

# Tacky jewelry raises dead, starts apocalypse

by Justin Harrison

The end of the world will begin with grave robbing. A man clad in leather armor will claw open a fresh grave and take someone's skull in his left hand. This done, he will then recite an unusual oath, "The Blackest Night falls from the skies. The darkness grows as all light dies! We crave your hearts and your demise! By

"have been really prevalent lately, but I think they have about run their course for a while."

Although vampires and zombies are currently the most popular types of undead, unique takes on those who will not stay buried, or modified interpretations of the popular archetypes are just as prevalent. Lewis Lovhaug, the writer and host of *Atop the Fourth Wall*, de-

monsters as evil, and even in the case of mindless hordes of zombies, they're not necessarily evil in themselves, because they are not even conscious, but they still represent evil as an idea." On vampires, and why some of the otherwise extremely disturbing actions they take are seen as romantic by fans, Grunert says "Vampires have always been a romantic idea, at least in the literary sense. But they have also

you should." Popular video game franchise *Resident Evil* takes this warning to its logical extreme in its story, with the ruthless Umbrella Corporation ultimately wiping out an entire city in the name of zombie-based weapons testing.

*Blackest Night* is set to conclude next April, and fans of the undead have several big projects to look forward to. An adaptation of *World War Z* is in develop-



Picture by Emma Godfrey

The Black Lantern Corps proved to be less than fond of journalists. And artists. And online humorists.

my black hand, the dead shall rise!" As he speaks, both the black ring on his right hand and the pilfered skull begin to glow with an ominous light, while a small blue figure hiding in the shadows of a nearby tree laughs quietly. So begins DC comics' *Blackest Night*, both the latest entry into the Green Lantern mythos and one of the more prominent examples of the undead's recent popularity in US pop culture.

In the span of about five years, the undead have made a major return to the entertainment world. Max Brooks' *World War Z* has drawn rave reviews; George A. Romero has restarted his *Living Dead* franchise to moderate success; *Buff*, the show which helped define much of the current horror movement, has resumed in comic form; the *Twilight* juggernaut continues to be a financial success; and DC is using their own take on the undead as the basis for their current big crossover story. Jason Grunert, the author of *I-Mockery's "Tales from the Longbox"* attributes this recent popularity to cycles, saying "in the fifties it was all science fiction and men from Mars. The seventies was all disaster movies. Vampires were big in the nineties, and are just now seeing a big comeback." Zombies, he says,

scribes *Blackest Night's* Black Lantern corps as a modified version of the traditional zombie, saying "Black Lanterns are to zombies what *Twilight* vampires are to vampires of lore - there are similar elements, but they do not follow the same kind of tropes. For one thing, despite the Black Lanterns continually crying "FLESH!" they do not actually consume flesh like regular zombies - just the heart. And even then, unlike zombies, the Black Lanterns are fully intelligent and have all the memories of the person."

Often, a viewer's perception of the undead and of those who fight them can play a large role in their enjoyment of the story. Grunert notes that zombies' inherent lack of humanity allows the protagonists to do things that would be considered horrific in reality, saying "Anytime you dehumanize something it is more acceptable to act violently towards it." Not only is a protagonist's violence accepted in zombie stories, but the characters can sometimes be portrayed as an almost messianic figure, which Grunert says is "only natural... in a story where they are fighting against a massive, inarguably evil force. Nobody is going to question the motives of intelligent undead

been largely portrayed as sociopathic or monstrous in their behavior... They are still largely the villains. And in cases where they are the protagonist... the story is often framed so we identify with that character."

As a literary device, the undead have their origins in the Romantic era, and some aspects of that time's values are still prevalent in today's stories. Almost always there will be an element of caution with the stories, a remnant of the Romantic's distrust of scientific progress. From a broad perspective, *Blackest Night* begins because several groups are unwilling to compromise with each other, and decide to go to war wielding the power of the emotional spectrum. As a result of this, the Black Lanterns rise to put an end to such petty conflicts by exterminating all life in existence. Grunert says that most modern horror tries to warn the audience not to "play God. You see that all the time in horror movies, where the zombie uprising is the result of a company that was too ambitious, creating some kind of drug or virus that gets out of control. It all goes back to that idea that just because you can do something doesn't necessarily mean that

ment, *Zombieland* is a box office smash, and *Buff*'s season eight is set to conclude in 2010. For those interested in following *Blackest Night*, Lovhaug recommends reading *Green Lantern: Rebirth*, *The Sinestro Corps War*, *Rage of the Red Lanterns*, *Sins of the Star Sapphires* and *Agent Orange*, saying that "the entirety of Geoff Johns' run on Green Lantern has been building to this, but those are the collected trades that have the most relevance."

However long the undead's popularity lasts, their current time in the spotlight has left several indelible imprints on modern popular culture. Zombies have learned to run, have been given a variety of different names, and have been created by malevolent, questionably designed space jewelry. Vampires have expanded the forms of which they can take, broadened the powers they can wield, and have taken to settling turf wars with baseball instead of violence. The quality of these tales has varied wildly, from being surprisingly fun despite odd aesthetic decisions, to mildly traumatizing to, at times, being outright offensive. Vacillations and all, it has been an undeniably interesting ride.