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Zombies as an Allegory for Terrorism: Understanding the Social Impact of Post-9/11 Security Theatre and the Existential Threat of Terrorism through the Work of Mira Grant

Tamsin Phillipa Paige 



Abstract, This paper seeks to understand the impact upon society of “security theatre”: being the proliferation of security legislation and processes, particularly in the context of airport security screening. Security theatre is a response to the ongoing threat of terrorist attack without warning since September 11, 2001. While as lawyers we have a clear understanding of the laws have been put in place in response to these issues, we often have very little real grasp of how these laws impact society at large. Responses to social change are often first documented in popular literature. This paper seeks to explore the social impact of security theatre through examining bestselling popular literature that was intended as an allegory of these issues. Thus, the approach taken is to use such literature as a sociological text to provide insight into social responses. To that end Mira Grant’s apocalyptic Newsflesh trilogy and interviews with Grant about these topics within the books will be analysed and explored with a view to understanding the social impact of security theatre. My hope that we gain greater insight into the social perception of these issues, and the ability to view them from a different perspective.

Keywords, Terrorism, security theatre, 9/11, zombies, social control, fear

I. INTRODUCTION

In a world where the US government is releasing statements claiming that a Death Star would not be compliant with IHL,1 where the Australian Red Cross and the ICRC are analysing the conduct of characters in Game of Thrones for

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their compliance with IHL,2 and legal scholars analyse the beginning of Star Wars: A New Hope to determine whether or not the destruction of Alderaan could be considered justifiable under the doctrine of just war,3 legal analysis of popular fiction is no longer the anomaly that it once was. However, while all of these other noted incidences are lawyers analysing popular fiction in an effort to make difficult and abstract concepts of law relevant to the general public, in this paper I will be doing the exact opposite. This paper doesn’t try and understand how law in Mira Grant’s4 Newsflesh trilogy is handled in order to demonstrate how that law functions in society today, rather I will be using Grant’s fictional account of a post-zombie apocalypse world to help understand the social impact of transnational laws that have created ubiquitous security theatre regulations, and the existential threat of terrorism that these regulations and procedures cre-ates. This is possible because storytelling is a key feature of how humanity makes meaning of situations, and Grant, by her own admission wrote the trilogy “about Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Alliance, and all of these things that create an illusion of dangers that so they can be the solution.”5 Beyond Grant’s intention to write the trilogy about the impact (and pointless-ness) of security theatre,6 the trilogy is useful as a sociological tool to under-standing social perceptions of these issues because the social resonance of the stories is clearly demonstrated in that each novel in the trilogy was nominated for a Hugo Award,7 and Feed (book one of the series) was 76 on NPR’s Top 100 Killer Thrillers List and was a Publishers Weekly Best Book of 2010.8 Further, Grant is the author of numerous bestselling novels,9 has won Campbell Award,10 a Hugo award,11 a Locus award,12 and a Nebula award13 (and she was the first person to be nominated for 5 Hugo Awards on the same ballot).14 This clear evi-dence of social impact is important because it reveals that the series has created a culturally resonant narrative on these issues which means that it has consist-ently caused readers to draw parallels between the narrative as told and reality as experienced;15 a key feature of narratives that form a part of social fabric – namely that authors of fiction use the freedom accorded by storytelling to reveal truths about society.16 This is a phenomenon that Grant is clearly aware of, as demonstrated by her statement: “horror movies are educational, if you know how to pay attention to them. They tell you about social trends – about the things that people are afraid of.”17

In this paper will explore two separate but linked ideas. In Part II I will out-line the narrative and world that Grant creates in the Newsflesh trilogy, focusing on the state of the world as this is central focus of the analysis that follows in this article. In Part III I explore the social impact of the overt regulation of soci-ety in the name of security. In this process I will briefly define what is under-stood by the term “security theatre”, and then I will outline the ways in which Grant sets up within her narrative world a detailed framework of social

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regulation the name of security designed to be a mirror for transnational laws and regulations that govern movement in the post-9/11 world. After illustrating how Grant sets up this mirror, I will examine the broadly five different responses had within the trilogy to this regulation and ordering of everyday life.18 It is worth noting at this juncture that these responses are designed to be conceptu-ally helpful generalisations based on analogies presented in the form of individ-ual characters in the series, not definitive empirical categories.19 In Part IV I will parse out the social impact of living with the perennial and existential threat that a terrorist attack could occur at any moment, something that Grant unpacks through her use of the constant background threat of another zombie outbreak. This section will include an examination of the rich research that has already been done on the role of zombies in socio-cultural analysis. The paper will con-clude by drawing these two threads together to provide an overview of how trans-national laws around security have been weaponised by lawmakers to create a culture of fear within the voting populace disproportionate to the actual nature of the threat. The analogous points in the Newsflesh books to reality often focus parallels in contemporary Australian society as a consequence of my expertise as a researcher; however, the fact that Grant is an American author writing in the context of an American socio-cultural setting, and that parallels from her work to US and UK society are also drawn highlights that findings here are conceptually valuable to Anglo-centric societies.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE NEWSFLESH SERIES

At its core, the Newsflesh trilogy is a political conspiracy thriller that just hap-pens to be set 26 years after the zombie apocalypse. It is about the concentration of power in bureaucratic institutions within government, and the ways in which these institutions act to maintain their power once it has been acquired – rather than being about zombies. The series starts circa 2040 with protagonists George, Shaun, and Buffy being invited to be part of the press pool for the presidential election campaign of moderate Republican candidate Senator Peter Ryman, mak-ing them the first independent media representatives to receive such an invita-tion. Grant quickly outlines that at the point where the zombie apocalypse commenced, society lost faith in the mainstream media because of their sluggish response (and often outright denial of events) which led to the rise of bloggers becoming a primary source of information in society. This then led to governmen-tal regulation on these bloggers creating effectively a second stream of journalism that was independent journalists operating via blog collectives.

Upon receiving their invitation to join Senator Ryman on the campaign trail to report on his tilt at the Oval Office, George, Shaun, and Buffy break away from the collective that they are a part of the form their own blog collective:

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“After the End Times”. While on the campaign trail the protagonists managed to survive a number of zombie outbreaks, which they discover were intentionally created as assassination attempts on Senator Ryman. In the process of digging into who was responsible for the assassination attempts, the After the End Times team uncover that right wing Republican Governor Tate (who was Senator Ryman’s opponent in the primaries, and running mate in the general election) was behind the very public and intentional zombie outbreaks, causing them in an effort to return America to a state of fear with the goal of restoring society’s moral core through fear.

The second book in the series opens with the After the End Times team is dis-covering that Governor Tate was merely a stalking horse for senior bureaucrats within government (who are later discovered to be the senior management of the CDC – a department that operates as a mirror for Homeland Security and the TSA). The remainder of the trilogy centres on the After the End Times team work-ing to discover the depths of the conspiracy, and those responsible, while evading attempts to have them neutralised. The trilogy concludes with the After the End Times team making public the corruption and malfeasance of the CDC leadership.

III. SECURITY THEATRE AFTER THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

It doesn’t take long for Grant to start setting the mirror to post-9/11 security the-atre within the series. Very early in Feed, Grant establishes the different areas of geography and different classifications of security threat level contained within these areas, and based upon that threat level sets out the regulations for entry and exit into each zone.20 Much like entry into the difference security zones of transportation hubs throughout the world is dependent on invasive checks and scans to determine that the individual is not capable of carrying out an act of ter-rorism, so to Grant sets of a system of regulation where individuals need to prove that they are not in an active zombie state in order to be cleared to enter an area determined to be a zombie free zone.21 Throughout the series, Grant reinforces the normative nature in society of all of these security procedures that are designed to ensure that the populous are safe from the perennial threat of the zombies that lurk outside of these secure zones.22 Grant also sets up heavy regu-lation on movement between different zones that are considered to be restricted due to the threat level posed,23 in a way that mirrors legislation criminalising travel to certain parts of the world.24 Perhaps the most poignant mirror that Grant sets is the way in which, towards the end of the series, all of the regula-tions regarding journalists are weaponised to control information flows during a time of emergency,25 something that we are seeing in Australia through recent raids over leaked national security documents that are of public interest.26

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The environment that is described by Grant accords with the research that has been done analysing “security theatre” environments, and security driven society. The post-9/11 world has shifted security dynamics in palpable ways, making the focus of security regulations one of the performative ritual and the-atre.27 In this dynamic, security takes on a Butler-esque performative dimen-sion,28 whereby the populous are reminded that it is the government who keeps them safe from external threats.29 To understand this performative aspect of security that is intrinsic to security theatre, an understanding of Butler’s work on the inherently performative nature of law is necessary. Butler generally posits that black letter law is the symbolised ideal of law, while law in reality is the social interactions that the ideal creates within society.30 When this concept is applied to security, the symbolised ideal is the legislation and regulations that articulate the frameworks and procedures that are to be implemented in a secur-ity space (such as an airport). From this symbolised ideal we have the social rela-tions of the government officials performing security by enacting those regulations on the populous by either deeming them safe and free to proceed, or suspect and in need of further checking. This action (or performance) of imple-menting legal procedure and regulations take the law from symbolised ideal to physical reality. Further, it is the public nature of this performance of security that takes it from being an ordinary act of performative law, into being a public spectacle – hence the term “security theatre”. In this dynamic, the spectacle of bor-der security serves the primary purpose of heightening fear and anxiety in those who participate,31 casting the zombie/terrorist as monstrous in order to heighten paranoia and generate a pliable populous.32 The spectacle itself is structured in such a way that it compels participants to feel that the threat faced is both exter-nal and numerous in nature, and that they are only safe because of the hard work of the government and the rigorous security that the government is deploying. 33

These performative structures and regulations that encapsulate “security the-atre” are unique in the post-9/11 environment because of the ubiquity. What we have seen (and that Grant has reflected in the Newsflesh trilogy) is that security has become transnational in nature, and that state power has shifted to trans-national bureaucracies.34 These transnational bureaucracies that control the security spaces, also possess the power to define the security threats.35 Bigo argues that as a result security apparatus is in the post-9/11 world have taken on a Foucauldian approach of population behavioural management that he dubs the ban-opticon.36 Through this approach security apparatuses cease to be about or focus upon security outcomes, rather they take on the purpose of regulating and normalising social behaviour.37 Tsoukala suggests that within this frame-work government undertakes the process of normalising the threats faced by society,38 and highlighting that the threat itself is inevitable.39 Once this process of normalisation inevitability has been established, governments take on the role

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of soothing public anxiety through performative demonstrations of security, high-lighting that the “government can and will control what is presented as essen-tially uncontrollable.”40 The macro cultural phenomena of a fear response inherent to “security theatre” leads to ready acceptance of modified social routine, and discourses that are grounded in cultural “truth” rather than fact-based evi-dence.41 When reading the Newsflesh trilogy it is clear that Grant is aware of this process of securitisation that has taken place within (Western) society, and is in turn (by her own admission)42 critiquing and criticising this exercise of gov-ernmental power and manipulation.

Within the series Grant sets up broadly five social reactions the legal regula-tion ordering society, in the name of safety, in her post-zombie apocalypse world. These, I would argue, typify the different ways in which different people within the society respond to post-9/11 security theatre; however, all of these categories are fluid in nature and there will often be crossover between them. It is worth noting that these are conceptual generalisations drawn from the social discourse designed to assist in thinking about the issue of responses to “security theatre”,43 not definitive empirical categories, and that should be read with that in mind.

The first response is an initial overwhelming feeling of fear, which is then replaced by a sense of security created by the regulations. The second response is one of resistant adaption – namely the individuals in this category adapt to the new regulations but make a significant effort to hold on to what they have lost. The third category other people for whom this security regulation forms either a new normal, or in the case of younger generations the only normal that they have ever known. The fourth group of people are those who reject the need for these regulations and instead choose to live a life that allows them to avoid this sort of governmental oversight. The final reaction is that of the people in power who then weaponise these regulations in order to maintain their power. Each of these expressions is typified by particular character, or group of characters, within the series and will now be explored in turn.

A. Fear and Comfort

By this response, I mean that the individual in question has a reaction of fear when confronted with the security protocols, which is then quickly replaced by feelings of comfort and safety because of the presence of such “robust” security procedures. When examining this broad response to security theatre, the charac-ter that most typifies this reaction is Buffy; however, the reaction is present in the vast majority of the unnamed population within the series. The introduction to Buffy as having this sort of reaction to security theatre occurs early on in Feed:

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Buffy’s a great techie and a decent friend, but her ideas about safety are a little skewed, probably thanks to growing up in a high security zone. She is less worried in the field and she is in supposedly protected urban environments. While there are more attacks on an annual basis in cities than rural areas, there are also a lot more large men with guns when you get away from the creeks and cornfields.44

The inference here is that the overt constant presence of high security has gener-ated a sense of fear is entirely grounded in the regular reminder that there is something to be afraid of. As Grant notes in that above quote, when Buffy is removed from that constant reminder of the need to be afraid she exhibits lower levels of anxiety, even though the risk of harm should something happen away from a high security zone is greater. While this introduction to Buffy’s character only shows as the increased levels of anxiety and fear that she feels in the pres-ence of high security, the comfort she also takes from being within such a zones can be inferred by her behaviour throughout Feed. Even though Grant flags that Buffy feels less worried when in the field, it must also be noted that when the protagonists are in the field Buffy remains within the relative safety of the secure van that functions as a mobile headquarters for the journalistic team. While this reaction to security theatre is exemplified within Buffy, it is put forward as a com-mon response to these sorts of measures by the majority of the populous in the books.45 Grant suggests this is “because everyone wants to feel like there is a dan-ger that can be defeated, because then you are inherently safer than you were before the danger you didn’t even know about yesterday went away.”46

B. Resistant Adaption

This response infers that the individuals in question adapt to the new normal that is the protocols and procedures related to the security theatre, but under-takes steps to attempt to preserve their way of life before such procedures existed. Initially this response is typified by George and Shaun’s parents (the Masons), and the Ryman family. In Deadline and Blackout, this role is filled by Maggie. The two common themes in each of these character groups are the desire to hold onto a way of life that resembles a pre-security theatre environment and taking steps to achieve it, and the access to the financial means to facilitate the steps taken to maintain such a lifestyle.

For the Masons this means living in an open neighbourhood in suburbia, allowing their children to grow up in an environment where they have access to outdoor spaces to play, and permitting them to attend a school that has a min-imal amount of mandatory security screening.47 For the Rymans this means

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continuing to operate a horse farm and engage in equestrian sporting events, even though horses are at risk of amplification into a zombie state and are thus considered dangerous and restricted animals.48 For Maggie, maintaining a pre-security theatre lifestyle involves occupying her family’s country estate home and having all of the legally mandated security requirements being made as invisible as possible, and regularly hosting grindhouse movie marathon parties.49 So while each of these characters adapt to the new normal of security theatre, they do so in a manner that minimises its impact upon their lives; however, such minimisa-tion is only possible because of the financial means that they have to buy such conveniences.50 The equivalent in reality would be those who have the means to buy business or first class travel tickets and priority security screening to minim-ise their contact with transport hub security theatre. Of particular interest is the way that Grant highlights that such resistant adaption requires financial privil-ege to implement, something this scene mirrored in real life when considering the costs of travel expenses that minimise contact with these sorts of secur-ity protocols.

C. New Normal

The concept of a new normal in relation to security theatre, and within the Newsflesh trilogy, is the idea that the structures and regulations governing life are simply a new inalienable fabric of reality that is neither positive nor negative, and simply must be navigated around in the process of life. In the books this approach is most clearly portrayed in the characters of George and Shaun, and also repre-sented by the majority of the team who make up “After the End Times”. The adjustment to this new normal differs from that of a resistant adaption, in that those who have adopted this security theatre as a new and unmistakable fabric of reality do so in a manner that lacks a nostalgia for the pre-security times. This is evident in the way that George and Shaun casually discuss the environment in which they exist.51 When analysing architecture they do so from a utilitarian point of view of the risk of zombie outbreak rather than any sort of pleasing aesthetic.52 When engaging with security measures they do so with a minimum amount of fuss and navigate them seamlessly engaged with both their necessity and their inconvenience, but without the fear and comfort response that we see in Buffy and in the majority of the populous. By the end of the trilogy, the majority of charac-ters portraying this response to security theatre are resistant to these sorts of security regulations because of the culture of fear that they create – which they see as unnecessarily negative in society.53

This response is not uncommon in society. It represents a response of every single person who sees the raft of transnational security laws being put in place as inconvenience but necessary for the safety of society from terrorist attack.

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Based upon anecdotal evidence of teaching national security law, I would suggest that this response is most frequent in people who have no strong memories of a pre-9/11 era where security was less theatrical and overt. While closely related to that of the resistant adapter, the primary difference between these two responses is how the individual engages with the pre-security past. The resistant adapter attempts to hold on to the pre-security theatre past, while the new normal indi-vidual simply embraces security theatre and sees the past as theoretically pleas-ant but unachievable given this new reality.

D. Opt Out

When discussing what I refer to as the “opt out” response to security theatre, is important to clarify what is meant by this term. Within the Newsflesh trilogy these characters have rejected the government security regulations that are per-vasive in daily life throughout the series, and instead live quasi-criminal existen-ces on the fringes of society.54 In reality, this response is much less extreme. It would normally entail individuals who choose not to travel via traditional means, or actively avoid situations which brings them into contact with security theatre. So, while this group of people may have a high proportion of those engaged in career criminality, unlike in the Newsflesh trilogy, this decision in and of itself doesn’t make them criminal.

Grant predominantly uses Dr Abbey and her team to represent this group,55 although they’re supplemented by the Monkey,56 and a network of off grid and smuggler communities that are encountered later in the series.57 The common theme of each of these characters (or groups of characters) is the way in which they make an active decision to withdraw from a society dominated by security theatre. The impact of this is not that they live in an environment that is inher-ently more unsafe,58 instead they trade-off numerous social conveniences in pref-erence for the freedom that has accorded by not subjecting themselves to overt and theatrical security procedures and government regulations. Correlation can be seen between this sort of decision-making process and those who choose not to fly in a post-9/11 era. Those who choose not to fly lose the convenience of airline travel, but in return are able to continue their lives with a limited amount of invasive government regulation and probing.

E. Power Corrupts

The final broad category of response to highly regulated security theatre that Grant portrays in the Newsflesh trilogy is the group of people who weaponise this sort of security regulation in society in order to maintain power structures, in particular their place within power structures. In the series, much like in real

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life, people within this category are generally politicians or senior officials within government apparatuses who are seeking to maintain personal and governmental power over society. In the real world these sorts of responses can be seen in Australia through the current Coalition government, who have adopted a strat-egy of weaponising fear, in particular (but not limited to) likening refugees to ter-rorists, in order to win democratic elections.59 It can also be seen in the US with the strategies adopted by the GOP and the current Trump administration,60 and throughout the UK in relation to leaving the EU in the Brexit vote.61 When speaking on this issue, Grant herself notes that is a common tactic (at least within US politics) to weaponise fear in order to win an election: “the judge who’s getting ready to run for office is tough on crime … [The] sheriff who is up for re-election is suddenly picking up huge numbers of people on minor drug busts … It’s an easy win.”62

The characters who portray this sort of response to security theatre are ini-tially Governor Tate, who is contesting the Republican Party primary is to be their presidential candidate, and is later the vice presidential nominee on the Republican ticket.63 After Tate’s death at the end of Feed, this role has taken over by Dr Joseph Wynne64 and the rest of the CDC65 – who act as a mirror for the Department of Homeland Security. Because the series at its core is a political con-spiracy thriller, Grant has exaggerated the extent to which these characters have engaged in this sort of behaviour, but that is a common feature (and arguably the duty) of the fiction writer – to exaggerate in order to make a point through enter-tainment.66 The conclusion of the Newsflesh trilogy reveals the way in which the CDC had maintained a public fear of the zombie reality in order to maintain their prominent position of power within society. While exaggerated because of the nature of the fiction, this is not unlike the reality of which it is holding a mirror up to, as pointed out above, in relation to Australia, the US, and the UK.

IV. THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT OF TERRORISM

Throughout the series, Grant masterfully sets up the ever-pervasive background noise that is the threat of a zombie outbreak. The zombies of the Newsflesh tril-ogy are not the real threat, but they are a constant focal point of threat and fear lurking just around the corner throughout the narrative. As a result every time there is a major zombie outbreak incident it is traumatic and shocking, but never surprising – suddenly the zombies are no longer a background noise and threat, instead they are an immediate danger that temporarily becomes the focal point, and as quickly as they arrive and wreak havoc, they are put down and returned to background noise. This ongoing and extraordinary threat that zombies pose to the continuation of society has been counted through an extraordinary raft of social regulation and laws (discussed above), in much the same way the

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“extraordinary threat of modern terrorism has been mirrored by extraordinary countermeasures.”67

Grant’s zombie/terrorist analogy works inherently because of the ways that the zombie in pop culture mirrors the structural treatment of terrorists within contemporary society. The zombie in popular culture is a source of anxiety and fear specifically because at the initial point of meeting it is unclear as to the nature of the threat faced,68 namely zombies and people look the same upon cursory inspection. MacNeil argues that because zombies are aware of their zom-bieness they act without hesitation in furtherance of their goals (which in Grant’s Newsflesh series is either to make more zombies or to feed depending on the size of the zombie pack), whereas humans are initially uncertain about whether the creature before them is a human or a zombie, and this causes humans to hesitate and analyse before acting,69 something that can lead to their own demise. This source of anxiety is exactly the same as the way that contem-porary society has set up anxiety around terrorism – anyone could be a terrorist and you don’t know until it is too late.70 This fear is compounded by the fact that there is an inherent awareness that under the right circumstances anyone could become a zombie/terrorist71 (see for example peaceful climate change processes being labelled green terrorists by governments).72 The inherent fear and anxiety sees the zombie treated in pop culture is a monstrous other in the same way that we see criminals described as monstrous by judges.73 This rhetoric of the other is also present in how governments deal with varying manifestations of terrorism within society.74 When examining the monstrous othering of the zombie in pop culture discourse we are able to create the necessary conditions for an effective horror narrative, because as a genre horror necessarily relies upon the monster being viewed as inhuman or subhuman.75 When this is done in relation to indi-viduals within the society it allows for the creation of a culture of fear – namely a cultural affect where the individual emotion of fear is felt collectively and en masse response to this emotion is encouraged.76 While Grant successfully uses this cultural knowledge of the zombie in a very effective analogy for society’s fear of terrorism, the zombie is a figure of popular culture can be used as a stand-in for any dehumanised other within society.77

It is not just the pervasive and existential nature of the threat of zombies/ter-rorism that Grant captures in her use of zombies, but also the way that this threat is used within society to justify extraordinary and invasive restrictions upon everyday life in the name of safety. The 9/11 attacks, and numerous other instances of terrorism (whether or not they were successfully completed, or thwarted before the attack could come to fruition), have been used to justify a raft of counterterrorism legislation that is invasive and arguably is a consistent restriction in violation on the human rights of the populous it purports to keep safe.78 Indeed, the last universal periodic review of human rights in Australia

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noted the fact that Australian counterterrorism law restricted human rights in a manner that was wholly disproportionate to the threats it was protecting against.79 Similar accusations were made against the UK,80 and the US.81

Grant notes the way that crises are used to further generate a narrative of fear and justify legal measures that would purportedly prevent a similar crisis from ever occurring again. She does this through her discussion around laws pre-venting the keeping of domestic animals capable of being amplified into a zombie state. Grant initially discusses this phenomena when she sets out the history of what’s known as “Mason”s law’.82 This is a series of legislation that existed in the Newsflesh series that restricted ownership of domestic pets in response to the unexpected amplification of a pet dog that killed the Mason”s natural born child (which also led to their adoption of George and Shaun). This use of the “shadow of a crisis”83 to justify restrictive legislation the name of security is palpably revisited in the wake of the incident at the Ryman horse ranch and how within hours that tragedy was being used to advocate stricter laws,84 as well is at a number of other points in the narrative.85

In addition to the enactment of zombie safety legislation mirroring the enact-ment of counterterrorism legislation, Grant sets up the background threat of zombies as a mirror to the threat of terrorism in contemporary society through other mechanisms. The first of these mechanisms is the way in which she sets up the intentional use of zombies as a weapon constituting an act of terrorism, backed by global mutual assistance and extradition treaties. In doing so she sets up common law precedents within the narrative world that clearly lays out how intentionally causing zombie amplification meets the elements of the crime of ter-rorism (rather than some theoretically lesser charge such as murder),86 which, at least in the US, carries with it a death penalty sentence.87 The clearest other mechanism used to set up this mirror is the devastation caused by the mosquito borne outbreak throughout Florida that occurs at the end of Deadline and occu-pies a significant amount of focus in Blackout. This is an intentional narrative decision by Grant; she likens the zombie outbreak, or the intentional causing of a zombie outbreak, to an act of terrorism because of the potential for indiscrimin-ate and violent destruction that comes with both of these sorts of events.88 Beyond that, Grant also takes aim at how differentiated privilege within society impacts upon the decision to label an incident an act of terrorism. 89 Throughout the series we see zombie outbreaks that are being covertly caused by people in positions of power as an act of social control being structured as tragic accidents, while those same people are threatening to implicate the protagonists (who have significantly less social power and capital) in causing those outbreaks thus hav-ing them branded as terrorists. This is an intentional play on the way terrorist attacks are reported and labelled within society – for example the way in which mass shootings conducted by cis gendered white men avoid the label of acts of

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terrorism, while the same acts committed by a person of colour are demonised as terrorist actions.90

While it is clear that counter zombie initiatives in the Newsflesh series are set up as a mirror by Grant for counterterrorism initiatives, this begs the ques-tion about what can we learn from this narrative? I would suggest that there are three key lessons to be learned from this narrative. First, is the way in which the distillation of power through small increments goes unnoticed and harms society. Second, how post tragedy legislation serves to set up the tragedy as a new form of normal. Finally, how making law in the wake of a tragedy is a poor idea because of the skewed perspective being brought to the legislation.

A. “It Was Baby Steps, All The Way”91

Throughout the series it’s clear to the reader that there has been a strong distil-lation of power, ostensibly for the good of society, in the CDC. The powers of the CDC hold a wide ranging and govern all facets of society. In addition to main-taining a zombie free populous, they are charged with research and development in order to defeat the zombies, and even have the power to declare people legally dead simply because they say it’s so.92 This power was born out of a need for an efficient mobilisation in response to a crisis; however, what is clear throughout the series is that in the wake of the crisis this power was incrementally increased rather than being allowed to wane. We have seen this same scenario play out in the real world in response to post-9/11 environments, and the power vested in major intelligence agencies. The warning that Grant issues us about this distillation of power within government agencies is that once the emergency is over such agencies are often reluctant to hand back that power:

It didn’t start out like this, Georgia. It started out with good intentions – God, such good intentions. They thought they were taking steps to protect the country. In the end, no one noticed when protection turned into imprisonment, or when ‘for the good of the people’ turned into ‘for the good of the people in power.’ It was all baby steps, all the way.93

If we learn no other lesson from Grant’s allegory of zombies as terrorists, this is the lesson that we need to take heed of – that the distillation of power runs the inherent risk of ceasing to be about the good and safety of the nation, and becomes about the maintenance of that power by the people who hold it.94 This isn’t a shocking lesson to be learned, but one that the point of is regularly missed. One need only look at the passing of data encryption laws at the end of 2018 in the Australian Parliament. The Opposition Labor Party stated that they

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felt the laws were poor and disproportionate, but supported them anyway to avoid being cast as weak on national security.95 This incident is just the most recent one in an almost two decade history of incremental increases in powers and security agencies throughout the Western world, all in the name of keeping society safe from terrorism. If we learn anything from Grant’s work, we should be asking whether any of this is really necessary (noting that the UN Human Rights Committee has already highlighted that these laws are disproportionate to the threat being faced).96

B. A New Form of Normal

The next lesson that we should be learning from the Newsflesh trilogy, is the way in which laws made in the wake of a tragedy facilitated new normal within society that set up the circumstances of the tragedy as every day rather than exceptional. Within the books we see this phenomenon through the casual discussion of the legal obliga-tions upon citizens and the government in relation to crisis situations. Whether these discussions relate to how the government needs to respond to a crisis situation:

Travel to a Level 1 zone means they’re not legally obligated to do anything but shoot you.97

Under the strict interpretation of the law, the CDC would be within its rights to come into the valley, shoot us, sterilise the surrounding area, and deal with our remains. The fact that it took us alive for extensive testing was unusual, because it represented an unnecessary risk on its part – no one would have questioned it if the CDC had killed us.98

Or the way in which the heavy regulation of day-to-day movement and activity created a culture seemingly addicted to fear:

There’s always been something nasty waiting around the corner to kill us, but it wasn’t until the Rising that we let ourselves start living in this constant state of fear. This constant ‘stay inside and let yourself be protected’ mentality has gotten more people killed that all the accidental exposures in the world. It’s like we’re addicted to being afraid.99

This lesson goes hand-in-hand with the majority of social reactions discussed in the first half of this paper, namely that because the majority of people in some

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way incorporate these new laws created in the wake of tragedy into their day-to-day life with anywhere from limited resistance to comforted acceptance it becomes easy for the extreme situations which they are designed to prevent to be thought of as imminent and constant dangers rather than the outliers that they truly are. I would suggest this is because there is little to no counterpoint argu-ment to the normality of these threats being presented in mainstream discourse.

C. Skewed Laws

This lesson is intimately linked with the lesson on how laws made in the wake of tragedy normalise the tragedy that occurred. While that lesson was one on the normalisation of outliers through legislation, this lesson is about how if we choose to make laws in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, those laws are going to be an inherent overreaction to the reality of the situation. Grant sets up this lesson iteratively through the series with her regular discussion of the regula-tions in society designed to keep everyone safe. This normalised discussion around security theatre, and the performance of security is necessary for safety is then gradually dismantled through the introduction of Dr Abbey and the asso-ciation that the protagonists have with her. It is through this association that they realise that the performative nature of the security regulations that are in place did nothing to keep them safe, but instead served as a constant and unfor-gettable reminder of the threat to their humanity.100

This lesson is important is because the majority of laws made in the immedi-ate aftermath of a crisis generates a culture of fear in society, and elevate issues in a manner that is disproportionate the actual threat being faced. As Grant puts it “it muddies the question of what is and is not a genuine issue.”101 There is evi-dence of this within Western society, with media coverage and public fear of ter-rorism being clearly disproportionate to the actual threat.102 Even a broad interpretation of what constitutes an incidence of terrorism shows relatively few casualties in recent years;103 however, Oppositions are still happy to allow Governments to pass bad laws to avoid being seen as weak on national security.

V. CONCLUSION

In the Newsflesh trilogy we see a rich science-fiction world where the zombie apocalypse occurred in 2014 and in the wake of such an earthshattering event a raft of social control and regulation measures got brought into place in the name of keeping everyone safe. It would be easy and convenient to walk away from that narrative entertained but unchallenged because the narrative is science-fic-tion and thus unrelated to the real world. Such a response sells the work that Grant has done in this series short. The world of the Newsflesh trilogy is an

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allegory for the world we live in, and the impact of what happens when we allow the focus of laws and social regulation to be on safety and fear, rather than bal-ancing safety with freedom and the ability to live. In this article I’ve explored the five broad social responses that Grant puts forward in her work to the overt and theatrical regulation of security, and discussed the three main lessons to be learned from how heavy regulation of society in the name of safety creates a cul-ture of fear that allows power to become distilled, and culturally sets up tragedy as normal rather than an outlier while setting up disproportionate laws to respond to these outlying tragedies. These issues are not independent. The lack of meaningful resistance within society to security theatre legislation feeds the cultural paradigms the perceived tragic outliers is commonplace, which in turn allows for the disproportionate distillation of power within a small number of government agencies. The inherent risk in allowing society to function in this way is the small unnoticed baby steps away from a culture that values and respects human rights and civil liberties, towards a culture that is suspicious of the outsider and tolerates indignity in the name of safety.

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6. Polletta and Lee (n 15), 718; Sandberg (n 15), 153.
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Group, First edition, 2011), 234; See also: “And now they feel like I’m presenting an optimistic version of

the future, and like I was right about a whole lot of things, because I studied the sociology behind it.” Interview with Mira Grant (n 5), 6.



1. When this paper was presented at ANZSIL 2019, it was suggested that there needed to be a sixth category of active resistance, which arguable the “After the End Times” team move into towards the end of the trilogy, the presence of this response was not within the trilogy in a meaningful way. I would also argue that while there is active resistance to these transnational laws in reality, I would suggest that fall more within the “Opt Out” category than represent a sixth and separate category. I would like to thank Rebecca Dudley for raising this point.
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4. Ibid 32–34.
5. See for example: Ibid 156, 272, 358–359, 400, 405, 425, 435, 458–459; Grant (n 17), 33, 45, 129, 282, 427–428, 466, 496, 506–507, 509; “Alaska. Remember? As long as they can prove they’ve made every effort to preserve the greater civilian population, the government is not only allowed to lock down a hazard zone, they’re required.” Shutting down a state would mean proving they’d done it to save the nation. Somehow, I didn’t think that would be all that hard of a sell. Things were too bad, and people were too frightened.” Mira Grant, Blackout (Orbit, 1st U.S. ed, 2012), 60. See also 64, 180, 192–193, 479, 513.
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7. See for example: Criminal Code Act (1995) (Commonwealth of Australia), 119.2–119.3.
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15. “From blood tests to gated communities, we have embraced the cult of fear, and now we don’t seem to know how to put it back where it belongs.” Grant (n 11); See also: “Normal people like being alone. Being alone means being safe.” Grant (n 17), 137. There are many other examples within the novels, these are just two clear examples.
16. Interview with Mira Grant (n 5), 2.
17. Grant (n 20), 32–33.
18. Ibid 103 & 249–253.
19. Grant (n 17), 131–137.
20. “The Masons paid in everything but blood to keep us in a place where there were blue skies and open spaces”: Grant (n 20), 33; Grant (n 17), 136.
21. For example: “In modern security design,

“death trap” isn’t always a bad phrase. The idea is minimizing casualties, not preventing them entirely.” Grant (n 20), 187.

1. For example: “I’ve always had a soft spot for pre-Rising buildings. Sure, they’re basically

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death traps and most of them should be torn down before something goes horribly wrong, but they’re death traps with style.” Grant (n 17), 130–131.



1. “And it was flawed. I used to believe in that level of security, in blood tests every ten minutes and checking your reflexes and response rates constantly. Even as an Irwin, I swore by following the rules. And then I met Dr Abbey, who maintained the absolute minimum were security was concerned, and I learned that half of the tests you take on a daily basis are useless. If you haven’t been exposed or gone outside, what’s the point in sticking another needle in your finger? Those tests didn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know … but they reinforced the idea that we had to be afraid, always, that our humanity was fleeting, maintained only by constant web of government oversight.” Grant (n 20), 540. The clearest example of this issue is airport security screening during transit, where the passengers are rescreened even though they haven’t left designated clean zones since their last scan.
2. Grant (n 17), 178–191; Grant (n 22), 167–184.
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3. “This country needed someone to take real action for a change. Someone who was willing to what needed to be done. Not just another politician preaching change and keeping up the status quo … We took some good steps toward God and safety after the Rising, but they’ve slowed in recent years. People are afraid to do the right thing. That’s the key. Real fear’s what motivates them to get past the fears that aren’t important enough to matter.

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They needed to be reminded. They needed to remember what America stands for.” Grant (n 20), 554–555.



1. Grant (n 17), 437–449.
2. Grant (n 22), 577–622.
3. John Gardner, The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft

for Young Writers (A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1st ed, 1984), 62–63 (“The Art of Fiction”).

1. Austin Turk, “Sociology of Terrorism” Annual Review of Sociology 30 (2004): 271, 281.
2. William MacNeil, “The Litigating Dead: Zombie Jurisprudence in Contemporary Popular Culture,” No Foundations 14 (2017): 108, 111.
3. Ibid.
4. For a review of how law through the extraordinary breadth of what constitutes a terrorism offence reinforces this notion see: E Parker, “Implementation of the UK Terrorism Act 2006 - The Relationship Between Counterterrorism Law, Free Speech, and the Muslim Community in the United Kingdom versus the United States,” Emory International Law Review 21 (2007): 711.
5. Richard Greene, “The Badness of Undeath” in Richard Greene and K Silem Mohammed (eds), Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead (Open Court Publishing, 2010), 3, 3.
6. Vikram Dodd and Jamie Grierson, “Terrorism Police List Extinction Rebellion as Extremist Ideology,” The Guardian <[https://www.](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/10/xr-extinction-rebellion-listed-extremist-ideology-police-prevent-scheme-guidance) [theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/10/xr-extinction-rebellion-listed-extremist-ideology-police-prevent-scheme-guidance](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/10/xr-extinction-rebellion-listed-extremist-ideology-police-prevent-scheme-guidance)> (accessed 11 January 2020).
7. Penny Crofts, “Killing To Survive: The Walking Dead, Police Slayings and Medieval Malice” Law, Culture and the Humanities 174387211769229 (2017): 4–5 (“Killing

To Survive”).

1. For an overview of how the US deploys rhetoric of othering strategically in relation to terrorism see: Turk, “Sociology of Terrorism” (n 66); For a demonstration of UK rhetoric of othering in relation to terrorism see: Helen Fenwick, “Terrorism Threats and Temporary Exclusion Orders : Counter-Terror Rhetoric or Reality?,” European Human Rights Review no. 3 (2017): 247. Of particular note are the ways in which they are specifically referred to as “foreign terrorist fighters” and thus become

subject to significant restrictions of liberty without a trial.



1. Noel Carroll, “The Nature of Horror,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 46, no. 1 (1987): 51, 52.
2. Tudor (n 41), 243–246.
3. For a discussion of the dehumanisation and zombification of refugees see: Penny Crofts and Anthea Vogl, “Dehumanized and Demonized Refugees, Zombies and World War Z,” Law and Humanities 13, no. 1 (2019): 29.
4. “The most concerning aspect of this analysis is the finding that major changes to the framework are more likely to occur in the shadow of a crisis.” Dominique Dalla-Pozza, “Refining the Australian Counter-Terrorism Legislative Framework” Public Law Review 27, no. 4 (2016): 271, 278. This whole paper is of interest in exploring this issue.
5. Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Australia (No CCPR/C/AUS/CO/6, United Nations, 9 November 2017), 15–16 <[https://](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/AUS/INT_CCPR_COC_AUS_29445_E.pdf) [tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/AUS/INT_CCPR_COC_AUS_29445_E.pdf) [20Documents/AUS/INT\_CCPR\_COC\_AUS\_](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/AUS/INT_CCPR_COC_AUS_29445_E.pdf) [29445\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/AUS/INT_CCPR_COC_AUS_29445_E.pdf)>.
6. Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on the Seventh Periodic Report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Norther Ireland (No CCPR/C/GBR/CO/7, United Nations, 17 August 2015), 14–15 & 19.
7. Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of United States of America (No CCPR/C/USA/ CO/4, United Nations, 23 April 2014), 9 & 22.
8. Grant (n 20), 93.
9. Dalla-Pozza (n 78), 278.
10. “Within six hours of Rebecca’s death, half the children’s safety advocacy groups were clamoring for tighter guidelines and attempting to organize legislation that would make the life led by the Rymans illegal. No more early riding classes or family farms; they wanted it shut down, shut down now, and shut down hard. It wasn’t a surprise to anyone but the Rymans, I think: Peter and Emily never attempted to map out scenarios leading to the martyrdom of their eldest daughter, so they never considered what a boon her death would be to certain organizations.” Grant (n 20), 252.
11. For example: Ibid 102–103 & 131.
12. Ibid 195 & 458–459.

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1. Ibid 211–212.
2. “ … intentionally triggering a zombie outbreak, that’s a weapon of mass destruction. You can’t control it, you can’t decide where it goes.” Interview with Mira Grant (n 5), 4.
3. “We have so many cases in America. America is having a gun violence epidemic … and it’s terrifying … We’re scared witless by this, and it’s sociologically fascinating and sickening at the same time that if a brown person, if a person of colour shoots someone with a gun … for whatever reason, whether you would look at it and say they were justified under the law, or whether you would look at it and say they were committing a crime, odds are about 90 per cent they’re getting labelled a terrorist. If a brown person is driving a truck and loses control of the truck, and it ploughs into pedestrians, even if autopsy finds that they had an aneurism while they were moving their girlfriend’s stuff across town, they are still going to be labelled a terrorist. We have had so many school shootings in the last year. It is … it is heartbreaking and terrifying … But you’re not seeing these predominantly straight, predominantly cis, predominantly white males labelled terrorists. If you had come into my high school with a gun and started shooting my fellow students, you’re a terrorist. You’re out there to create terror. And it’s spreading. You know, they’re being radicalised by online groups, by the MRAs, by the incels. You cannot look at this and say that it in any way does not fit the definition of terrorism. But that label doesn’t get put on these boys, because they’re good white boys from good white families, in America. Terrorism is absolutely used as a label to create additional fear, and allow the pushing of additional regulations against the people that we as a culture have collectively decided are the other.” Ibid 5.
4. For example compare the tone and reporting in these two shooting incidents: Ralph Ellis et al, “Orlando Shooting: 49 Killed, Shooter Pledged ISIS Allegiance,” CNN <[https://edition.cnn.](https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/index.html)



[com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/index.html)> (accessed 13 June



2016); AFP, “Sandy Hook Massacre: Harrowing Details of Newtown School Killings Revealed,” ABC News <[https://www.abc.net.au/news/](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-28/us-releases-harrowing-newtown-massacre-documents/5177140) [2013-12-28/us-releases-harrowing-newtown-massacre-documents/5177140](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-28/us-releases-harrowing-newtown-massacre-documents/5177140)> (accessed 28 December 2013); See also: Janet Reitman, “U. S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don’t Know How to Stop It,” New York Times <[https://](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html) [www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html) [html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html)> (accessed 3 November 2018).

1. Grant (n 22), 579.
2. Grant (n 20), 405 & 425.
3. Grant (n 22), 579.
4. “I have found that for the most part, people with power are unwilling to surrender power.” Interview with Mira Grant (n 5), 7.
5. James Elton-Pym, “Labor Agrees to Pass Encryption Laws “to Keep Australians Safe” over Christmas,” SBS News <[https://www.sbs.](https://www.sbs.com.au/news/labor-agrees-to-pass-encryption-laws-to-keep-australians-safe-over-christmas) [com.au/news/labor-agrees-to-pass-encryption-laws-to-keep-australians-safe-over-christmas](https://www.sbs.com.au/news/labor-agrees-to-pass-encryption-laws-to-keep-australians-safe-over-christmas)> (accessed 6 December 2018).
6. Human Rights Committee, “Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of United States of America” (n 81); Human Rights Committee, “Concluding Observations on the Seventh Periodic Report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Norther Ireland” (n 80); Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Australia (n 79).
7. Grant (n 20), 44.
8. Ibid 400.
9. Grant (n 17), 206.
10. See quote in footnote 53: Grant (n 22), 540.
11. Interview with Mira Grant (n 5), 2.
12. Hannah Ritchie et al, “Terrorism,” Our World Data <<https://ourworldindata.org/terrorism>>.
13. Ibid.

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