

For As Long As We Both Are Human: The Promise of Zombies in Fiction, Poetry, and Food

by Melissa Gish

We all know our zombie history (17th-century West African slaves brought to work on Haiti's sugar cane plantations) and our first Hollywood zombies: *White Zombie* (1932), starring Bela Lugosi, and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). Some of us might even know our first pulp zombies: "Salt is Not for Slaves" (1931) by G.W. Hutter and "The House of Magnolias" (1932) by August Derleth, both published in *Weird Tales*. In those early days, no one was quite sure what zombies were or what they were capable of doing. We can pretty much all agree that it wasn't until George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* that our minds exploded with horrible understanding. We all point to that moment in the graveyard—*They're coming to get you, Barbara*—and the 90 minutes that followed as the birth of one of the greatest collective nightmares ever spawned. What Romero and co-writer John Russo had at first envisioned as a horror comedy quickly evolved into an icon on par with Frankenstein's monster and Dracula. But while these latter versions of undead creatures have often been portrayed as tragic victims of an inhospitable world, zombies—the everyday human undead—have no redeeming qualities. We feel no sympathy for their loss of humanity, no empathy for their personal struggle—indeed there is no personal struggle, no personality whatsoever, in fact. Instead, plunged into the deepest pit of the uncanny valley, we feel only fear for these nameless, faceless hordes of nobodies. So it's no wonder that modern zombies and Romero's "rules" have endured for more than 50 years. Ambling, rotting, flesh-eating zombies have permeated virtually every corner of popular culture. But they have also invaded places we might think too far off the beaten path: childhood, poetry, even the kitchen! Let's take a look at how zombies fit into these realms with a few writers who have put zombies in some very interesting places: **Baileigh Higgins**, whose 10-book YA series *Children of the Apocalypse* was released this year as a boxed set; **Juan J. Morales**, author of *The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems*; and **Lauren Wilson**, the brains behind *The Walking Dead: The Official Cookbook and Survival Guide*.

BAILEIGH HIGGINS

Fiction is certainly the most familiar genre when it comes to zombies. So how does one stand out in the crowd? Perhaps by crowding the field. Baileigh Higgins has carved out a solid niche in the world of zombie fiction with her YA novels. She can barely keep up with her numerous book series that feed the furious demands of her ravenous fans.

Melissa Gish (MG): Where did your interest in zombies begin?

Baileigh Higgins (BH): It first began with a movie, *Dawn of the Dead*. This classic from George A. Romero is still a favorite of mine, and I'm grateful for the fact that he brought the modern-day zombie to life. He's such an icon. My interest further developed when I began reading zombie apocalypse fiction. The first book I read was *As the World Dies* by Rhiannon Frater. I instantly became hooked by the plot and characters, and afterward, I dove into anything and everything zombie related.

MG: Why do you think zombies are still popular? Where is their value?

BH: I think they've endured because of their simplicity. They have no thoughts, no personalities, no intelligence of their own. In essence, they're a mindless shambling horde that provides the perfect backdrop to any kind of survival story. Because in the end, it's not about the zombies, it's about the people and how they choose to face the end of everything they've ever known. When civilization is stripped away, you cut to the heart of people and what they truly are beneath all the masks and glamour of society. That's when the real monsters come out, but it's also when true heroes are born.

Zombies are very versatile. They can be adapted for fun, comedic movies and games, or used to project horror with all its accompanying fear, blood, and gore. They can even be used to make a point about certain aspects of human nature and civilization. They make the perfect metaphor. I think that they can teach us to face death with courage and fortitude. That we can still love and hope no matter how tough it gets. I believe that all of us have the capacity for great good and great evil. It just depends on which side you allow to win. In the end, life is a choice, whereas death is inevitable.

MG: So much of what's out there in terms of zombie stories is one-dimensional and simple gore. But your books combine elements of horror with adventure, character relationships, contemplation, hope, and heartbreak. Why is this important in telling your stories?

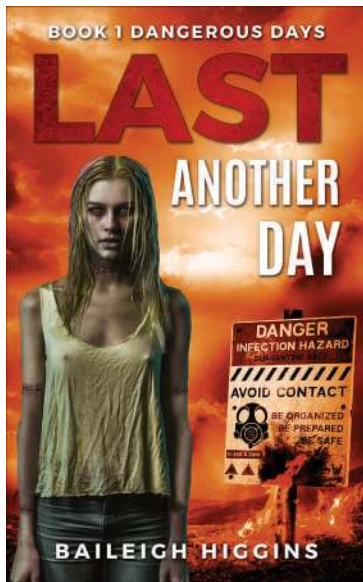
BH: I tell my stories from a perspective of hope, love, and triumph while still acknowledging the evil that's out there. There is beauty in tragedy and nobility in self-sacrifice, just like there is darkness in all of us. It's often our relationships with others that save us from that darkness, that keep us from giving up when all seems lost. That's why character relationships are so important to me. What wouldn't a parent do to save their child, or a wife a husband, or a brother a sister, after all? Or even a stranger?

MG: Your characters are faced with tough decisions that impact their survival. Would you consider yourself a survivalist? Did you have to conduct research for your books?

BH: I think that all of us have wondered what we would do in such situations. How we would react to challenges of such magnitude. If we'd even survive considering the odds. That's part of what makes this genre such fun to watch and read. I'm a writer who lives in an imaginary world. If faced with the real deal, I have no idea how I'd react, but I would like to think that I'd hold on to some semblance of humanity, at least. That I wouldn't give in to my darkest impulses and still be me at the end.



Artwork courtesy B. Higgins



EBook cover courtesy B. Higgins

MG: Do you approach zombies differently for adult and young adult audiences?

BH: I do. My YA books are cleaner and more suited to a younger audience, but there will always be an element of horror and gore, and there will always be a struggle for survival, tragedies, and even death. I believe that kids and teens are far more resilient than we give them credit for at times, and could handle just about anything thrown their way.

MG: Are there advantages or disadvantages to writing your books as a series?

BH: There are definite advantages to writing in series. Not only can I fully explore a particular set of characters and their world, but I can build complex relationships, bring in change and upheaval, tragedy and heartache, but also hope and resolution. Another plus is that readers will often read the sequels and become real fans, instead of moving on after one book and forgetting all about you.

MG: What advice can you give new writers?

BH: It's vital to let your own voice shine through. There will always be similarities between your story and the next, but your voice is unique and cannot be copied. Tell the story the way you want to tell it, and there will always be an audience for it.

JUAN J. MORALES

*Zombies and poetry? Sounds like a perfect combination for parody. And yet, somewhat surprisingly, we take the zombies in Juan J. Morales's **The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems quite seriously. His zombies are a catalyst for reflection, introspection, and even judgment.***

MG: What do you think has allowed Romero-esque zombies to endure and even flourish in recent years?

Juan J. Morales (JM): Romero is a legend for a reason. He took zombies in a new direction from its historical connections to the voodoo myths and origins. *Night of the Living Dead* continues to resonate with us 51 years later because it's a low budget and brave movie that cast African-American and female protagonists. The ending of that movie also still bites hard. Meanwhile, the way *Dawn of the Dead* delivers the cautionary tale about zombies and consumerism could easily be seen as prophecy for smartphones and other technological luxuries disconnecting us from each other. Even though the zombies were blue in this one, it scared the hell out of me. Romero gave everyone permission to use the zombie and a reminder that horror, like sci-fi, is a genre that can take risks and innovate. It captures class war and shows the zombies as the monster of the people. The city overrun by zombies evokes clear associations with uprisings and rebellion. We usually identify with the survivors that fight to stay alive, but there are also times where we root for the hordes of the undead to tear it all down.



MG: Like other “monster movie” creatures, zombies haven’t entirely shaken their B-horror movie reputation. As a serious writer, why include them in your poems?

JM: Zombie flicks, comics, and shows all give us the full range of emotions. They’re gory, wild, terrifying, and funny as hell at the same time. They also represent a flexible form with so many ways to raise the stakes: the fast zombies in *28 Days Later*, combining the found footage horror with zombies in *[REC]*, and the moving setting of *Train to Busan*. The possibilities remain endless. When I was younger and had those reoccurring dreams about zombies, I made sure to write them down to be sure I could preserve all the graphic and vivid details. Like in the poem, “My First Zombie,” I continually had the dream that inspired the poem when my mother was stricken with breast cancer. In other poems, I wanted to write about how the rules can be broken as well. Despite the paralyzing fears they provoked, writing these poems also spoke to me about the importance of family and protecting each other. Zombies compel us to band together in unlikely and strained alliances, and they give rise to the slackers, the weird, and the people who don’t quite fit into the world. Trust has to be earned and inevitably challenged. Zombies can come to represent opportunity if people survive the first wave of attacks and if they adapt.

MG: How did the theme of the “end times” emerge in your latest collection?

JM: I used to be honestly afraid of zombies, which became the primary manifestation of how I began exploring the end times. I would have reoccurring nightmares featuring the undead—my house overtaken, family turned, and then me being undead and put down. I remember times when I was house hunting and thinking in the back of my mind if the house could be “zombie proofed” and if it had the tools and items to fortify this house for riding out the apocalypse. I would plan escape routes and contingency plans if things went down, which was an absurd, dark, but fun way to play with my imagination.

To work through my fear of zombies and the end times, I read and watched everything I could to better understand what makes the end times tick, the conventions, and how to dissect it. I challenged myself to not look away in the gorier moments and learned about the different rules of the world. The quest for apocalyptic knowledge also led to a better understanding of what it all represents. Why are we fixated on our demise? The end times is an important entry point into ecopoetics and environmental issues, which remind us the end times stand in for the issues that we really want to talk about: overpopulation, climate change, pandemics, extinction, and our over-reliance on technology to name a few issues at stake.

MG: It’s clear that these poems are personal and revealing. How do zombies fit in?

JM: Along with being obsessed with zombies, an important relationship was ending when I started this book. That sent me on a journey to try and understand this as a personal apocalypse. Around the same time, I remember being alone in my house and watching the entire first season of *The Walking Dead* in one night. Sitting alone in my basement, I felt a mixture of fascination and devastation. It was a struggle at first to write so honestly about this relationship ending and to see if the apocalyptic landscape could be an appropriate way to explore this. Gradually, it became easier to absorb all these fears and start to assemble a zombie apocalypse and my version of the end times. And then the concerns grew outward with the intention of connecting with other people through the healing power of poems. From there, I started to also write more hopeful and humorous poems for the collection to give *Handyman* balance. The book became a journey out of the darkness and into light.

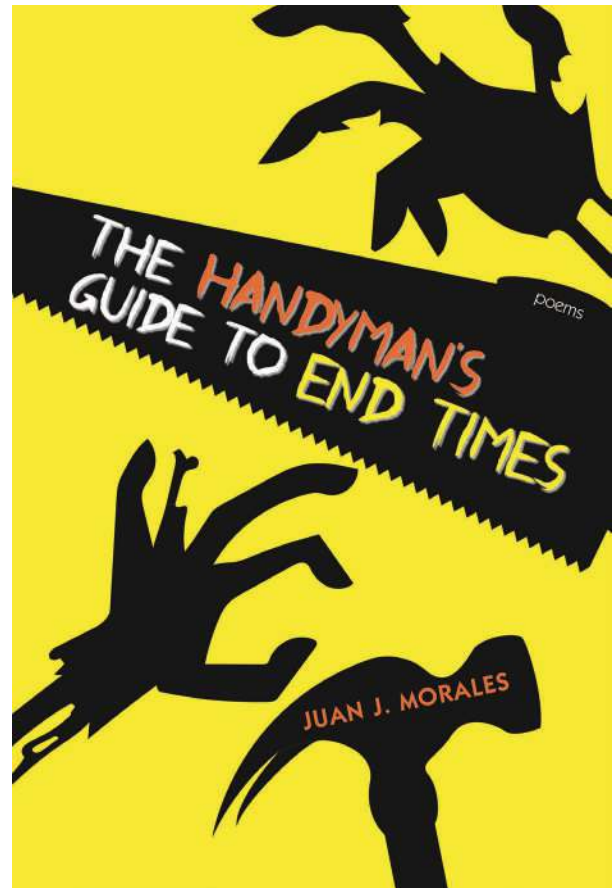
MG: Your poems have a lot to say about human relationships, how people make choices to embrace their sense of humanity or turn their back on it. What do you think apocalypse scenarios can tell us about what it means to be human?

JM: In a famous interview, George A. Romero once cynically called *The Walking Dead* “a soap opera with a zombie occasionally.” I can see where he’s coming from, but I still love the comic and the show. In the same way that viewers root for some characters to get killed, they also threaten to stop watching if a specific character doesn’t make it. The characters and world remind us that humanity needs to survive. There needs to be a storyteller to keep it going. I wanted to make sure my poems addressed that layer of conflict for the characters. In writing, we cannot protect our characters even if we want to. Plus, readers/viewers expect the struggle between compassion and violence to be explored in the end times.

Some other key elements in apocalyptic scenarios are the change in currency (usually ammo, weapons, water, food, and shelter) and putting characters into situations where they are asked how far are they willing to take it to survive. What/who will they sacrifice? How do the characters learn to inflict violence and cope with the inhumane things they do now that there are no rules? Ultimately, the zombie scenario usually sends characters on the journey where they lose and then rediscover their humanity. Even this means realizing the atrocities they have committed. They work towards redemption and need friendship and love. Even Woody Harrelson’s quest for a Twinkie in *Zombieland* can be tied to his humanity.

MG: With the influx of zombie material out there in recent years, what do you think makes a work unique?

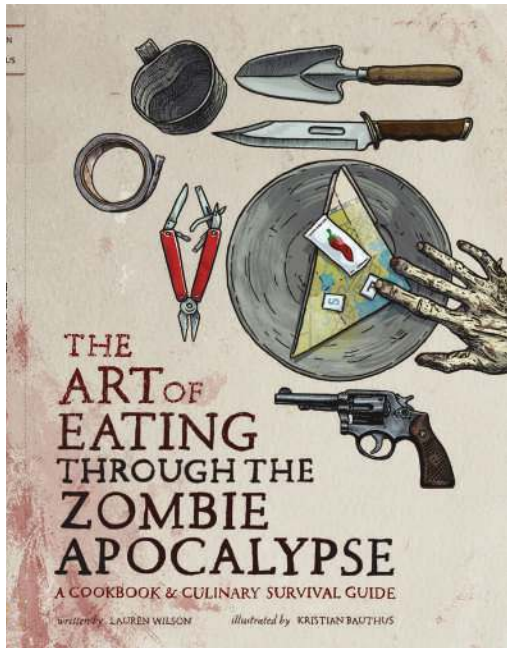
JM: There’s an almost overwhelming amount of zombie media out there, but because it’s flexible and part of the low-budget tradition, it will continue to coax creatives to share their version of the zombie apocalypse. The best zombie movies, books, and video games out there all balance engaging in the key criteria of the genre while also innovating or challenging it. It has to have the gore, destruction, and mayhem we come to expect, and it also has to have the compelling storytelling in its format or situation. Two favorites of mine are the novel *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead and Jess Walter’s story, “Don’t Eat Cat.” Both succeed because of the post-apocalyptic worlds they build, the zombie rules they challenge, and how they both explore human hubris and our hopes in rebuilding. Also, the use of zombies is not going to resonate if it’s just part of a gimmick. Even with readers/viewers willing to suspend their disbelief and accept a low-budget zombie, they won’t suffer a plot with zombies added because someone ran out of ideas.



Cover art courtesy J. Morales

LAUREN WILSON

The last place one might expect to find zombies is in the kitchen. Yet Lauren Wilson has crafted two books that provide serious instruction for not only surviving the zombie apocalypse but also eating well during the event. In the vast landscape of cookbooks on the market, zombies are what give Wilson's books a unique bite.



Artwork courtesy L. Wilson

MG: Can you tell us where your zombie fandom began?

Lauren Wilson (LW): I can tell you exactly where my zombie fandom began. It was in my little brother Jarrod's bedroom, Christmas 2001. I was home from college for the holidays and my bro was having a sleepover. He and his friend were playing video games, and since we had always enjoyed playing video games together I joined in. They were playing a game called *Resident Evil*, perhaps the quintessential zombie game franchise, and pretty soon I had taken over and kicked them out and played through the entire night.

MG: Here's the age-old question: Which do you prefer, slow zombies (ala Romero) or fast zombies (ala *World War Z*)?

I am a slow zombie gal all the way. That said, *28 Days Later* was a good movie, and I kind of bought the premise because their zombies technically weren't dead but infected with a virus (which means no rigor mortis or decomposing corpse to slow you down).

MG: What do you think has allowed zombies to endure since *Night of the Living Dead* and even flourish since *The Walking Dead*?

LW: It's always been a topic I have wanted to delve into in a real academic/sociological kind of way. But if I were to just speculate off the cuff, I would say that zombies are "other," and stories of us against "other" (aliens, enemies, the man, etc.) have resonated since the dawn of story. It amazes me that the pop-culture interest is still going strong. Even the likes of Jim Jarmusch are still creating works for the canon—*The Dead Don't Die* is one of those rare zombie movies I actually liked.

MG: What do you think characterizes the best zombie fiction?

LW: Zombies are an interesting genre because there are tropes that are so tired but are still almost demanded by fans. A character hiding a zombie bite from their group, for example. So to me, the most interesting works are those that do all the expected cliché things but still manage to inject some freshness in the overarching plot or the aesthetic style. One such work that shines as a beacon of this is *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead. He is a literary powerhouse that decided to "genre slum" by writing a zombie novel. He did such interesting things with his universe, and then on top of that, his writing is beautiful. Great book.



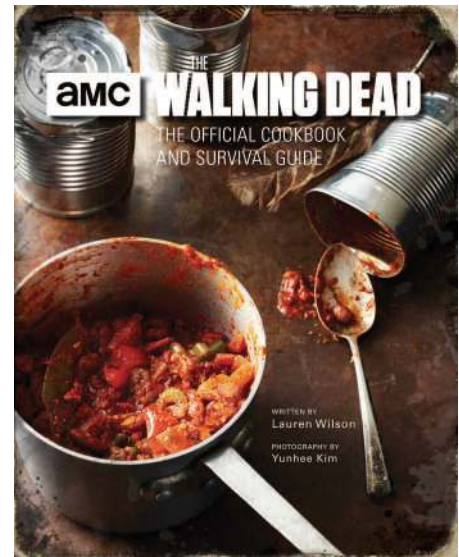
AP

Fives

1966

MG: Why cookbooks? This seems like such an odd (yet perfect) combination of themes. How did these books come about?

LW: After graduating from college and working for a couple of years I decided to go to chef school, and so my career at the time was cooking professionally. One of my best friends, Paul, said to me one day, “You’re a zombie nerd and a food nerd, you should write a cookbook for the zombie apocalypse.” I thought it was a great idea but sat on it for three years. When I moved from Toronto to New York, *The Walking Dead* had just started and I was amazed that zombies seemed to be making it into the mainstream. Luckily I had some down time to actually start fleshing out the idea. I worked on the proposal for about a year, and then, because I had zero contacts in publishing, cold called every literary agent in New York City. I was so lucky to land my agent, Deborah Schneider, and eventually we sold *The Art of Eating* to the wonderful folks at Smart Pop. I did A TON of research because I had nary a survival skill when I started out with *The Art of Eating*. Between books and experiments and interviews and hunting trips, it was a very research intensive process. Because I had written *The Art of Eating*, I was approached by Insight Editions to write the cookbook they had planned to produce in partnership with AMC. It was, forgive the pun, a no-brainer for me.



Artwork courtesy L. Wilson



Clearly, there isn’t a single corner of the literary landscape that is safe from the hordes of undead relentlessly ambling toward a readership. With apparently no end in sight for these creatures, there are still many zombie stories to be told and zombie poems to be crafted. Creative writers will undoubtedly continue to find ways to serve up zombies to hungry readers. It seems even the most outlandish ideas for infusing a work with zombies is not beyond the realm of publication. One day, the zombie craze will fade in favor of a new monster, but until then, in the words of Rick Grimes, “Let’s keep trying as long as we can.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Baileigh Higgins

South African writer Baileigh Higgins lives in the Free State. Her unhealthy obsession with the end of the world has led to numerous books on the subject and a secret bunker, the location of which only she knows. She publishes her books through Amazon and has a large and loyal following, so much so that she has continued several series due to reader demand. A prolific writer, her series include *Death & Decay*, *Dangerous Days*, *Dangerous Nights*, *Death's Children*, *The Black Tide*, and *The Undead Adventures of Chas*.



Baileigh Higgins, 2019

excerpt from Last Another Day, Book 1 of Dangerous Days (2018)

“The woman ran towards her, feet slapping on the tar road as she closed the distance. The child cried, his mother half-carrying and half-dragging him. Morgan stared at the unfolding scene, and her heart sank when she realized the truth. “They’re not going to make it.” The infected man reached them and latched onto the boy first, ripping him out of his mother’s hands. Morgan looked away. She leaned over and locked the passenger door, the click loud in her ears. With an iron grip on the wheel, she steered the truck around the family and drove away. That was the last stop she made.”

excerpt from Outbreak, Book 1 of Black Tide (2018)

“When news of the disease first hit, we had prepared as best we could. We filled out pantry with bottled water, food, and toiletries. Dad withdrew his savings and bought a generator and a tank of fuel. I even started a vegetable garden. We received gloves and masks from the mobile clinics set up around the country and educated ourselves on the symptoms.

We were ready.

Now I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at our naivety.

We were fools.”

Juan J. Morales

Juan J. Morales is the author of *The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems* (2018, University of New Mexico Press) which was recently named the Winner of the 2019 Latino International Book Award in the Single Author in English Poetry category. He was born in the U.S. to an Ecuadorian mother and a Puerto Rican father. He grew up in Colorado and is the Director of Creative Writing and an Assistant Professor at Colorado State University-Pueblo. His other works include *Friday and the Year That Followed* (2006, Fairweather Books) and *The Siren World* (2015, Lithic Press).

All of these excerpts are from *The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems*.

excerpt from "The Zombie Sisyphus Dream"

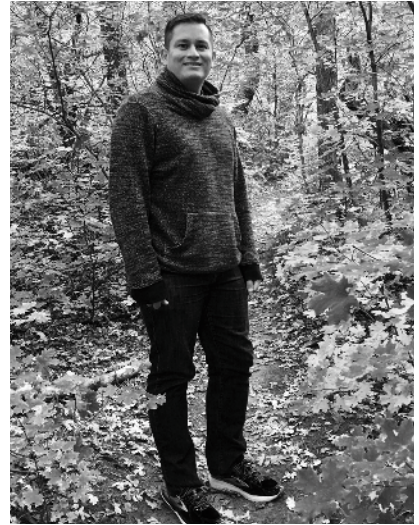
The head wears eyes
that starve, jaw full of
hungry gnashing,
the neck gone except
choice tendons dangling.

excerpt from "Across The Overrun States"

I should check if I have enough lumber to board up
my windows and doors, shaking off
the probability of being an early-on casualty,
but I can't decide if home is where
I take a stand
or if I'm supposed to abandon it.

excerpt from "The Long Engagement"

I will walk beside you on the rubble streets and overstepped fields,
resist picking the only flowers left
for you, kill whatever is edible—in times of rationing and scavenging,
in sleeplessness and dehydration, in fever and epidemic
for as long as we both are human.



Juan Morales, 2019

Lauren Wilson

Lauren Wilson completed culinary training at Toronto's George Brown Chef School in 2008. She is a professional cook and writer who also has experience in catering and teaching cooking classes. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is the author of *The Art of Eating through the Zombie Apocalypse: A Cookbook and Culinary Survival Guide* (2014, BenBella Books) and *The Walking Dead: The Official Cookbook and Survival Guide* (2017, Insight Editions). Her most recent work, a departure from the zombie world, is a collaboration with Eileen Konieczny, RN, called *Healing with CBD: How Cannabidiol Can Transform Your Health without the High* (Ulysses Press, 2018). She is currently writing another book on CBD for Snoop Dogg's media outlet Merry Jane. It will be published by Chronicle Books in the spring of 2020.



Lauren Wilson, 2019

excerpt from The Art of Eating through the Zombie Apocalypse: A Cookbook and Culinary Survival Guide

“Who wants basic survival to be bland? By including a few small packets of herbs and spices, you can survive in a world teeming with the undead without forsaking flavor. Salt, pepper, cayenne, thyme, smoked paprika, curry powder, or any of your favorite flavor enhancers can be packed into labeled 1/4-inch resealable bags. You can also include a packet of sprouting seeds for an easy way to get a quick nutrient boost.”

excerpt from The Art of Eating through the Zombie Apocalypse: A Cookbook and Culinary Survival Guide

“. . . if you're hanging around your home during the initial outbreak and wondering where you might be able to find some canned tuna, don't consider for a second hitting up the corner store or your local grocery store. Wal-Mart? Never. Not only are these the kind of places everyone else will have tried, leaving nothing left, but the zeds will be happily feasting on an hors d'oeuvre platter of stupidity and you'll be the cherry on top.”

Recipes from The Walking Dead: The Official Cookbook and Survival Guide

Sweet Treats to Die For

“Carl's Chocolate Pudding”

“Carol's Beet and Acorn Cookies”

End of World Beverages and Libations

Alexandria Lemonade

Hershel's Healing Elderberry Tea

Putting Up: Food Preservation for End Times

Grady Memorial Dried Fruit Trail Mix

The Governor's Pickled Peppers

Dig In! Meals for Hungry Survivors

Negan's Spaghetti all'Arrabbiata

Oceanside Fish Stew