

## The Popularity Problem: Stephen King's Cultural Context

---

Amy Palko

In his introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 2007*, Stephen King describes his search among a chain bookstore's "Wall of Magazines" for the new issues of *Tin House* and *Zoetrope: All-Story*:

I stare at the racks of magazines, and the racks of magazines stare eagerly back. Celebrities in gowns and tuxes, models in lo-rise jeans, luxury stereo equipment, talk-show hosts with can't-miss diet plans—they all scream *Buy me, buy me! Take me home and I'll change your life! I'll light it up!* (xiv; emphasis in original)

Finally, he spots them on the bottom shelf, beneath *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*, and crouches on the floor "like a school janitor trying to scrape a particularly stubborn wad of gum off the gym floor" (xiv).

The visual image of a "Wall of Magazines" (xiv), which is structured as a physical embodiment of the hierarchical literary field, illustrates the gulf between texts that are economically successful and those that enjoy literary credibility. The prominent positions of the ephemeral celebrations of the rich and famous signify, as King writes, "fiction's out-migration from the eye-level shelves" (xv) to the "lowest shelf, where neatness alone suggests few ever go. . . . Britney Spears has become a cultural icon, available at every checkout, while an American talent like William Gay labors in relative obscurity" (xv).

However, as King recognizes, his own work is not shelved in the recesses of the bookstore; instead, it appears on a "table filled with best-selling hardcover fiction at prices ranging from 20 to 40 percent off. James Patterson is represented, as is Danielle Steel" (xiv). These books, he says, are "the moneymakers and rent payers; these are the glamour ponies" (xiv). The rise of "glamour pony" fiction and its multimillionaire authors was one of the defining characteristics of the

twentieth-century publishing industry, and it still persists into the twenty-first. The result has been, as King's "Wall of Magazines" demonstrates, a differentiation between popular, best-selling fiction and serious, credible literature.

To understand the rather complex reasons for why this differentiation exists within contemporary American literary production, we need to take into account the process of sacralization. According to Lawrence W. Levine in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988), sacralization results from a cultural shift in which art becomes less shared across the culture, less the purview of all members of a culture, and instead is elevated in such a way that only elite audiences are considered to have the knowledge and means to access it. These audiences, in turn, "approach the matters and . . . works" of serious cultural producers, such as classical orchestras, "with proper respect and proper seriousness, for aesthetic and spiritual elevation rather than mere entertainment" (146). As Levine argues, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century and reaching a zenith during the modernist period of the early 1900s, American society became increasingly bifurcated along the lines of "low" and "high" culture.

An exploration of the roots of this bifurcation in the publishing industry and its effects on authors and their literary output during the American Renaissance can be found in William Charvat's *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* (1968). In this posthumously published collection of papers, Charvat discusses the case of Herman Melville, whose authorial career serves to illustrate sacralization as it became a defining characteristic of cultural production. Melville's first two novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, were instant popular successes, but his next few novels were not so, and as the author entered the middle of his career, he became torn between his financial difficulties and his conviction that he needed to produce original literature capable of shaping a national literary identity. After writing two successful potboilers, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, he began working on the more serious *Moby Dick* with the encouragement of Nathaniel Haw-