



KILLING IT IN THE RATINGS

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

You might make a TV series about vampires or werewolves — and some networks did — they said, but you could never put zombies on TV. They’re simply too scary, they said. Viewers would be turned off and would then turn off your program.

But AMC wouldn’t listen. The network debuted “The Walking Dead” on Oct. 31, 2010 — 15 years ago — and it went on to become the longest-running cable TV drama series ever: 177 episodes over 11 seasons.

HOW DOES ONE GET A HORROR SHOW ON TELEVISION?

Writer Robert Kirkman was a huge fan of zombie-themed movies and video games. He pitched the idea of a comic book sequel to the George Romero film, “Night of the Living Dead,” to his editors at Image Comics.

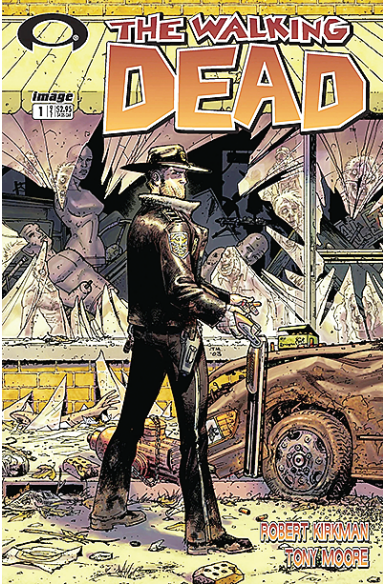
The counterproposal: Come up with an original premise so he and his artist, Tony Moore, would own the copyright.

“The Walking Dead,” about a group of survivors struggling to deal with a zombie apocalypse, was launched in October 2003. After issue No. 6, Moore left and was

replaced by Charlie Adlard. The series would run through July 2019.

Frank Darabont, who had directed hit films like “The Shawshank Redemption” “The Green Mile” and “The Mist” worked with Kirkman to adapt the book into a TV series. They tried to sell the show to NBC, but the network asked if they could instead turn their show into a procedural: For example, two main characters might “solve a zombie crime of the week.”

NBC finally turned down the pitch, saying they couldn’t put something as terrifying



as zombies on TV.

In January 2010, the cable network AMC announced it had licensed a pilot episode to be written, directed and co-produced by Darabont.

Fans of the comic book and of the horror genre eagerly looked forward to the show’s debut. Two weeks before the scheduled debut on Halloween Day 2010, the first episode leaked online.

From the start, “The Walking

Dead” was a ratings hit and a pop culture phenomenon, developing into a multi-billion-dollar franchise with toys, video games and spin-off series.



Frank Darabont

But there were downsides as well. After reported disputes over budget cuts and meddling by executives, AMC fired Darabont just before Season 2 began. He complained this was done to cut him out of his promised share of profits.

Ten years later, AMC settled by paying him \$200 million.

A HORROR SHOW WITH PLENTY OF HEART ... AND BRAINS

“The Walking Dead” and its spin-off series are all filmed in Georgia, where film and TV producers are offered a generous tax incentive. Season 1 was mostly shot in downtown Atlanta — and, after all, the show was actually set in Atlanta. Subsequent seasons were filmed at a studio near Senoia, Georgia, 30 miles southwest of Atlanta.



British actor Andrew Lincoln played the lead character of Deputy Rick Grimes. He departed after during Season 9 and had always planned to do so: Lincoln disliked spending so much time away from his wife and two children. “They become less portable as they get older,” he explained. His character was not killed off, however.



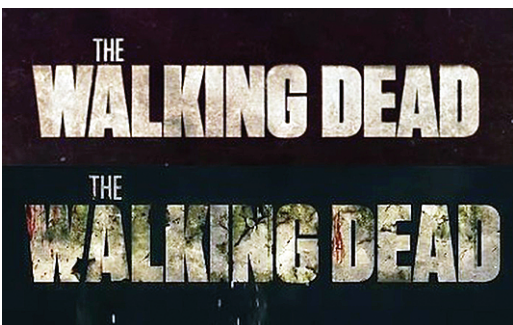
Characters were killed off each season, catching fans off guard. Each time one of the main stars met their end, producers held a dinner party — a “Death Dinner” — for them. The Season 7 premiere featured a show villain, played by Jeffrey Dean Morgan, murder a fan favorite character using a baseball bat wrapped with barbed wire. Fans were horrified.



The term “zombies” isn’t used on the show or in the comic book. Characters call them “walkers,” “skin-eaters,” “deadheads,” “wasteds,” “deadies,” “rotters,” “geeks,” “lurkers” and so on. Kirkman explained: “We wanted to kind of give you a sense that ‘The Walking Dead’ takes place in a universe where zombie fiction doesn’t exist.”



More than 150 extras auditioned to play walkers each season. Producers preferred thin actors with a pronounced bone structure. The actors then attend walker school, where they’re taught to move properly — not just with extended arms and muttering “Braaaaaains!” Foreground extras got contact lenses and dentures. Those in the background wore masks.



Producers had the show’s opening title screen decompose little by little each season. In addition, the show’s makeup artists began darkening the walkers’ makeup each season — the hope was for viewers to get a sense that the walkers were decaying with the passage of time.

