his eyes." We could do worse. But there's trouble under the stoic heroic. Neville "loathed" his father Fritz for his "logic and mechanical facility," and we sense that Neville doesn't have much of that facility.

Vampires have regulated his life. They only come out at night, and that keeps Neville close to home, striking back at the vampires when the sun is out. His entire life has become a slavish devotion to anti-vampire rules of engagement. "Old Fritz" would be proud, if he were still alive, and if his son weren't such a bungler.

Neville is not a brilliant tactician. The

novel opens with him pacing, smoking, and cursing with impatience. It's hard to tell what frustrates him the most: the vampires, the solitary life, or his vast ignorance. He plods along anyway, a faulty engine that refuses to quit. In the course of the novel he is a cook, carpenter, electrician, healer, car mechanic, janitor, biologist, chemist, and



assassin. He learns most of these skills by reading manuals and by trial and error. Matheson dwells on the minutiae of Neville's habits and the rigors of domestic upkeep: reinforcing the house, taking out the garbage, cutting garlic cloves (25 necklaces, twice a week), and whittling stakes. He doesn't do this by choice; he does it because he will die if he doesn't.

In *I Am Legend*, laziness is life-threatening. Neville can never rest. He must be responsible, every hour of every day. He is awake at 5:30am, and out the door with a to-do list. He carries his lunch like a hardhat, always on the clock, working, working. He is locked in routine, as dedicated as the garbageman, the newspaper deliverer, the convenience store clerk, and the traffic cop, waking up earlier than every-

body else, performing a macabre neighborhood service.

This is the central conflict of the book: not Neville vs. the vampires, but Neville vs. Neville; or rather, it is Neville vs. the Neville he fails to become. It is up to him to fix his house, cook his meals, and fight off the living dead. On top of that, he has to grind up the garbage in the sink, clean the furniture, scrub the toilet, change the sheets, brush his teeth, and use dental floss, "because he was his own dentist now." Flossing! He's the last man on Earth and he's flossing! That's more heroic than any fistfight with the undead. Neville is a lower middle-class man who must over-achieve to save the human race.

Though he is overworked, he enjoys none of the comforts of a working man: no family, no wife or girlfriend, no drinking buddies, no vacation, not even a hammock or a lawn chair to sit on. He has his alcohol, his cigarettes, and his music (all classical, from his mother), but no human companionship or ability to travel. He is an isolated man, with never a moment's happiness, only fleeting adrenaline rushes and dreams of the past. There's no point in flossing when nobody's around to smell your breath, and there's enough booze to dull the pain of a toothache.

So why do it? "Some things could go to pot, but not his health, he thought. Then why don't you stop pouring alcohol into yourself? he thought. Why don't you shut the hell up? he thought." How can he overthrow a world population of vampires when he can't control the battle of his mind?

This is the story of a man of feeling who learns to live alone, slowly, painfully. He was once a father and a husband, with a job, a home, and a neighbor named Ben. Now he is a frantic murdering paranoid, turning his house into a purely functional fortress, the grief over his dead wife and daughter drowning in booze. He doesn't have the brains of a scientist or the patience of a saint. "I'm an animal! he exulted. I'm a *dumb, stupid* animal and I'm going to drink!" He survives at the cost of his humanity.

The scenes of Neville duking it out with

the vampires and ambushing them in their sleep are anti-heroic to the extreme. During the first morning of the story, he drags a pair of corpses “the color of fish out of water” across the yard. He enters a house of the undead with the guilt of a burglar, and after slaying an adult vampire, he stakes a child that reminds him of his own dead daughter. There is no joy in killing, and no grace in running away. In a narrow escape from the vampires, Neville runs them down in his car, stumbles out, forgets his keys, loses the power in his house, and re-emerges on the porch with a gun, shooting the vampires out of rage. Nothing redeems him. Matheson has created in Neville a classic antagonist. Compared to the vampires, who by all intents and purposes are running the planet, Neville is an aberration. His actions are ugly, clumsy, and murderous, as far away from the human ideal as the bloodthirsty creatures surrounding him. “All he does is drink blood,” Neville muses about the vampire; and as for him, he does far more, and far worse.

Matheson blurs the line between vampire and human, hero and villain. Neville is determined to stay alive. How brave, how butch. But the necessary methods of survival have turned him into a hermit, against his own nature.

One of the great myths of modern culture is the supremacy of the independent man. Being a “self-made” man, living by his own wits, his own counsel, is the stuff of fictional heroism. With *I Am Legend*, Matheson takes that ideal to its absurd extreme. Here is a man *forced* to be independent, *forced* to be a lone-gun outlaw, and we see how perverse the truly independent man can become.

Neville broods upon this in the library, recalling the “maiden librarian” who used to work there: “He thought about that visionary lady. To die, he thought, never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one’s embrace. To sink into that hideous coma, sink then into death and, perhaps, return to sterile, awful wanderings. All without knowing what it was to love and be loved. That was a tragedy more terrible than becoming a vampire.”

He dismisses such thoughts as “maudlin reveries”; again, the inner conflict. He knows in his heart that he cannot go on alone, but he goes on anyway, forcing himself to be smarter, faster, and more ruthless than the vampires. *I Am Legend* gives the lie to the virtue of the indomitable human spirit. Neville may have an indomitable

spirit, but it’s hardly human.

I haven’t mentioned the dog yet.

During most of the story, the vampires control the book’s plot and momentum, with Neville being the frustrated reactor. But once the dog appears, the balance of the story shifts to Neville. At that point, and until the dog’s death, Neville is the protagonist. Matheson shoves the vampires to the background, and focuses on man and animal.

I can think of no more heartbreaking passage in horror literature than Neville’s nerve-wracked seduction of the dog. He sees the dog at his lowest point: weeks of painstaking cellular research have added up to nothing but more guesswork from the layman scientist. “He stayed drunk for two days and planned on staying drunk till the end of time, or the world’s whisky supply, whichever came first.”

Then he sees the “miracle”: a live creature, walking around in the daytime. The house goes to pot; the cellular experiments stop; he quits drinking; he gives no thought to vampire slaying. All that matters to him is connecting with this injured, hungry, frightened animal.

Matheson handles these passages delicately, never once stooping to sentiment. Neville is self-aware. He knows exactly how pathetic he is for obsessing about the dog, but he can’t help himself. He has lost all hope in the scientific method, and his own capacity for rational thought. Now he feels an emotional hope: “The eagerness he’d felt upon seeing the germ in his microscope was nothing compared with what he felt about the dog.” This is the romance of *I Am Legend*, and Matheson doesn’t play it for laughs. The dog restores a traditional faith in Neville, who once despised religious fundamentalism, and now clasps his hands in prayer every night, wishing good health to the dog and a visit the next day. Has Neville snapped? Matheson tells it straight: the fate of the world hinges on Neville’s success in getting a pet. The vampires do not intrude here, showing Matheson’s confidence in the power of this material.

Little by little, Neville gains the trust of the dog, who is understandably cautious. The suspense builds with each tiny victory of seduction. When Neville finally gets the dog in his house, it needs a covering to feel safe. Neville wraps up the animal, holds it in his lap, and talks to it for hours. This is the climax of the novel:

“The dog looked up at him with its

dulled, sick eyes and then its tongue faltered out and licked roughly and moistly across the palm of Neville’s hand.

“Something broke in Neville’s throat. He sat there silently while tears ran slowly down his cheeks.

“In a week the dog was dead.”

Matheson says nothing about what Neville is thinking and feeling here. We see an image, an action, and a reaction. We don’t need to be told what Neville is thinking: this is what he wanted, all those months alone. This emotional hope caused him no end of torment, but now he has his reward. Then Matheson jerks the cord and the dog is gone, the hope dashed.

Neville’s story is over at this point. He is finished. “I don the robe of hermit without a cry, he thought.” Seeking nothing, wishing for nothing, he is passive, not even an antagonist. So the vampires seek him out, to end the book.

Parts III and IV are a dramatic letdown. By abandoning all hope, Neville is doomed; the only question is how and when. The character Ruth sparks a bit of human interest, and yet she is so obviously a vampire spy, with her blatant pity for the vampires, and her lack of true emotion when talking about her past, that there is no real suspense.

Neville doesn’t listen to Ruth, and the vampires take him prisoner. We have a glimpse of the vampire life. They have established tribes, claimed territory, and declared martial law. Neville is witnessing a perverse rebirth of Man, and he is their predator. “I’m the abnormal one now,” he thinks. In the years to come, he will be their campfire tale: the daywalking demon who murdered them in their sleep. And at this point in the story, when Neville is an unfeeling shell of a man, killing vampires just to prolong his own lonely existence, he isn’t much better than a boogeyman. He was dead long before the vampires put him out of his misery.

If Neville were a misanthropic character from the start, *I Am Legend* would be a dreary apocalypse. By giving Neville so many flaws and wishes, and by letting a dog wander into the neighborhood, Matheson creates a human tragedy.

We feed on emotions as passionately, and as greedily, as any vampire feeds on blood. This is the story of a man starving for hope, in a world starving for blood. ~

Ken Provencher resides in Massachusetts