

Stephen King

Born: Portland, Maine; September 21, 1947

Principal long fiction • *Carrie*, 1974; *Salem's Lot*, 1975; *Rage*, 1977 (as Richard Bachman); *The Shining*, 1977; *The Stand*, 1978, unabridged version 1990; *The Dead Zone*, 1979; *The Long Walk*, 1979 (as Bachman); *Firestarter*, 1980; *Cujo*, 1981; *Roadwork*, 1981 (as Bachman); *The Gunslinger*, 1982, revised 2003 (illustrated by Michael Whelan; first volume of the Dark Tower series); *The Running Man*, 1982 (as Bachman); *Christine*, 1983; *Cycle of the Werewolf*, 1983 (novella; illustrated by Berni Wrightson); *Pet Sematary*, 1983; *The Eyes of the Dragon*, 1984, 1987; *The Talisman*, 1984 (with Peter Straub); *Thinner*, 1984 (as Bachman); *The Bachman Books: Four Early Novels by Stephen King*, 1985 (includes *Rage*, *The Long Walk*, *Roadwork*, and *The Running Man*); *It*, 1986; *Misery*, 1987; *The Drawing of the Three*, 1987 (illustrated by Phil Hale; second volume of the Dark Tower series); *The Tommyknockers*, 1987; *The Dark Half*, 1989; *Needful Things*, 1991; *The Waste Lands*, 1991 (illustrated by Ned Dameron; third volume in the Dark Tower series); *Gerald's Game*, 1992; *Dolores Claiborne*, 1993; *Insomnia*, 1994; *Rose Madder*, 1995; *Desperation*, 1996; *The Green Mile*, 1996 (six-part serialized novel); *The Regulators*, 1996 (as Bachman); *Wizard and Glass*, 1997 (illustrated by Dave McKean; fourth volume in the Dark Tower series); *Bag of Bones*, 1998; *Storm of the Century*, 1999 (adaptation of his teleplay); *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, 1999; *Black House*, 2001 (with Straub); *Dreamcatcher*, 2001; *From a Buick Eight*, 2002; *Wolves of the Calla*, 2003 (fifth volume of the Dark Tower series); *Song of Susannah*, 2004 (sixth volume of the Dark Tower series); *The Journals of Eleanor Druse: My Investigation of the Kingdom Hospital Incident*, 2004 (written under the pseudonym Eleanor Druse); *The Colorado Kid*, 2005; *Cell*, 2006; *Lisey's Story*, 2006.

Other literary forms • Stephen King published more than one hundred short stories (including the collections *Night Shift*, 1978, *Skeleton Crew*, 1985, and *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, 1993) and the eight novellas contained in *Different Seasons* (1982) and *Four Past Midnight* (1990). Two of these novellas are central to his work. In *The Body*, a boy's confrontation with mortality shapes his developing identity as a writer. In *The Mist*, King in his satirical and apocalyptic mode brings Armageddon to the Federal Foods Supermarket as an assortment of grade-B film monsters that inhabit a dense fog.

The relations of King's fiction with the electronic media are many and complex. Much of his fiction has been adapted to both the large and small screens, although it usually plays best in the mind's eye. Several of King's screenplays have been produced, including *Maximum Overdrive* (1986), which he directed. A relatively successful mixed-media venture was his collaboration with George Romero on *Creepshow* (1982), a film anthology inspired by the DC Comics' blend of camp and gore and based on King's own book version. *Creepshow II*, written by Romero and based on King's stories, appeared in 1987. King's teleplays include *The Stand* (1994), which was based on his novel, and *Storm of the Century* (1999), which was written expressly for television broadcast. King has published numerous articles and a critical book, *Danse Macabre* (1981).

Achievements • King is perhaps the most widely known American writer of his generation, yet his distinctions include publishing as two authors at once: Beginning in 1966, he wrote novels that were published under the pseudonym Richard Bachman. He won many British Fantasy and World Fantasy Awards, including the latter for overall contributions to the genre in 1980. At first ignored and then scorned by mainstream critics, by the late 1980's his novels were reviewed regularly in *The New York Times Book Review*, with increasing favor. Beginning in 1987, most of his novels were main selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which in 1989 created the Stephen King Library, committed to keeping King's novels "in print in hardcover." King was *People* magazine's Writer of the Year in 1980. One of his most appropriate distinctions was the October 9, 1986, cover of *Time* magazine, which depicted a reader, hair on end, transfixed by "A Novel by Stephen King." The cover story on the "King of Horror" correctly suggested that his achievement and the "horror boom" of the 1970's and 1980's are inseparable. Yet, like Edgar Allan Poe, King turned a degenerated genre—a matter of comic-book monsters and drive-in films—into a medium embodying the primary anxieties of his age.

King's detractors attribute his success to the sensational appeal of his genre, whose main purpose, as King readily confesses, is to scare people. He is graphic, sentimental, and predictable. His humor is usually crude and campy. His novels are often long and loosely structured: *It*, for example, contains 1,138 pages. In an environment of "exhaustion" and minimalism, King's page-turners are the summit of the garbage heap of a mass, throwaway culture. Worst of all, he is "Master of Postliterate Prose," as Paul Gray stated in 1982—writing that takes readers mentally to the films rather than making them imagine or think.

On the other hand, King's work provides the most genuine example of the storyteller's art since Charles Dickens. He has returned to the novel some of the popular appeal it had in the nineteenth century and turned out a generation of readers who vastly prefer some books to their film adaptations. As Dickens drew on the popular culture of his time, King reflects the mass-mediated culture of his own. His dark fantasies, like all good popular fiction, allow readers to express within conventional frames of reference feelings and concepts they might not otherwise consider. In imagination, King is not merely prolific; his vision articulates universal fears and desires in terms peculiar to contemporary culture.

Biography • The second son of Donald and Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, Stephen Edwin King has lived most of his life in Maine, the setting for most of his fiction. Two childhood traumas, neither of which he remembers, may have been formative. In 1949, when he was two years old, his parents separated and his father disappeared. In 1951, he apparently saw a train dismember a neighborhood friend.

King's conservative Methodist upbringing was supplemented early with a diet of comic books and pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. When twelve, he began submitting stories for sale. In 1970, he graduated from the University of Maine, Orono, with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in dramatics. He encountered two lasting influences, the naturalist writers and contemporary American mythology. He also met Tabitha Jane Spruce, whom he married in 1971.

After graduation, he worked in an industrial laundry until 1971, when he became an English instructor at a preparatory school in Hampden, Maine. He wrote at night in the trailer he shared with his wife and two children. During the early 1970's, he sold stories to men's magazines. Then, in 1974, he published *Carrie*, which was fol-

lowed by several best-sellers and sales of motion-picture rights.

King settled in Maine with his wife, Tabitha King, a novelist and the writer of *Small World* (1981), *Caretakers* (1983), and others. They had three children, Naomi, Joe, and Owen. In addition to writing daily (except Christmas and his birthday), King became active in opposing censorship, composing essays and lecturing on the topic and supporting controversial publications. He also indulged his love of rock and roll, having purchased a local radio station (renamed WZON) and occasionally performing, with writers Dave Barry, Amy Tan, and others, in the Rock-Bottom Remainers.

In 1999, King was struck by a vehicle while walking along a rural road near his home and sustained severe and life-threatening injuries that would require many years of painful surgery and therapy to recover. Nevertheless, he remained upbeat and philosophical during his lengthy recovery and eventually returned to productive writing. At the time of his accident, he was writing his memoir *On Writing* (2000). When he finally completed that book, he included in it an account of his life-altering experience.



Tabitha King

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Analysis • Stephen King may be known as a horror writer, but he calls himself a “brand name,” describing his style as “the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald’s.” His fast-food version of the “plain style” may smell of commercialism, but that may make him the contemporary American storyteller without peer. From the beginning, his dark parables spoke to the anxieties of the late twentieth century. As a surrogate author in *The Mist* explains King’s mission, “when the technologies fail, when . . . religious systems fail, people have got to have something. Even a zombie lurching through the night” is a “cheerful” thought in the context of a “dissolving ozone layer.”

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culture. This reality, already mediated, is translated easily into preternatural terms, taking on a nightmarish quality.

King's imagination is above all archetypal: His "pop" familiarity and his campy humor draw on the collective unconscious. In *Danse Macabre*, a study of the contemporary horror genre that emphasizes the cross-pollination of fiction and film, he divides his subject according to four "monster archetypes": the ghost, the "thing" (or human-made monster), the vampire, and the werewolf. As with his fiction, his sources are the classic horror films of the 1930's, inherited by the 1950's pulp and film industries. He hints at their derivations from the gothic novel, classical myth, Brothers Grimm folktales, and the oral tradition in general. In an anxious era both skeptical of and hungry for myth, horror is fundamentally reassuring and cathartic; the tale-teller combines roles of physician and priest into the witch doctor as "sin eater," who assumes the guilt and fear of his culture. In the neoprimitivism of the late twentieth century, this ancient role and the old monsters have taken on a new mystique. In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), psychologist Bruno Bettelheim argues that the magic and terrors of fairy tales present existential problems in forms children can understand. King's paranormal horrors have similar cathartic and educative functions for adults; they externalize the traumas of life, especially those of adolescence.

Carrie • Stephen King's first published novel, *Carrie*, is a parable of adolescence. Sixteen-year-old Carrie White is a lonely ugly duckling, an outcast at home and at school. Her mother, a religious fanatic, associates Carrie with her own "sin"; Carrie's peers hate her in a mindless way and make her the butt of every joke. *Carrie* concerns the horrors of high school, a place of "bottomless conservatism and bigotry," as King explains, where students "are no more allowed to rise 'above their station' than a Hindu" above caste. The novel is also about the terrors of passage to womanhood. In the opening scene, in the school shower room, Carrie experiences her first menstrual period; her peers react with abhorrence and ridicule, "stoning" her with sanitary napkins, shouting "Plug it up!" Carrie becomes the scapegoat for a fear of female sexuality as epitomized in the smell and sight of blood. (The blood bath and symbolism of sacrifice will recur at the climax of the novel.) As atonement for her participation in Carrie's persecution in the shower, Susan Snell persuades her popular boyfriend Tommy Ross to invite Carrie to the Spring Ball. Carrie's conflict with her mother, who regards her emerging womanhood with loathing, is paralleled by a new plot by the girls against her, led by the rich and spoiled Chris Hargenson. They arrange to have Tommy and Carrie voted king and queen of the ball, only to crown them with a bucket of pig's blood. Carrie avenges her mock baptism telekinetically, destroying the school and the town, leaving Susan Snell as the only survivor.

As in most folk cultures, initiation is signified by the acquisition of special wisdom or powers. King equates Carrie's sexual flowering with the maturing of her telekinetic ability. Both cursed and empowered with righteous fury, she becomes at once victim and monster, witch and White Angel of Destruction. As King has explained, Carrie is "Woman, feeling her powers for the first time and, like Samson, pulling down the temple on everyone in sight at the end of the book."

Carrie catapulted King into the mass market; in 1976 it was adapted into a critically acclaimed film directed by Brian De Palma. The novel touched the right nerves, including feminism. William Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), which was adapted into a powerful and controversial film, had touched on similar social fears during the 1960's

and 1970's with its subtext of the "generation gap" and the "death of God." Although Carrie's destructive power, like that of Regan in *The Exorcist*, is linked with monstrous adolescent sexuality, the similarity between the two novels ends there. Carrie's "possession" is the complex effect of her mother's fanaticism, her peers' bigotry, and her newly realized, unchecked female power. Like Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), a collection of fractured fairy tales in sardonic verse, King's novel explores the social and cultural roots of evil.

King's *Carrie* is a dark modernization of "Cinderella," with a bad mother, cruel siblings (peers), a prince (Tommy Ross), a godmother (Sue Snell), and a ball. King's reversal of the happy ending is actually in keeping with the Brothers Grimm; it recalls the tale's folk originals, which enact revenge in bloody images: The stepsisters' heels, hands, and noses are sliced off, and a white dove pecks out their eyes. As King knows, blood flows freely in the oral tradition. King represents that oral tradition in a pseudodocumentary form that depicts the points of view of various witnesses and commentaries: newspaper accounts, case studies, court reports, and journals. Pretending to textual authenticity, he alludes to the gothic classics, especially Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). *'Salem's Lot*, King's next novel, is a bloody fairy tale in which Dracula comes to Our Town.

'Salem's Lot • By the agnostic and sexually liberated 1970's, the vampire had been demythologized into what King called a "comic book menace." In a significant departure from tradition, he diminishes the sexual aspects of the vampire. He reinvests the archetype with meaning by basing its attraction on the human desire to surrender identity in the mass. His major innovation, however, was envisioning the mythic small town in American gothic terms and then making it the monster; the vampire's traditional victim, the populace, becomes the menace as mindless mass, plague, or primal horde. Drawing on Richard Matheson's grimly naturalistic novel *I Am Legend* (1954) and Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* (1955), King focused on the issues of fragmentation, reinvesting the vampire with contemporary meaning.

The sociopolitical subtext of *'Salem's Lot* was the ubiquitous disillusionment of the Watergate era, King has explained. Like rumor and disease, vampirism spreads secretly at night, from neighbor to neighbor, infecting men and women, the mad and the senile, the responsible citizen and the infant alike, absorbing into its zombielike horde the human population. King is especially skillful at suggesting how small-town conservatism can become inverted on itself, the harbored suspicions and open secrets gradually dividing and isolating. This picture is reinforced by the town's name, 'salem's Lot, a degenerated form of Jerusalem's Lot, which suggests the city of the chosen reverted to a culture of dark rites in images of spreading menace.

King's other innovation was, paradoxically, a reiteration. He made his "king vampire," Barlow, an obvious reincarnation of Stoker's *Dracula* that functions somewhere between cliché and archetype. King uses the mythology of vampires to ask how civilization is to exist without faith in traditional authority symbols. His answer is pessimistic, turning on the abdication of Father Callahan, whose strength is undermined by secret alcoholism and a superficial adherence to form. The two survivors, Ben Mears and Mark Petrie, must partly seek, partly create their talismans and rituals, drawing on the compendium of vampire lore—the alternative, in a culture-wide crisis of faith, to conventional systems. (At one point, Mears holds off a vampire with a crucifix made with two tongue depressors.) The paraphernalia, they find, will work only if the handler has faith.

It is significant that the two survivors are, respectively, a “wise child” (Petrie) and a novelist (Mears); only they have the necessary resources. Even Susan Norton, Mears’s lover and the gothic heroine, succumbs. As in *The Shining*, *The Dead Zone*, and *Firestarter*, the child (or childlike adult) has powers that may be used for good or for evil. Mears is the imaginative, nostalgic adult, haunted by the past. The child and the man share a naïveté, a gothic iconography, and a belief in evil. Twelve-year-old Mark worships at a shrinelike tableau of Aurora monsters that glow “green in the dark, just like the plastic Jesus” he was given in Sunday School for learning Psalm 119. Mears has returned to the town of his childhood to revive an image of the Marsten House lurking in his mythical mind’s eye. Spiritual father and son, they create a community of two out of the “pop” remnants of American culture.

As in fairy tales and Dickens’s novels, King’s protagonists are orphans searching for their true parents, for community. His fiction may reenact his search for the father who disappeared and left behind a box of *Weird Tales*. The yearned-for bond of parent and child, a relationship signifying a unity of being, appears throughout his fiction. The weakness or treachery of a trusted parent is correspondingly the ultimate fear. Hence, the vampire Barlow is the devouring father who consumes an entire town.

The Shining • In *The Shining*, King domesticated his approach to the theme of parent-child relationships, focusing on the threat to the family that comes from a trusted figure within it. Jack Torrance, a writer, arranges to oversee a mountain resort during the winter months, when it is closed due to snow. He moves his family with him to the Overlook Hotel, where he expects to break a streak of bad luck and personal problems (he is an alcoholic) by writing a play. He is also an abused child who, assuming his father’s aggression, in turn becomes the abusing father. The much beloved “bad” father is the novel’s monster: The environment of the Overlook Hotel traps him, as he in turn calls its power forth. As Jack metamorphoses from abusive father and husband into violent monster, King brilliantly expands the haunted-house archetype into a symbol of the accumulated sin of all fathers.

Christine • In *Christine*, the setting is Libertyville, Pennsylvania, during the late 1970’s. The monster is the American Dream as embodied in the automobile. King gives *Christine* all the attributes of a fairy tale for “postliterate” adolescents. *Christine* is another fractured “Cinderella” story, *Carrie* for boys. Arnie Cunningham, a near-sighted, acne-scarred loser, falls “in love with” a car, a passionate (red and white) Plymouth Fury, “one of the long ones with the big fins,” that he names Christine. An automotive godmother, she brings Arnie, in fairy-tale succession, freedom, success, power, and love: a home away from overprotective parents, a cure for acne, hit-and-run revenge on bullies, and a beautiful girl, Leigh Cabot. Soon, however, the familiar triangle emerges, of boy, girl, and car, and Christine is revealed as a femme fatale—driven by the spirit of her former owner, a malcontent named Roland LeBay. Christine is the medium for his death wish on the world, for his all-devouring, “everlasting Fury.” LeBay’s aggression possesses Arnie, who reverts into an older, tougher self, then into the “mythic teenaged hood” that King has called the prototype of 1950’s werewolf films, and finally into “some ancient carrion eater,” or primal self.

As automotive monster, Christine comes from a variety of sources, including the folk tradition of the “death car” and a venerable techno-horror premise, as seen in King’s “Trucks” and *Maximum Overdrive*. King’s main focus, however, is the mobile

youth culture that has come down from the 1950's by way of advertising, popular songs, film, and national pastimes. Christine is the car as a projection of the cultural self, Anima for the modern American Adam. To Arnie's late 1970's-style imagination, the Plymouth Fury, in 1958 a mid-priced family car, is an American Dream. Her sweeping, befinned chassis and engine re-create a fantasy of the golden age of the automobile: the horizonless future imagined as an expanding network of superhighways and unlimited fuel. Christine recovers for Arnie a prelapsarian vitality and manifest destiny.

Christine's odometer runs backward and she regenerates parts. The immortality she offers, however—and by implication, the American Dream—is really arrested development in the form of a *Happy Days* rerun and by way of her radio, which sticks on the golden oldies station. Indeed, *Christine* is a recapitulatory rock musical framed fatalistically in sections titled "Teenage Car-Songs," "Teenage Love-Songs," and "Teenage Death-Songs." Fragments of rock-and-roll songs introduce each chapter. Christine's burden, an undead 1950's youth culture, means that most of Arnie's travels are in and out of time, a deadly nostalgia trip. As Douglas Winter explains, *Christine* reenacts "the death," during the 1970's, "of the American romance with the automobile."

The epilogue from four years later presents the fairy-tale consolation in a burned-out monotone. Arnie and his parents are buried, Christine is scrap metal, and the true Americans, Leigh and Dennis, are survivors, but Dennis, the "knight of Darnell's Garage," does not woo "the lady fair"; he is a limping, lackluster junior high teacher, and they have drifted apart, grown old in their prime. Dennis narrates the story in order to file it away, all the while perceiving himself and his peers in terms of icons from the late 1950's. In his nightmares, Christine appears wearing a black vanity plate inscribed with a skull and the words, "ROCK AND ROLL WILL NEVER DIE." From Dennis's haunted perspective, *Christine* simultaneously examines and is a symptom of a cultural phenomenon: a new American gothic species of anachronism or déjà vu, which continued after *Christine's* publication in films such as *Back to the Future* (1985), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), and *Blue Velvet* (1986). The 1980's and the 1950's blur into a seamless illusion, the nightmare side of which is the prospect of living an infinite replay.

The subtext of King's adolescent fairy tale is another coming of age, from the opposite end and the broader perspective of American culture. Written by a fortyish King in the final years of the twentieth century, *Christine* diagnoses a cultural midlife crisis and marks a turning point in King's career, a critical examination of mass culture. The dual time frame reflects his awareness of a dual audience, of writing for adolescents who look back to a mythical 1950's and also for his own generation as it relives its undead youth culture in its children. The baby boomers, King explains, "were obsessive" about childhood. "We went on playing for a long time, almost feverishly. I write for that buried child in us, but I'm writing for the grown-up too. I want grown-ups to look at the child long enough to be able to give him up. The child should be buried."

Pet Sematary • In *Pet Sematary*, King unearthed the buried child, which is the novel's monster. *Pet Sematary* is about the "real cemetery," he told Winter. The focus is on the "one great fear" all fears "add up to," "the body under the sheet. It's our body." The fairy-tale subtext is the magic kingdom of our protracted American childhood, the Disney empire as mass culture—and, by implication, the comparable multimedia

phenomenon represented by King himself. The grimmer, truer text-within-the-text is Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

The novel, which King once considered "too horrible to be published," is also his own dark night of the soul. Louis Creed, a university doctor, moves with his wife, Rachel, and their two children (five-year-old Ellie and two-year-old Gage) to Maine to work at King's alma mater; a neighbor takes the family on an outing to a pet cemetery created by the neighborhood children, their confrontation with mortality. Additionally the "sematary," whose "Druidic" rings allude to Stonehenge, is the outer circle of a Native American burial ground that sends back the dead in a state of soulless half life. Louis succumbs to temptation when the family cat, Church, is killed on the highway; he buries him on the sacred old Native American burial grounds. "Frankencat" comes back with his "purr-box broken." A succession of accidents, heart attacks, strokes, and deaths—of neighbor Norma Crandall, Creed's son Gage, Norma's husband Jud, and Creed's wife Rachel—and resurrections follows.

The turning point is the death of Gage, which Creed cannot accept and that leads to the novel's analysis of modern medical miracles performed in the name of human decency and love. Louis is the father as baby boomer who cannot relinquish his childhood. The larger philosophical issue is Louis's rational, bioethical *creed*; he believes in saving the only life he knows, the material. Transferred into an immoderate love for his son, it is exposed as the narcissistic embodiment of a patriarchal lust for immortality through descendants, expressed first in an agony of sorrow and rage, then ghoulishly, as he disinters his son's corpse and makes the estranging discovery that it is like "looking at a badly made doll." Later, reanimated, Gage appears to have been "terribly hurt and then put back together again by crude, uncaring hands." Performing his task, Louis feels dehumanized, like "a subhuman character in some cheap comic-book."

The failure of Louis's creed is shown in his habit, when under stress, of taking mental trips to Orlando, Florida, where he, Church, and Gage drive a white van as Disney World's "resurrection crew." In these waking dreams, which echo the male bond of "wise child" and haunted father from as far back as *Salem's Lot*, Louis's real creed is revealed: Its focus is on Oz the Gweat and Tewwible (a personification of death to Rachel) and Walt Disney, that "gentle faker from Nebraska"—like Louis, two wizards of science fantasy. Louis's wizardry is reflected in the narrative perspective and structure, which flashes back in part 2 from the funeral to Louis's fantasy of a heroically "long, flying tackle" that snatches Gage from death's wheels.

In this modernization of *Frankenstein*, King demythologizes death and attacks the aspirations toward immortality that typify contemporary American attitudes. King's soulless Lazaruses are graphic projections of anxieties about life-support systems, artificial hearts, organ transplants—what King has called "mechanistic miracles" that can postpone the physical signs of life almost indefinitely. The novel also indicts the "waste land" of mass culture, alluding in the same trope to George Romero's "stupid, lurching movie-zombies," T. S. Eliot's poem about the hollow men, and *The Wizard of Oz*: "headpiece full of straw." Louis worries that Ellie knows more about Ronald McDonald and "the Burger King" than the "*spiritus mundi*." If the novel suggests one source of community and culture, it is the form and ritual of the children's pet "sematary." Its concentric circles form a pattern from their "own collective unconsciousness," one that mimes "the most ancient religious symbol of all," the spiral.

It • In *It*, a group of children create a community and a mythology as a way of confronting their fears, as represented by It, the monster as a serial-murdering, shape-shifting boogey that haunts the sewers of Derry, Maine. In 1958, the seven protagonists, a cross-section of losers, experience the monster differently, for as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), It derives its power through its victim's isolation and guilt and thus assumes the shape of his or her worst fear. (To Beverly Rogan It appears, in a sequence reminiscent of "Red Riding Hood," as her abusive father in the guise of the child-eating witch from "Hansel and Gretel.")

In a scary passage in *Pet Sematary*, Louis dreams of Walt Disney World, where "by the 1890s train station, Mickey Mouse was shaking hands with the children clustered around him, his big white cartoon gloves swallowing their small, trusting hands." To all of *It*'s protagonists, the monster appears in a similar archetypal or communal form, one that suggests a composite of devouring parent and mass-culture demigod, of television commercial and fairy tale, of 1958 and 1985: as Pennywise, the Clown, a cross between Bozo and Ronald McDonald. As in *Christine*, *Pet Sematary*, and *Thinner*, the monster is mass culture itself, the collective devouring parent nurturing its children on "imitations of immortality." Like Christine, or Louis's patched-up son, Pennywise is the dead past feeding on the future. Twenty-seven years after its original reign of terror, It resumes its seige, whereupon the protagonists, now professionally successful and, significantly, childless yuppies, must return to Derry to confront as adults their childhood fears. Led by horror writer Bill Denborough (partly based on King's friend and collaborator Peter Straub), they defeat It once more, individually as a sort of allegory of psychoanalysis and collectively as a rite of passage into adulthood and community.

It was attacked in reviews as pop psychology and by King himself as a "badly constructed novel," but the puerility was partly intended. The book summarizes King's previous themes and characters, who themselves look backward and inward, regress and take stock. The last chapter begins with an epigraph from Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-1850) and ends with an allusion to William Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," from which King takes his primary theme and narrative device, the look back that enables one to go forward. During the 1970's, King's fiction was devoted to building a mythos out of shabby celluloid monsters to fill a cultural void; in the postmodern awareness of the late 1980's, he began a demystification process. *It* is a calling forth and ritual unmasking of motley Reagan-era monsters, the exorcism of a generation and a culture.

Other 1980's Novels • As for King the writer, *It* was one important rite in what would be a lengthy passage. After *It*'s extensive exploration of childhood, however, he took up conspicuously more mature characters, themes, and roles. In *The Eyes of the Dragon* (written for his daughter), he returned to the springs of his fantasy, the fairy tale. He told much the same story as before but assumed the mantle of adulthood. This "pellucid" and "elegant" fairy tale, says Barbara Tritel in *The New York Times Book Review* (February 22, 1987), has the "intimate goofiness of an extemporaneous story" narrated by "a parent to a child." In *The Tommyknockers*, King again seemed to leave familiar territory for science fiction, but the novel more accurately applies technohorror themes to the 1980's infatuation with technology and televangelism. In *The Dark Tower* cycles, he combined the gothic with Western and apocalyptic fiction in a manner reminiscent of *The Stand*. Then with much fanfare in 1990, King returned to that novel to update and enlarge it by some 350 pages.

King and Bachman • The process of recapitulation and summing up was complicated by the disclosure, in 1984, of Richard Bachman, the pseudonym under whose cover King had published five novels over a period of eight years. Invented for business reasons, Bachman soon grew into an identity complete with a biography and photographs (he was a chicken farmer with a cancer-ravaged face), dedications, a narrative voice (of unrelenting pessimism), and if not a genre, a naturalistic mode in which sociopolitical speculation combined or alternated with psychological suspense. In 1985, when the novels (with one exception) were collected in a single volume attributed to King *as* Bachman, the mortified alter ego seemed buried. Actually Bachman's publicized demise only raised a haunting question of what "Stephen King" really was.

Misery • *Misery*, which was conceived as Bachman's book, was King's first novel to explore the subject of fiction's dangerous powers. After crashing his car on an isolated road in Colorado, romance writer Paul Sheldon is "rescued," drugged, and held prisoner by a psychotic nurse named Annie Wilkes, who is also the "Number One Fan" of his heroine Misery Chastain (of whom he has tired and killed off). This "Constant Reader" becomes Sheldon's terrible "Muse," forcing him to write (in an edition especially for her) *Misery's* return to life. Sheldon is the popular writer imprisoned by genre and cut to fit fan expectations (signified by Annie's amputations of his foot and thumb). Like Scheherazade, the reader is reminded, Sheldon must publish or literally perish. Annie's obsession merges with the expectations of the page-turning real reader, who demands and devours each chapter, and as Sheldon struggles (against pain, painkillers, and a manual typewriter that throws keys) for his life, page by page.

Billed ironically on the dust jacket as a love letter to his fans, the novel is a witty satire on what King has called America's "cannibalistic cult of celebrity": "[Y]ou set the guy up, and then you eat him." The monstrous Reader, however, is also the writer's muse, creation, and alter ego, as Sheldon discovers when he concludes that *Misery Returns*—not his "serious" novel *Fast Cars*—was his masterpiece. Just as ironically, *Misery* was King's first novel to please most of the critics.

The Dark Half • *The Dark Half* is an allegory of the writer's relation to his genius. The young writer-protagonist Thaddeus Beaumont has a series of headaches and seizures, and a surgeon removes from his eleven-year-old brain the incompletely absorbed fragments of a twin—including an eye, two teeth, and some fingernails. Nearly thirty years later, Beaumont is a creative writing professor and moderately successful literary novelist devoted to his family. For twelve years, however, he has been living a secret life through George Stark, the pseudonym under which he emerged from writer's block as the author of best-selling crime novels. Stark's purely instinctual genius finds its most vital expression in his protagonist, the ruthless killer Alexis Machine. Beaumont is forced to disclose and destroy his now self-destructive pseudonym, complete with gravesite service and papier mâché headstone. A series of murders (narrated in Stark's graphic prose style) soon follows. The pseudonym has materialized, risen from its fictional grave literally to take Thad's wife and children (twins, of course) hostage. What Stark wants is to live in writing, outside of which writers do not exist. However, the writer is also a demon, vampire, and killer in this dark allegory, possessing and devouring the man, his family, friends, community.

Drawing on the motif of the double and the form of the detective story—on Rob-

ert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (c. fifth century B.C.E.), as well as *Misery* and *Pet Sematary*—King gluts the first half of the book with Stark/Machine's gruesome rampages. The last half is psychological suspense and metafiction in biological metaphor: the struggle of the decently introspective Beaumont against the rawly instinctual Stark for control of both word and flesh, with the novel taking shape on the page as the true author reclaims the "third eye," King's term for both child's and artist's inward vision. Once again, the man buries the terrible child in order to possess himself and his art. The book ends in a "scene from some malign fairy tale" as that child and alter ego is borne away by flocks of sparrows to make a last appearance as a black hole in the fabric of the sky.

In dramatizing the tyrannies, perils, powers, and pleasures of reading and writing, *Misery* and *The Dark Half* might have been written by metafictionists John Fowles (to whose work King is fond of alluding) or John Barth (on whom he draws directly in *It* and *Misery*). Anything but abstract, however, *The Dark Half* is successful both as the thriller that King's fans desired and as an allegory of the writer's situation. Critic George Stade, in his review of the novel for *The New York Times Book Review* (October 29, 1989), praised King for his tact "in teasing out the implications of his parable." *The Dark Half* contains epigraphs instead to the novels of George Stark, Thad Beaumont, and "the late Richard Bachman," without whom "this novel could not have been written." Thus reworking the gothic cliché of the double, King allows the mythology of his own life story to speak wittily for itself, lending a subtle level of self-parody to this roman à clef. In this instance, his blunt literalness ("word become flesh, so to speak," as George Stark puts it), gives vitality to what in other hands might have been a sterile exercise.

Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne • Some have criticized King's negative depiction of women, which King himself admitted in 1983 was a weakness. A decade later, King would address, and redress, this in his paired novels *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. Both present a strong but besieged female protagonist, and both feature the total solar eclipse seen in Maine in 1963, during which a moment of telepathy, the books' only supernaturalism, links the two women.

Gerald's Game is the story of Jessie Burlingame, a young wife who submits to her husband's desire for bondage in a deserted cabin, only to have him die when she unexpectedly struggles. Alone and helpless, Jessie confronts memories (including the secret reason she struck out at Gerald), her own fears and limitations, and a ghastly visitor to the cabin who may or may not be real. In a bloody scene—even by King's standards—Jessie frees herself and escapes, a victory psychological as well as physical. The aptly named Dolores Claiborne is trapped more metaphorically, by poverty and an abusive husband, and her victory too is both violent and a sign of her developing independence and strength.

Initial reaction from critics was sometimes skeptical, especially given the prurient aspect of Jessie's plight and the trendy theme of incestuous abuse in both novels. However, King examined family dysfunction in works from *Carrie* and *The Shining* to *It*, and he continued his commitment to women's issues and realistic strong women in *Insomnia*, *Rose Madder*, and other novels. Archetypal themes also strengthen the two books: Female power must overcome male dominance, as the moon eclipses the sun; and each woman must find her own identity and strength out of travail, as the darkness gives way to light again. (King uses mythology and gender issues

more explicitly in *Rose Madder*, which evenly incorporates mimetic and supernatural scenes.)

The books are daring departures for King in other ways. In contrast to King's sprawling *It* or encyclopedic *The Stand*, these books, like *Misery*, tightly focus on one setting, a shorter period of time, and a small cast—here *Misery*'s duet is replaced by intense monologues. In fact, all of *Dolores Claiborne* is her first-person narrative, without even chapter breaks, a tour de force few would attempt. Moreover, King challenges our ideas of the genre horror novel, since there is little violence, none of it supernatural and all expected, so that suspense is a function of character, not plot (done previously by King only in short fiction such as “The Body” and “The Last Rung of the Ladder”).

Character and voice have always been essential to King's books, as Debbie Notkin, Harlan Ellison, and others have pointed out. Dolores Claiborne is especially successful, her speech authentic Mainer, and her character realistic both as the old woman telling her story and as the desperate yet indomitable wife, the past self whose story she tells. In these novels, King reaches beyond childhood and adolescence as themes; child abuse is examined, but only from an adult point of view. Dolores and Jessie—and the elderly protagonists of *Insomnia*—reveal King, perhaps having reconciled to his own history, exploring new social and psychological areas.

Bag of Bones • *Bag of Bones*, which King calls a “haunted love story,” opens with narrator Mike Noonan recounting the death of his wife, Jo, who collapses outside the Rite Aid pharmacy from a brain aneurysm. Both are relatively young, and Jo, Mike learns, was pregnant. Because Mike is unable to father children, he begins to question whether Jo was having an affair. As Mike slowly adjusts to life without Jo, he is forced to make another adjustment. Formerly a successful writer of gothic romance fiction, he now finds that he is unable to write even a simple sentence. In an attempt to regain his muse and put Jo's death behind him, Mike returns to Sarah Laughs (also referred to as “TR-90” or the “TR”), the vacation cabin he and Jo purchased soon after he became successful. As Mike quickly learns, Sarah Laughs is haunted by ghosts, among them the ghost of blues singer Sarah Tidwell.

While at Sarah Laughs, Mike meets Mattie Devore, her daughter Kyra, and Mattie's father-in-law, Max Devore, a withered old man of incalculable wealth who is accustomed to getting anything he wants. Having rescued Kyra from walking down the middle of Route 68, Mike quickly becomes friends with both Kyra and Mattie. Mattie is the widow of Lance Devore, Max's stuttering son. Lance had nothing to do with his father after learning that his father had tried to bribe Mattie into not marrying him. After Lance's death from a freak accident, Max returned to Mattie's life in an attempt to get acquainted with his granddaughter, Kyra. The truth is, however, that Max wants to gain custody of Kyra and take her away to California; he will do whatever it takes to accomplish that.

To help Mattie fight off Max's army of high-priced lawyers, Mike uses his own considerable resources to retain a lawyer for Mattie named John Storrow, a young New Yorker unafraid to take on someone of Max Devore's social stature. As Mike is drawn into Mattie's custody battle, he is also exposed to the ghosts that haunt the community. As Mike sleeps at night, he comes to realize that there are at least three separate spirits haunting his cabin. One, he is sure, is Jo, and one, he determines, is Sarah Tidwell. The third manifests itself only as a crying child, and Mike cannot tell whether it is Kyra or some other child. Mike and Kyra share a special psychic connec-

tion that allows them to share dreams and even to have the same ghosts haunting their homes—ghosts who communicate by rearranging magnetic letters on each of their refrigerator doors.

As Mike becomes further embroiled in the custody battle with Max Devore, his search to determine the truth about Jo's affair finally leads him to a set of journals Jo was keeping, notes from a research project that was her real reason for sneaking away to Sarah Laughs. Jo's notes explain how everyone related to the people who murdered Sarah Tidwell and her son have paid for this sin by losing a child of their own. Sarah Tidwell's ghost is exacting her revenge by murdering the children of those who murdered her own child. Mike, related to one of the people who murdered Sarah's child, has been drawn into this circle of retribution from the beginning, and the death of his unborn daughter, Kia, was not the accident it seemed to be. Mike also realizes that Kyra, the last descendant of this tragedy, is to be the final sacrifice used to put Sarah Tidwell to rest. Mike's return to the ironically named Sarah Laughs, it seems, has been a carefully orchestrated tragedy. Everything is tied to the ghost Sarah Tidwell's purposes, even Mike's writer's block. Mike's writing abilities return while he is at Sarah Laughs, but by the end of the novel he realizes it was simply to lead him to the information he needed to put Sarah's spirit to rest. Sarah's ghost may have destroyed his wife and child, but Jo's ghost gives him the means to save Kyra.

The usual King trademarks that fans have come to expect are present in *Bag of Bones*. The novel, moreover, shares much with the southern novel and its themes. Guilt is a predominant theme of many southern works, especially those of William Faulkner, Edgar Allan Poe, and Tennessee Williams. Racism, not a theme usually associated with northern writers, has been successfully transplanted by King via the traveling Sarah Tidwell. By the end of the novel the evils of the community have become so entrenched in the soil (another similarity to Faulkner's fiction) that they begin to affect Mike himself, and he has to fight the urge to kill Kyra. Only by reburying the past—in this case, by literally reburying Sarah Tidwell's body—can matters finally be put to rest. Mike dissolves Sarah's body with lye and her spirit finally leaves Sarah Laughs. Jo's spirit also leaves, and all is quiet once more at the cabin.

By the 1980's, King had become a mass-media guru who could open an American Express commercial with the rhetorical question "Do you know me?" At first prompted to examine the "wide perceptions that light [children's] interior lives" (*Four Past Midnight*) and then the cultural roots of the empire he had created, he proceeded to explore the phenomenon of fiction, the situations of reader and writer. During the 1990's, King continued to develop as a writer of both supernatural horror and mimetic character-based fiction. His novels after *Dolores Claiborne*—from *Insomnia* through *Lisey's Story*—all provide supernatural chills while experimenting with character, mythology, and metafiction.

Financially invulnerable, King became almost playful with publishing gambits: *The Green Mile* was a serial, six slim paperbacks, in emulation of Charles Dickens and as a self-set challenge; Richard Bachman was revived when *The Regulators* was published in 1996. Although he is still thought of as having no style, actually King maintained his compelling storyteller's voice (and ability to manipulate his reader emotionally) while maturing in the depth and range of his themes and characters.

King, perhaps more than any other author since Faulkner and his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, also creates a sense of literary history within the later novels

that ties them all together. In *Bag of Bones*, King references several of his other novels, most notably *The Dark Half*, *Needful Things*, and *Insomnia*. For longtime fans, this serves both to update King's readers concerning their favorite characters and to unify King's body of work. King's ironic sense of humor is also evident. When Mike's literary agent tells him of all the other best-selling novelists who have novels coming out in the fall of 1998, the most notable name missing from the list is that of Stephen King himself.

Linda C. Badley

Updated by Bernadette Lynn Bosky

Other major works

SHORT FICTION: *Night Shift*, 1978; *Different Seasons*, 1982; *Skeleton Crew*, 1985; *Dark Visions*, 1988 (with Dan Simmons and George R. R. Martin); *Four Past Midnight*, 1990; *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, 1993; *Hearts in Atlantis*, 1999; *Everything's Eventual: Fourteen Dark Tales*, 2002.

SCREENPLAYS: *Creepshow*, 1982 (with George Romero; adaptation of his book); *Cat's Eye*, 1984; *Silver Bullet*, 1985 (adaptation of *Cycle of the Werewolf*); *Maximum Overdrive*, 1986 (adaptation of his short story "Trucks"); *Pet Sematary*, 1989; *Sleep Walkers*, 1992.

TELEPLAYS: *The Stand*, 1994 (based on his novel); *Storm of the Century*, 1999; *Rose Red*, 2002.

NONFICTION: *Danse Macabre*, 1981; *Black Magic and Music: A Novelist's Perspective on Bangor*, 1983; *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, 1988 (Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, editors); *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, 2000; *Faithful: Two Diehard Red Sox Fans Chronicle the 2004 Season*, 2004 (with Stewart O'Nan).

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon: A Pop-up Book*, 2004 (text adaptation by Peter Abrahams, illustrated by Alan Dingman).

MISCELLANEOUS: *Creepshow*, 1982 (adaptation of the DC Comics); *Nightmares in the Sky*, 1988.

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Bloom, Harold, ed. *Stephen King: Modern Critical Views*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998. This is the best single collection of essays about King, many collected from other sources listed here, but including previously unreprinted pieces from journals or non-King-specific books. High-quality pieces cover a range of themes and King's works through *Needful Things*. Good chronology, bibliography, and index.

Collings, Michael R. *Scaring Us to Death: The Impact of Stephen King on Popular Culture*. 2d rev. ed. San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1997. Examines King's influence on the rise of horror fiction in the United States.

_____. *The Work of Stephen King: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1996. Provides both a good chronology and useful descriptions of some of King's hard-to-find works, as well as a copious, annotated list of secondary sources.

Docherty, Brian, ed. *American Horror Fiction: From Brockden Brown to Stephen King*. New

- York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. This collection of essays places King's works into context with other American horror writers.
- Hohne, Karen A. "The Power of the Spoken Word in the Works of Stephen King." *Journal of Popular Culture* 28 (Fall, 1994): 93-103. Discusses the tension in King's work between slang speech, which codifies a knowledge rejected by those in power, and monologic orality, which embodies that power; claims his works illustrate the tension between official and unofficial languages and ideologies that exists not only in literature but also throughout society.
- Hoppenstand, Gary, and Ray B. Browne, eds. *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmare*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1987. The collection of academic criticism of King includes an introduction by Hoppenstand and essays on themes ("Adolescent Revolt," "Love and Death in the American Car"), characters ("Mad Dogs and Firestarters," "The Vampire"), genres (King's "Gothic Western," techno-horror), technique ("Allegory"), and individual works.
- King, Stephen. *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*. Edited by Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988. Though many of the interviews collected in this volume become somewhat repetitive, they provide a good sense, in King's own words, of what he is trying to do in his fiction and why he does it. The interviews were held between 1979 and 1987; the opening transcript of a talk King gave at the Billerica Public Library is most useful.
- Magistrale, Tony. *Hollywood's Stephen King*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Study of the adaptations of King's stories to the screen that is organized by themes and pays close attention to how King's texts are altered. Includes an interview with King.
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