

I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations



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Amy J. Ransom. *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 231 pp. \$45.00. ISBN 9781476668338.

ALTHOUGH it misses some opportunities to engage more rigorously with theories of race and masculinity, Amy J. Ransom's comprehensive book about Richard Matheson's horror/sf novel *I Am Legend* and its many screen adaptations is an eminently readable and useful addition to critical literature on the horror/science fiction genre, studies of Richard Matheson's oeuvre, and the intertwined histories of literature, film, and mass media in twentieth and early twenty-first century texts. Before reading this book, I was mostly ignorant about the pervasive nature of Matheson's 1954 text in structuring horror/sci-fi conventions of the late twentieth century. After finishing this book, I'm convinced that *I Am Legend* deserves an exceptional position as a reflecting pool for social concerns about masculinity as well as race and race-mixing in a United States context.

The best part of *American Myth* is in its lucid treatment of the historical and cultural context for the series. Ransom is thorough in discussing literary and filmic antecedents for the "last man" apocalyptic narrative (such as M. P. Shiel's novel *The Purple Cloud* [1901] and *The World, The Flesh and the Devil* [1959], written and directed by Randal MacDougall). Historical details -- of production and direction of the adaptations, as well as of Matheson's response to those adaptations -- are interestingly and usefully explained in an accessible way. Finally, Ransom's overall argument about the most recent iterations of *I Am Legend* as conjecturing a "post-white" United States is persuasive (181).

The first chapter, "The Trauma of World War II and the Decline of Western 'Right,'" includes a thorough critical summary of the originary novel, situating Matheson's work both historically -- as a response to post-WW2 and Cold War fears -- and generically, as the vampire novel Matheson intended it to be. Thematically, Ransom is most concerned with the figure of the protagonist and the different interpretations of the Robert Neville character. Even in the 1954 original text, Matheson's Neville "problematizes the white male's role as arbiter of right" with his erratic behavior and symbolic castration (being the only surviving human foreclosing possibilities for reproduction) (56). One of the interventions of the original narrative is its illustration of the "Last Man" post-apocalyptic narrative,

one that is “symptomatic of the gravity of the national crisis in white masculinity and its traditionally perceived prerogatives” (82). Ransom’s use of “star” theory guides the second and third chapters, in which she analyzes the first filmic adaptations of Matheson’s book, the 1964 film *The Last Man on Earth* and 1971’s *The Omega Man*.

Chapter 2 is a well-reasoned argument that reads Matheson’s two novels *The Shrinking Man* (1956) and *I AL* in order to establish Matheson’s thematic interest with depicting a “crisis of masculinity” (112). This claim is then used to examine the casting and performance of Vincent Price as the protagonist in the first film adaptation of *I AL* and how Price’s interpretation of the character makes clearer the more submissive and perhaps queered role of a bachelor being pursued by “lustful” vampires and locked in a passionate relationship with his vampire suitor, neighbor and friend-in-a-former-life Ben Cortman. The third chapter, “The Last White Man on Earth: Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man*,” intervenes in critical conversations about the film that have overly relied on the “star persona” (12) of Charlton Heston and his reinforcement of a strong, masculine protagonist (in contrast to the earlier film starring Price) to define their interpretation of the film. Indeed, Ransom comes to show that *Omega*’s messages regarding race and masculinity are more ambivalent than critics have historically argued, and that the film “retained the subversive core of Matheson’s novel and its interrogation of its white hero and his moral imperative” (127).

While *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man* register cultural fears about the Cold War and Vietnam respectively, Ransom situates the two most recent adaptations of Matheson’s text -- two films produced in 2007, Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* and Griff Furst’s *I Am Omega* -- in their position as post 9/11 U.S. cultural productions. The section on Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* takes up the question of “what it means when the last man on earth is black” (160). Although it is Lawrence’s film that has garnered the most critical and popular attention in recent years, I also appreciated Ransom’s exegesis of its straight-to-DVD homologue, a more flashy interpretation of the original text -- this time featuring cannibalistic zombies and martial arts -- that nevertheless raises interesting questions about the future of an increasingly multiracial U.S.

While it’s a given that there is no single totalizing mythos that defines the history of the United States, reading race and gender at the center of U.S. horror/science fiction endeavors is a sound place to start. If anything, I wish that Ransom had engaged more with foundational theory about race and feminist theories of masculinity. Since the book already utilizes critical terms such as “star” theory and adaptation to inform the argument, I think a deeper engagement with critical race theory as well as theories about masculinity to inform her reading of the protagonists’ various identities throughout the adaptations would have been helpful.

Ultimately, Amy J. Ransom's book is clever, well-argued, and accessible to lay readers interested in the horror/science fiction genre, movie adaptations, and 20th century film and "star" histories. Because of the nature of the subject matter (using a variety of theoretical lenses to study a text and its adaptations by different people at different times), it is also an ideal book for undergraduates to learn how to usefully compare and close-read texts and their adaptations. For the more serious scholar of Matheson, Ransom offers both a comprehensive introduction to literary criticism about *I Am Legend*, as well as lucid new readings of the significance of the text, reminding us that the barriers between "literature" and "mass media" are increasingly permeable, and best understood as the inextricable realities that they represent.