

I am Legend: Apocalypse soon

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Directed by Francis Lawrence, written by Mark Protosevich and Akiva Goldsman, based on the novel by Richard Matheson

I Am Legend, based on a 1954 novel of the same title, stars actor Will Smith as Dr. Robert Neville, a scientist living in New York City in the year 2012. The film starts off with an ordinary newscast hailing the discovery of a vaccine for cancer. It is a “cure,” once believed impossible, that could potentially save the lives of millions all over the planet.

The next scenes we see are intensely disturbing.

New York City has been transformed into a ghost town. The entire island of Manhattan has been depopulated, the Brooklyn Bridge destroyed and the latter’s remains lie submerged under water. The streets are clogged with abandoned vehicles, suggesting that some horrific disaster has taken place.

The “sole survivor” of this catastrophe is Neville, who lives a life of solitude as he searches for more survivors in the city. His only companion is a faithful German shepherd he names “Sam,” short for Samantha. If possibly being the last member of the human alive race wasn’t wretched enough, Neville must also face an army of darkness every time the sun sets. Apparently, the much heralded “cure” for cancer released a deadly virus of staggering proportions. Most of the world’s population was killed off, while those who survived mutated into mindless, pale and blood-thirsty zombies. Despite having superhuman strength and reflexes, they quickly die if they are exposed to the sun’s UV radiation. Hence, Neville dubs them “dark seekers.”

As time wears on, Neville becomes dehumanized himself. He follows a daily regimen to keep his spirits up: cultivating crops in the park, hunting the wildlife that has spilled over into the city and playing golf off the deck of an aircraft carrier. With no one else to talk to, he can only communicate with his trusted canine.

His only hope in life is that someone else is still alive. Meanwhile, he captures some of the infected mutants and drags them back to his underground laboratory. The idea being that he can conduct medical research on them in search of a cure.

Thus, much of the film lacks any substantial dialogue, although Smith does manage to inject some much needed humor into the story. Interspersed throughout out the movie are flashbacks from the year 2009, in which we see Neville frantically trying to save his family from New York’s impending doom. In these sequences we learn that the disease has overtaken much of the city, which is only hours away from being sealed off by a military-enforced quarantine.

The huddled masses who want to flee the city must pass through an army checkpoint, and only those who are disease-free or who have military connections, like Neville’s family, are allowed to escape. We see a woman and her child prevented from boarding an emergency airlift because a military retina scan shows she is carrying the disease. Eventually the Brooklyn Bridge is blown up by military jets circling overhead, effectively sealing off the city. One helicopter is overwhelmed by an excess number of passengers and crash-lands. This calls to mind, and this is presumably the filmmakers’ intention, the evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon in 1975, and even the so-called rescue operations in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

This scene, one of the most expensive scenes ever shot on location in New York City, is ultimately a depressing and dismal glimpse of the future. Abandoned by the state, humanity is shown to be incapable of rescuing itself, not unlike the mutants Neville is trying to save. Like many typical disaster movies, it envisions a world where the great mass of people are incapable of rational planning, and when social breakdown arises only the military and police are

able to keep the hordes at bay.

The original novel tried to provide a scientific explanation for the virus and its monstrous effects on humans. It was said to have been a huge influence on George A. Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*. In 1971, a version starring Charlton Heston was released under the title *The Omega Man*, and it too tried to go into more detail along these lines, although it was a very weak effort. While the latest version offers a somewhat more sophisticated explanation as to how humanity arrived in such an awful predicament, it fails to show in a meaningful manner how human beings would react under such conditions.

At the climax of the film, the only real dialogue is a rather trite conversation about God between Neville and another survivor named Anna. "The world is a lot quieter now," she says, "We just have to listen. If we listen, we can hear God's plan." Neville then goes on to point out that this was a man-made epidemic and that God does not exist. At this point, the characters seem to have run out of things to say and the director, Francis Lawrence, primarily a music video director heretofore, probably sensing this, decides to cut to the chase and turn up the physical action. Like too many big-budgeted films coming out of Hollywood, whenever the audience's attention threatens to wane for lack of substance, right on cue the computer-generated special effects are called in and for a moment we are temporarily distracted from the obvious holes in the plot and its inconsistencies.

Without revealing too many details, Neville ultimately becomes humanity's savior while Anna and her son Ethan are able to escape the city in search of more survivors. All in all, the movie ends in a highly clichéd and predictable manner. At the screening this reviewer attended, the audience released a collective groan of disappointment, having seen this sort of conclusion in at least a dozen other films.

Ultimately, there is something quite repugnant about the concept of "survivalism" in this type of gloomy science fiction work—its glorification of the individual surviving "at all costs," its willingness to abandon humanity and civilization to their fate and its irrational fear of "others," usually large groups of people and/or cities. It can too easily be associated with those who believe the apocalypse is just around the corner, and that nothing can be done about it, that "paranoid style

in American politics" described by Richard Hofstadter in an influential 1964 essay.

I Am Legend is not the worst representative of this type of "Armageddon" culture, but it reflects (and exploits) confused fears and anxieties about the future without shedding any real light on them.



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