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Stephen King

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Stephen King

Stephen King, popularly known as “The King of Horror,” is one of the more prolific and successful writers of the twentieth century. Despite a reputation for writing only horror and gore, however, King has written works that do not qualify as either horror or supernatural but rather are thoughtful, intricate slices of human experience that often cause us to reflect on our own childhoods, not always with fond nostalgia. He encourages his readers to get in touch with their own memories of what being a child really means, and innocence has little to do with King's version of childhood. Believing that most adults have lost touch with their imaginations and a sense of the mythic, King constantly challenges his readers to expand their concepts of memory and experience.

Life

A writer who is remarkably open about his own history, King is frequently asked what seems to be an inevitable question: Where do you get your ideas? He has observed numerous times that this question seems to be asked more frequently of writers within the horror genre than of others, as though his story lines reflect an unstable mind. The assumption seems to be that he has to justify the choices he makes. Perhaps this pressure to defend himself is the reason so many details of his life are divulged in his nonfiction, wherein he reveals what he believes to be the sources if not for his fiction then at least for the turn of his mind. He acknowledges an early fascination with science fiction and with horror films and stories, but he has manifested that fascination in ways that attract readers who are interested in far more than either science fiction or horror, creating with his works a kind of intricate life philosophy.

Stephen Edwin King was born in Portland, Maine, on 21 September 1947. He and his older brother, David, were raised by their mother, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, after their father, Donald King, disappeared when Stephen was two years old. The story is that Donald went for a pack of cigarettes and never returned. After a good deal of moving around the country, the family returned to Maine permanently when Stephen was eleven. Nellie's parents were unable to care for themselves, and since she was not as firmly established in a career or a location as were her siblings, she and her sons were enlisted to care for her elderly parents.

King began writing short stories at an early age. He and his brother set up a small mimeograph press in their basement, which they used to print Stephen's short stories so they could sell the copies at school. Later King began submitting stories to magazines, receiving numerous rejections before being accepted by various men's and science fiction magazines. Attending the University of Maine at Orono, King wrote for a weekly school newspaper. He graduated with a B.S. degree in English in 1970, having also met the writer Tabitha Spruce at college; the two married in 1971. They struggled for a time while Stephen worked in an industrial laundry and then later as a high school English teacher, writing as much as possible in whatever time was left.

The first novel he sold was *Carrie* (1974), a tale that was later adapted for his first film, and he was at last able to quit his teaching job and write full-time. Since then he has written more than thirty novels, seven collections of short stories or novellas, and several works of nonfiction. He has experimented with various publishing approaches, including a serial novel (*The Green Mile*, 1996), a seven-volume epic (*the Dark Tower* series, of which four have been published to date, in 1982, 1987, 1991, and 1997; the fifth is in the works), downloadable Internet stories (*Riding the Bullet*, 2000) and the serialized e-book *The Plant* (2000–2001), screenplays (*Storm of the Century*, 1999, and *Rose Red*, 2002), a children's book (*The Eyes of the Dragon*, 1987), and two cowritten novels (*The Talisman*, 1984, and *Black House*, 2001, with Peter Straub). *Danse Macabre* (1980), his first nonfiction publication, is a kind of history of the horror genre in this century with much analysis of the genre's attraction for people. *On Writing* (2000) is a combination of autobiography and writing advice. Under the pseudonym Richard Bachman, he has written six other novels: *Rage* (1977), *The Long Walk* (1979), *Roadwork* (1981), *The Running Man* (1982), *Thinner* (1984), and —“posthumously”—*The Regulators* (1996). Many of his books have been translated into other languages and many have been made into movies with varying levels of success (several of which he has produced and/or acted bit parts in).

In June 1999 King was walking along the country roads near his summer home in Maine when he was hit by a van driven by a distracted driver. His leg was shattered, his knee split, his hip fractured, his ribs broken, his scalp lacerated, and his spine chipped. His recovery has been slow and painful, and he has documented some of his experiences in *On Writing*. Acknowledging that such

a near-death experience has its impact, he is considering retirement after he fulfills a number of obligations that are still pending. He and his wife, Tabitha, currently live in Bangor, Maine. They have three children, Naomi, Joe, and Philip, and one grandchild.

Works

An extremely prolific writer, King has developed a following of readers who want to know much more about the fantastic universe he has created with his tales, a universe that intersects within different texts at unexpected moments. Although popular thought assigns the works of Stephen King to the horror genre, they transcend such easy pigeonholing. Many of his works have a basic supernatural or science fiction flair, but his greatest strength is his ability to take everyday fears, fears that anyone may have, and create horror from them. King's novels are rooted in philosophy, culture, and theology in ways many critics tend to overlook. *Cujo* (1981) plays on our fears of rabid dogs, *Thinner* (1984) on curses and on the obsession to lose weight, *Carrie* (1974) on the mysterious power that manifests itself through menses (and telekinesis), *The Shining* (1977) on the demons of alcohol and isolation, *Christine* (1983) on a young boy's fixation with his car, *The Mist* in *Skeleton Crew* (1985) on a radiation leak that mutates everything it doesn't kill, *The Stand* (1978) on the government's out-of-control germ warfare, Apt Pupil in *Different Seasons* (1982) on a young boy's unnatural interest in the Holocaust, *The Dark Half* (1989) on the power of the psyche and pseudonyms, *Misery* (1987) on an obsessed fan, *Gerald's Game* (1992) on a friendly game of S&M that goes awry, and *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (1999) on getting lost in the woods. These and other stories are rooted in the mundane; no special powers or supernatural proclivities are required to experience the horror. The true horror is that although there is certainly an element of the supernatural at work in these tales, the origins of these events are not that far removed from our own possible experiences; the characters who experience these events are ordinary people we might encounter at any time, if they are not ourselves.

Other works draw from more traditional concepts of horror having to do with the monstrous: *Salem's Lot* (1975) is about vampires, *Pet Sematary* (1983) explores returning from the dead, *Tommyknockers* (1987) gives us a town taken over by space aliens, *Needful Things* (1991) shows the insidious and ubiquitous ways Satan is at work among us, and *Graveyard Shift* (in the *Night Shift* collection, 1978) is about mutant rats.

Even these ideas of monstrosity, however, do not affect readers simply on a "frightful" level; King at all times forces readers to think about their own complicity in evil and its furtherance. Refusing to write flat or stock characters, King shows that even good people make poor choices that have terrible results and that culpability must be examined at all times. In *Tommyknockers*, for example, the main character is magnetically drawn to the discovery of the buried space ship; any suspicion she may have about the evil intentions of the Tommyknockers is submerged by her belief that they are doing something good for the community. *Pet Sematary's* horror lies in the good intentions of a grieving father, just as *Cujo* shows that the rabid dog tries hard to remain a "good dog"; forces beyond the control of these characters use their good intentions to send them to their destruction. King certainly creates unlikable characters, but it is rare for a character—even Satan—to be accorded no sympathy at all. In *The Dead Zone* (1979), for example, the villain is established early on when he is unnecessarily cruel to a dog, and yet King, preferring the grays of human existence to the black-and-white world of much popular fiction, is careful to share enough of the character's background for readers to understand how such a nasty person can come to be, lending both credibility and sympathy to what would otherwise be simply a villain.

Just as Mary Shelley's complex and sympathetic portrayal of Frankenstein's monster was distorted and simplified by the popular movie-generated versions of the tale, the film versions of King's books have done much to fuel the popular assumption that King writes only of the horrible and the grotesque. For example, it is difficult to portray on a screen the inner thoughts of a dog struggling to be good, and much of the horror of *Cujo* the book is lost amid the bloody rampages of *Cujo* the movie. The horror in these movies is often far more visceral than intellectual, with the exceptions of *Misery* (1990), directed by Rob Reiner, and Stanley Kubrick's version of *The Shining* (1980). Reiner's *Misery* retains much of the sense of futility and fear from the book and actually deletes some of its more horrific and gory scenes; still, what is retained is very effectively done, and we can understand both the point of view of the writer who has been "captured" and the adoring fan who feels betrayed by the writer's intellectual ambitions. Kubrick's *The Shining* also retains much of the sense of panic from the book as well as the increasing despair of Johnny, the man who is gradually losing control of his sobriety and his sanity in the huge, haunted hotel; however, the power of the young boy is

somehow lost in the movie, where he seems more of a slightly autistic victim and less of a force to be reckoned with as he is in the book. The decisions made regarding the movies often seem somewhat formulaic and expedient, although sometimes it is the audience that misses the point. In *Needful Things*, for example, movie critics panned the portrayal of Satan, claiming that he was not adequately evil-looking; this portrayal is, of course, the point of the book, so that we can remember, consistent with Christian theology, that Satan does not appear with cloven hooves and forked tail but rather works patiently and quietly through our own desires and fears, undermining our souls. Patience and subtlety are difficult concepts to show in a two-hour movie, and so King's point is lost in the translation.

In King's later novels, however, a trend does seem to be occurring. The web of universe that he is weaving seems to be growing tighter and tighter, and the novels, including the earlier ones, appear to be intersecting more and more, so that he hints at planes of existence that go far beyond science fiction or even horror. Assuming that there are concurrent worlds where our "twins" live out parallel experiences, King builds upon the slippage between those worlds. *The Dark Tower* series identifies the center of King's constructed reality just as the Dark Tower itself is the center of the various planes of existence. Many of the more recent tales, even outside of *The Dark Tower* series, seem to stem from the desire to find the Dark Tower, to save it from the decay from which it is suffering, a decay that will ultimately obliterate the lines between the different worlds and result in impossible chaos. An epic filled with a sense of modern urgency, the series follows the journey of Roland as he moves toward the Dark Tower in order to save it. The first novel, *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* (1982), follows his journey through the desert to finally encounter the man who is his nemesis. *The Dark Tower: The Drawing of the Three* (1987) introduces us to Susannah, Eddie, and Jake, three unlikely heroes who will help Roland on his journey. *The Dark Tower: The Waste Lands* (1991) takes them across the apocalyptic land to the West, where they can find the beginnings of the path to the tower. *The Dark Tower: Wizard and Glass* (1997) gives us more of Roland's history before he met the others and sets them on their path. As frustrating as this drawn-out telling might be (with years between publication of the books), elements of the tale creep into other works by King, keeping readers eager for more. In the short-story collection *Everything's Eventual* (2002), there is a tale of Roland and his past. *The Talisman and Black House* both address elements of another world and its slippage; these stories focus on characters who do not have twins and who have to flip back and forth between worlds in order to save all of the worlds, which represent both escape and peril. King's exploration of these apparently dichotomous elements of these worlds, escape and peril, clearly demonstrates the ambivalence behind trying to escape our world: although it may be possible to avoid the realities of the world we know, the unknown devils of another world may be waiting our passage with evil intent.

The Stand (1978) seems to be the beginning of this examination of dichotomies, as the world is split between good and evil and the two elements must battle for primacy in the new world. *Hearts in Atlantis* (1999) presents us with a man who is aware of that slippage between worlds but who tries to assimilate into one world despite others who try to capture him and use his powers. *Dreamcatcher* (2001) operates in much the same way, as does *Rose Madder* (1995); the latter, in fact, explores the concept of twinning in a much more blatantly Freudian manner, where Rose has an unseen dark side that she allows to save her but which she prefers to hide in the future. *The Dark Half* (1989) is perhaps the same version of such twinning, about a pseudonym that begins to wield excessive power over the real figure. *Desperation* (1996) admits that there are spells that lead to another world and a language that provides access to understanding it. Although this is by no means a complete list of the links between the tales of the Dark Tower and King's other works, it gives an inkling of the complexity of Stephen King's universe; many of his characters appear in other books, some in an amusingly self-referential way (the small towns of Derry and Castle Rock figure large in his tales and news travels quickly between communities), some in a way that clearly establishes the dimensions of the King universe at all its levels. According to Roland, King's epic hero, what unites these different characters is "ka"—a concept something like "fate" only bound up in free will. It is the particular *ka* of all these characters to participate in King's universe and to create their own *ka-tet*, a group united by *ka*.

Heroes

King's heroes are united by more than *ka-tet*, however, for King relies a good deal upon his own childhood for his characterizations. He believes that children, especially young boys, have an affinity for the supernatural and that children make better horror heroes than adults because they believe so much more readily and completely and are able to suspend disbelief in ways that adults cannot. It is not unusual in King's stories for the adults to go insane and for the children to save the day. Jake, a young boy, is one of the heroes of the *Dark Tower* series, along with Eddie, the heroin addict, and Susannah, the black woman in

the wheelchair. Jack Sawyer, a boy, is the hero of *The Talisman*, and he returns in *Black House* as an adult; in the sequel he has erased the memories of his childhood adventures, and only by accepting those memories can he face his new task. In *The Shining* it is the boy's ability to see beyond the world of adults that ultimately saves him and his mother. In *Desperation*, it is a young boy's belief in himself that allows the prisoners to escape the mad policeman's jail. In *Hearts in Atlantis*, a young boy connects with a stranger in ways that no one else can. *Firestarter* (1980) and *Carrie* are both about the powers of young girls. In *Christine*, only the young boy understands the gravity of the situation and can save his friend. In countless short stories children are the heroes, able to cope with the strange reality around them in ways that the adults are incapable of. In both *Dreamcatcher* and *The Green Mile*, the hero is someone with a child's mentality who understands little except the power he was given. King gives power and autonomy to those who otherwise lack it, creating heroes who are relatively ordinary people to whom readers can relate easily. A master at manipulating reader sympathy, King believes that fairy tales—the ultimate propaganda and the beginning of our consciousness of the mythic—provide the conduit into our childhoods and that a new mythic sensibility allows us to reexperience the magic of a time when disbelief was not as powerfully at work in our lives.

Conclusion

In works that range from short stories to multivolume novels, screenplays to nonfiction, King's body of work is impressive. His writing style is very clean (he believes in deleting as many adverbs as possible), and his books are often page-turners, giving his works the reputation of being “light” reading. Despite this reputation, however, his works will be around for a long time, not only because of their entertainment value but because he has been able to create a universe that forces us to consider our own existence anew, to consider our own philosophies and theologies, and to look at the world around us in a different way. When earnest study has begun on King's body of work, critics will look beyond the gore to see the intricacies of the world he has evinced for us and may well decide that King is not only commercially successful but has been of some literary import as well.

See also [POPULAR FICTION](#).

Works

Carrie (1974)

Salem's Lot (1975)

Rage (as Richard Bachman) (1977)

The Shining (1977)

Night Shift (1978)

The Stand (1978)

The Dead Zone (1979)

The Long Walk (as Richard Bachman) (1979)

Danse Macabre (1980)

Firestarter (1980)

Cujo (1981)

Roadwork (as Richard Bachman) (1981)

Creepshow (1982)

The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger (1982)

Different Seasons (1982)

The Running Man (as Richard Bachman) (1982)

Christine (1983)

Pet Sematary (1983)

Skeleton Crew (1985)

The Talisman (1984)

Thinner (as Richard Bachman) (1984)

Cycle of the Werewolf (1985)

It (1986)

The Dark Tower: The Drawing of the Three (1987)

The Eyes of the Dragon (1987)

Misery (1987)

Six Stories (1987)

Tommyknockers (1987)

The Dark Half (1989)

Four Past Midnight (1990)

The Stand: The Complete and Uncut Edition (1990)

Needful Things (1991)

The Dark Tower: The Waste Lands (1991)

Dolores Claiborne (1992)

Gerald's Game (1992)

Nightmares and Dreamscapes (1993)

Insomnia (1994)

Rose Madder (1995)

Desperation (1996)

The Green Mile (1996)

The Regulators (as Richard Bachman) (1996)

The Dark Tower: Wizard and Glass (1997)

Bag of Bones (1998)

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon (1999)

Hearts in Atlantis (1999)

Storm of the Century (1999)

On Writing (2000)

Secret Windows (2000)

The Plant (2000–2001)

Black House (2001)

Dreamcatcher (2001)

Everything's Eventual (2002)

Rose Red (2002)

Further Reading

Beahm, George W. *The Stephen King Story*. Kansas City, Mo., 1991. Biography, including photographs and bibliographical appendix. Extensive in its coverage but somewhat dated.

Collings, Michael R. *The Annotated Guide to Stephen King: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography of the Works of America's Premier Horror Writer*. Mercer Island, Wash., 1986. Includes bibliographic information on editions and reprints, critical studies, reviews, and interviews. Fairly comprehensive although an updated supplement would be helpful.

Magistrale, Tony. *Stephen King: The Second Decade: Danse Macabre to The Dark Half*. Toronto, 1992. Many critical readings of some of King's later works; the criticism seems to be aimed at a more academic audience, although the interview with King at the beginning is interesting and shows a side of King that not many critics get to see.

Reino, Joseph. *Stephen King: The First Decade: Carrie to Pet Sematary*. Boston, 1988. A critical reading of Stephen King's life and text that attempts to situate King's work historically. Interesting but too much plot summary.

Russell, Sharon A. *Stephen King: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn., 1996. Covers some of King's later works, with a strong focus on characters as well as themes.

Wiater, Stan, Christopher Golden, and Hank Wagner. *The Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of the King of Horror*. New York, 2001. Discusses plots and characters from King's works, organizing the books and stories together thematically. Maps the connections between texts, including story lines, worldviews, and characters. Useful in its organization.

Winter, Douglas E. *Stephen King: The Art of Darkness*. New York, 1984. A fairly thorough evaluation of the themes within King's early works. Well-supplemented by Russell.

www.stephenking.com. Although there are many King Web sites, this is the authorized version and includes bibliographical and biographical information. The site also serves to keep fans updated regarding forthcoming King projects.