Patient Zero by Jonathan Maberry

If you ask any of my friends and family what my main interests have been for the last ten years, I guarantee that you would either hear “fantasy” or “zombies” as the chief answers. And it is true that during my high school career and the early part of my university days, I was with all the other cool goth kids who would buy their clothes at Hot Topic (because that was all the rage), listen to heavy metal and watch zombie movies until all hours of the night and wonder why I couldn’t sleep without wondering who was coming to get me, Barbara. While I’d never say that I have ceased my love affair with the undead, my interest in the subject did wane a bit until recently with the introduction of the extremely well-done Walking Dead series on AMC – based off the comic series by the same name – and the recent review of Feed for this website. And now, with my love of our favorite festering flesh feasters rekindled like the unlife-force of said beasts, I am proud (and depressed) to say that I blazed through Feed in two days and jumped straight into the fire with what has become my latest review: Patient Zero.

Patient Zero is the first, in what I imagine to be, a series of books written by Jonathan Maberry. It is about Joe Ledger, a former Baltimore detective, who when he was a teenager was forced to watch a bunch of bullies rape his then-girlfriend and then used the experience to take a couple hundred skill points in Bullet Time and Uber Bad-assery. I say this because there is a sequel entitled The Dragon Factory, which I intend to review at a later date. When we meet Joe Ledger, he is just a few days away from joining the FBI and had recently taken place in a police raid of a terrorist cell. During this raid, Joe was nearly bitten by a crazed terrorist who he had shot and presumably killed. Joe is actually picked up now by the FBI and taken to meet Church, who is a cold, cookie-loving individual who also heads a covert organization called the Department of Military Science, or DMS. After meeting Church (Okay who else keeps imaging him wearing blue armor and complaining about how the sniper rifle doesn’t work for him? Show of hands?), Joe is escorted to a dark room and told that the man he shot twice in the back was not quite alive, but rather hungry and (I could imagine) a bit ticked off about having two bullet holes by his spine. Imagine the whistle that must make when he goes cycling through town.

And so now, Joe learns two things:

1. Somebody took Bin Laden’s zombie movie marathon and all-night Resident Evil session a bit too seriously and decided to create their own undead army.
2. The DMS wants Joe to join them in their fight against the legions of the undead.

The story is broken up into a series of short chapters, with Joe’s chapters being told in first person and the points of view for the villains and a handful of one-off characters being done in third person. It’s an interesting experiment and seems to work for the purpose of the narrative, since there is a distinct style that reminds us of who the hero is. The first person is also more effective for Joe because of the situations he is put in. If we were simply a detached member of the audience, watching the events over Joe’s shoulders, then there wouldn’t be the kind of tension that is present in the later chapters. It’s also very interesting that we spend so much time with the three villains, learning their reasons for making the plague and the intrigue that occurs between them. Combined I would say the three villains have as much presence as Joe
does, providing a nice balance. The three villains are not so much concerned with the Americans – in fact they all agree that America’s fate is sealed – but rather the goals and allegiances of their comrades.

Joe Ledger is at the same time one of the strongest and yet weakest aspect of the story. On the plus side, he is intelligent, snarky, charming, confident, and competent. On the other hand, he feels a bit over-powered as a fighter. Joe can move swiftly through a battlefield and not only drop five Special Forces operatives in four seconds, but he can also make perfect running headshots. However, as the story progresses, Joe starts to lose that Superman persona as the odds are stacked heavily against him. One particular scene has him and his entire squad exhausted, out of ammunition, and backed up against a wall while the undead close in on them. And even though we know that they have yet to play the obvious trope card, the tension is extremely well done and Mr. Maberry did a fantastic job with making it an emotionally gripping scene. If there would be anyone that I could compare Joe Ledger to, it would have to be Mass Effect’s Commander Shepard. Albeit without the turians and krogans.

But of course, as badass as he is, even Joe Ledger does not simply walk into zombie-infested Mordor. Like the aforementioned Commander (seriously, considering how he’s been picked up by a cold, calculating boss of a clandestine organization who has a smoking hot second-in-command with a foreign accent and told to save the world, I’m surprised I didn’t make a nod to it sooner), Joe Ledger will need an army… or a really good team. And does Joe get this? Indeed he does! But do they serve as anything more than a group of hardened Special Forces types who can kick ass and chew bubble gum? Well… sort of. Outside of their nicknames and physical distinctions, there’s not much to really distinguish Joe’s squad for most of the story. Even with the descriptions, I spent whole chapters forgetting what the characters looked like and just dropping in random animated squad members to aid in the battle.

The main characters that we come to identify with and care about are Grace and Rudy. Grace is a British agent who is on loan to the DMS, and is one of the group’s best operatives. Yet under her tough exterior is a woman who has seen too many horrors and has witnessed the deaths of too many friends. Far too many. Rudy, however, is Joe’s best friend and psychologist, who ends up getting dragged into the mess and made to serve as the group’s counselor. He very much plays the Dr. McCoy to Joe’s Kirk – reminding Joe about his human side and what they’re fighting for. Or would it be more appropriate to call him Deanna Troi? Probably not, as I don’t recall him being assaulted by aliens while he slept. And he looks like Raul Julia, so added points there. (OF COURSE!!)

Sex, lies, betrayals, terrorism, zombies, and bullets abound in this tale of apocalyptic proportions. Is it a thought-provoking story that will change your life? No, not in the least. Like any good zombie movie, this is a popcorn summer blockbuster in book form. It’s zany, gory, thrilling, and above all just plain old entertaining. And that’s what we really want out of our action novels, isn’t it?

**Heroes:** Joe teeters between being awesome and over-powered, while still being likeable. Rudy and Grace lend balance to the overall rather generic-feeling team. That is not to say that being generic is a bad thing, though. – 3.5/5
Villains: By their own nature and definition, terrorists (whether they be in turbans or suits) make great villains. Especially the smart ones. – 5/5

Narrative: Flows very nicely and smooth. – 5/5

Plot: Relatively simple and straightforward, with stakes that rise steadily with every page being turned. – 5/5

Science (In place of Magic): Engineered plagues are pretty standard fare amongst zombie stories, now. – 3/5

World: Well...it’s our world. Nothing truly unique if you’re used to the espionage-type novels. – 3/5

Overall: 4/5