

# Max Brooks' *World War Z* brought to the screen, or is it?

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27 June 2013

*Directed by Mark Forster; written by Matthew Michael Carnahan, Drew Goddard and Damon Lindelof; based on the novel by Max Brooks*

When a film claims to be based on a book, there is a natural anticipation that its storyline will have something to do with said book. Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006), reviewed by the WSWs, was a sharp critique of the state of the infrastructure in America, political expediency and the deep-going decay of the society.

Published in the aftermath of September 11, Hurricane Katrina and any number of smaller disasters, the narrative in Brooks' work depicted a worldwide catastrophe, a "zombie war," rendered all the more horrific by the lack of official response. The film, as envisioned by Brad Pitt, director Marc Forster and company, is no such thing.

Given the wide geographic scope of the novel, a certain amount of trimming on that account was to be expected. Likewise, it would have been impossible to include every character in the book—or even half of them—in the usual run-time of a major release film. However, what we have here is a dramatic departure from the source material, with virtually the only commonality being the title and the monsters.

Even taken as a story on its own terms, the film version of *World War Z* has serious problems.

The film opens on a warm domestic scene at the Lane household. Patriarch Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt), a retired NGO worker, makes pancakes for his wife and daughters. The news plays in the background. There's an undefined series of emergencies going on, with flashes of commentators and crowd footage, but no clear idea comes through of what the problem might be. Martial law has been declared in some areas, and one of the daughters asks what that means. Lane describes it as

being "like house rules, but for everybody."

The family's trouble starts when they are caught in a traffic jam in downtown Philadelphia. Stopped cars and trucks stretch for miles, and there is a claustrophobic feel to the scene, with dark buildings hemming in the vehicles and their occupants on either side. The vehicles are lined up surprisingly neatly—a detail that is effectively contrasted to the chaos about to ensue.

That chaos takes the form of swarming, fast-moving zombies. They flow through the street as a biting, growing wave, quickly turning all those they reach into a part of the seething whole. The movements of the creatures are quite different from previous depictions of zombies. This is due to very strenuous study and work on the part of a group of dancers.

One of those involved told the WSWs that the performers were trained to move in very specific ways, and directed against letting any prior zombie films influence their actions. The end result is quite terrifying, the more so because there are a few scenes that do take on a balletic character. There are some remarkable leaps—verging on flight—and the animal-like swiftness is an accomplishment.

The Lane family abandons their car, hijacks a recreational vehicle and drives out of the city. They pass scenes of chaos, and ultimately end up in New York City, where Gerry has arranged with a former co-worker from the UN, Thierry (Fana Mokoena), to be helicoptered out.

By the time the family reaches the rendezvous spot, they've gained a new member in Tommy, a boy whose family had given the Lanes shelter, but who have apparently been absorbed by the monsters. When the group gets to safety—which turns out to be on one of a fleet of US Navy vessels off the coast of New York—Gerry is given the choice of working for the US

government or being thrown off the ship, along with his family. Of course, he agrees to work for the government.

A major theme of the novel has been trampled on in the film adaptation of *World War Z* --that of the government's indifference, lying and incompetence in the face of the catastrophe. Here instead we see the last best hope presented in the form of the military.

A scientist is briefly involved--young and full of wonder, he views nature as a challenge—and there is promise in his eagerness. He's killed off almost immediately. The action around this incident is muddled, almost as though the cast were just winging it at that point. In any event, this leaves Gerry as the only one who can apparently search for an answer to the zombie problem.

There are a few poignant scenes—the film is not lacking in talented actors, among them Pitt himself. These sequences, however, stand out as exceptions.

It seems clear that writing *World War Z*'s screenplay was a difficult process. Indeed, there were at least two versions of the script--including one by J. Michael Straczynski, rumored to be faithful to the book--and there were a series of re-writes even as filming was underway.

This is not unusual, but the reasons for some of the revisions does a disservice to the source material. In order to ensure passing the censors in Beijing, for example, “patient zero,” a young infected boy, was relocated from rural China to South Korea. In addition, an extended scene in Russia was axed in deference to that government. In attempting not to offend, the film is rendered largely toothless and devolves into yet another story of a lone hero out to save the world.

In an effort to afford Gerry Lane *some* dignity, he is allowed to be unhappy about being forced into working with the authorities, but this is pretty weakly portrayed, given that he moves easily within official circles, and much energy is spent on getting him from place to place.

The scenes taking place in Israel, where a wall has been built to keep the zombies at bay, are visually stunning. The aerial footage of the wall being breached, the ant-like piling up of the former humans and their overrunning of Jerusalem once inside is frantic and tense. In the midst of this, a couple of interesting things happen, including the rather heavy-handed dawning of

an idea for a possible solution to the crisis.

Ultimately, Lane and an Israeli soldier, Segen (Daniella Kertesz), who survives a zombie bite when Gerry takes drastic measures, land in Wales, hoping to access the World Health Organization's lab. The last third of the film relies heavily on Pitt's acting abilities, and to his credit he does bring some believability to a fairly predictable and dippy segment.

The immunization theory Lane develops and tests on himself is yet another departure from the book--and a significant one, at that. In the original, the fact that the immunization was known to be ineffective but nevertheless promoted as sound factors heavily in the spread of the zombie plague and is used to roundly damn the officials interviewed by the narrator. Here we have a government official, however “reluctant,” attempting to save the remnants of humanity.

The end of *World War Z* is something of a jumble. As if to make up for the stripping away of socially insightful commentary in the previous nearly two hours, a voice-over suddenly exhorts us to “help each other” and “be prepared for anything.” We are also warned that, “our war has just begun.” What is this supposed to mean? There is a disconnect between what we have just been presented with and the last minute or so. The confusion on the part of Pitt and the writers comes through clearly.



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