

CHAPTER 8

Imitations of Life: Zombies
and the Suburban Gothic

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Meet John and Mary Drone

Andrew Currie's 2006 movie *Fido* is an ambitious satire that combines elements of Sirkian melodrama, George A. Romero's Living Dead series, and the "Timmy's down the well" plotting of heroic dog films such as *Lassie* and *Old Yeller*.¹ The parameters of the film's wry premise—a kind of parallel-universe reimagining of a 1950s suburban community in which zombies are part of everyday life—are outlined in the amusing newsreel opener that alludes to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).² A cloud of cosmic radiation containing particles that can reanimate the dead led to the zombie wars, in which the last remnants of humanity desperately tried to eradicate the undead (as opposed to the red) menace. Thanks to the discoveries of a scientist named Reinhold Geiger (who figured out that zombies could be killed for good if you shot them in the head), the distinctly Halliburton-style "ZomCon" corporation managed to contain the outbreak and "tame" wild zombies for use as cheap labor during the reconstruction of society. The much-diminished new world that emerges from the ashes of the old is one in which time, it seems, has all but been suspended. We are told that it is several decades since the end of the zombie wars, but this is still a stagnant, stiflingly restrictive society in which

there seems little hope of substantive change: it appears to have been the 1950s for quite a while. What makes the film even more interesting is the fact that it resurrects the folkloric origins of the Caribbean "zombi," which of course had its roots in anxieties surrounding slavery, racial inequality, and the economic exploitation of the underclass. In Currie's film, "tame" zombies in steel control collars carry out all the menial and unpleasant tasks the white middle classes would prefer not to tackle themselves. Fido's lead character is a young boy named Timmy Robinson (K'Sun Ray), whose life is transformed when his status-conscious mother, Helen, (Carrie Anne Moss), overrules the objections of her zombie-phobic husband, Bill (Dylan Baker), and buys one to help around the house so that they are not "the only ones on the street without one!" As one reviewer put it, the film's depiction of "an undead chattel class hits an authentic socio-political nerve. It seems to capture perfectly what 1950s upper-class suburbia might have looked like had slave labor still been available."³ By projecting Romero's vision of zombie apocalypse slightly backward into a twenty-first-century vision of 1950s suburbia, Currie's film also manages to make some pertinent points about the containment culture of both that period and our own. The film evokes the upscale suburban developments of the present that rely on cheap migrant labor in the form of underpaid and often-illegal nannies, housekeepers, gardeners, and workers. Further, the security obsessed and manipulative conflation of the military-industrial complex epitomized in ZomCon evokes much criticized elements of the presidency of George W. Bush.⁴

Willard, the suburban town in which the film takes place, is fenced off from the dangerous "Wild Zone" outside by a vast steel fence that keeps the millions of "untamed" zombies outside from getting in. Other pockets of "civilization" are sparsely dotted around the countryside like army bases amid hostile territory. And yet, the odd brutal killing aside, Willard—a tongue-in-cheek microcosm of postwar United States—exists in a kind of tenuously peaceable bubble, insulated from the threatening world outside. The film functions therefore as an imitation on two different levels. On the most obvious level, it seeks to recreate an idealized vision of 1950s suburbia. Willard is a town of white picket fences, neatly mown lawns, gleaming cars, and secretly dissatisfied housewives: apart from the zombie presence, it is an extremely familiar take on the era of the kind seen in movies such as *Pleasantville* (1998) and *Far from Heaven* (2002). The way in which *Fido* depicts the suburban milieu brings to mind Frederic Jameson's comments at the beginning of his 1989 essay "Nostalgia for the Present":