King, Stephen 1947—

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Introduction

IN A CONVERSATION with Stephen King that took place several years ago, I made the mistake of asking him why he continues to live in Bangor, Maine. I reminded him that the year before he had made fifty million dollars; since he could afford to reside anywhere in the world, why Bangor? King took me in with a look that suggested he had just swallowed some particularly offensive species of bug—indeed, that perhaps I myself were a member of that insect species. His response was a sardonic, “Now, just where would you have me live—Monaco?”

This little anecode actually reveals a great deal about Stephen King, the man as well as the writer. Since 1974, the publication year of his first novel, *Carrie*, King has assembled a prodigious canon. By the late 1990s he had averaged more than a book a year for nearly three decades: 35 novels, 7 collections of short stories and novellas, and 10 screenplays. One consistent element that unifies this broad and eclectic landscape is that the majority of this fiction shares a Maine setting.

Born in Portland, Maine, on September 21, 1947, Stephen King has spent almost his entire existence in Maine. After his father, Donald, abandoned the family when Stephen was two years old and was never heard from again, his mother, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, was put in the sole position of raising Steve and his adopted brother, David. Stephen grew up in a succession of small towns, finally settling in Durham, Maine, when he was eleven. He was educated at the University of Maine, Orono, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1970. His wife, Tabitha, is also a Maine native, a novelist, and University of Maine, Orono, alumna.

Over the years, the Kings have centered their lives—and the lives of their three children—in and around the Bangor community. Their sprawling Victorian mansion on West Broadway, a street that was once home to many of the region's nineteenth-century timber barons, is located almost in the center of town. Each year the Kings donate at least ten percent of their pretaxable income to various charitable organizations, and a large number of these causes are local. In 1992, for example, Stephen King, an avid baseball fan, built a $1.2 million Little League ballpark for the city, and each year he spends another large sum of money to maintain its pristine upkeep. The Kings recently provided over two million dollars to renovate the Bangor Public Library. A pediatrics unit at Eastern Maine Medical Center, equipment for the Bangor Fire Department, music teachers for rural Maine schools, gym facilities for the Bangor YMCA, undergraduate scholarships for financially challenged students to study at universities in Maine and several other states—the list of community-based projects aided by the Stephen and Tabitha King Foundation is a long one. And

several years ago, Stephen King began insisting that before he would sell the rights to one of his novels to a Hollywood producer, the contract had to stipulate that the film would be shot some-where in Maine.

STEPHEN KING'S MAINE: STATE OF PLACE, STATE OF MIND

These illustrations are but a few examples of the obvious affiliation that Stephen King maintains with his native state. To a certain extent, however, the generous gifts to his community can be seen as a kind of payback for what the community has provided him in supplying material for a lifetime of writing. His most memorable characters are Maine natives. A novel such as *Dolores Claiborne* (1993) embodies the rugged spirit of Maine not only in its protagonist's powers of resiliency but in her very speech patterns, idioms, and diction. Even the supernatural creatures that have become signature features of King's horrorscape within the popular imagination are often Maine inspired: the Wendigo in *Pet Sematary* (1983) is a monster that owes its origins to regional Native American lore and a northeastern winter climate foreign to human habitation and survival. In an interview King conducted with me for the opening chapter *of Stephen King, The Second Decade: "Danse Macabre" to ("The Dark Half'* (1992), he spoke at length about the importance of Maine as an influence on his writing: "If I decide I don't want to be in Maine for a story, my mind always seems to take me back there. If I am in Iowa or Nebraska, it is a place that is flat and empty. A place where I can still recognize a similarity to Maine. So place comes through, and place casts its own weight over whatever you are writing."

King's books and stories have been so strongly shaped by Maine's environment that it is impossible to imagine separating landscape from personality, climate from theme. Rather than evoking a chamber-of-commerce, pastoral relationship with the Maine landscape, however, King draws upon a nature that is hostile and savage, an environment where malefic energies reside in secret. In the novel *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (1999), nine-year-old Trisha McFarland is lost in the Maine woods. For days she wanders deeper into the wilderness in search of human beings or signs of civilized life. Her torment is heightened by her constant struggle against nature's elements: from swamp bogs, to incessant insect attacks, to her feeble efforts to forage food. Early in the novel, King reminds both Trish and her audience that "the woods were filled with everything you didn't like, everything you were afraid of and instinctively loathed, everything that tried to overwhelm you with nasty, no-brain panic." Trisha's greatest adversary stalks her until the end of the novel where she must confront and vanquish an adult bear. In her semi-hallucinogenic state brought on by fatigue, fever, and starvation, the bear metamorphoses into a supernatural embodiment of the woods itself, a shifting composite of nature's faceless and aggressively misanthropic spirit.

In an essay entitled “Beyond the Kittery Bridge,” Burton Hatlen maintained that William Faulkner has remained one of King’s favorite novelists from his days as an undergraduate. Modeling much of his canon after Faulkner’s convoluted Yoknapatawpha cycle, King’s “Maine books also suggest that he is more or less deliberately creating a ‘myth of the South.’ “Like Faulkner, the fictional cycle unifying King’s Castle Rock microcosm often features families, characters, and events from one book that are referenced again in later books; certain plots are likewise dependent on events that have transpired in earlier narratives. For example, the haunting presence of Frank Dodd, the Castle Rock serial rapist in *Cujo* (1981) who merely haunts the perimeters

of this novel, reappears in a much more central and substantial role in *The Dead Zone* (1979). The chef in *The Shining* (1977), Dick Hallorann, makes a brief appearance as a young man in *IT* (1987), and his role as sage survivor and rescuer of others is consistent in both texts. The 1958 Plymouth Fury featured in *Christine* (1983) is resurrected from the auto graveyard to ferry Henry Bowers to his early-morning assignation attempt at the Derry public library in *IT*. Even King’s fictional towns—Castle Rock, Haven, Salem’s Lot—share characteristics particular to small Maine communities. To a real extent, these Maine locales are all connecting points on the road to Derry, a city modeled on Bangor and the epicenter of evil on King’s geoliterary map.

Understanding the importance of Maine as a shaping influence on King’s fiction is an important starting point to appreciating his art. But his attitude toward Maine, at least in his fiction, is a decidedly bifurcated one. In characters such as Dolores Claiborne, John Smith *(The Dead Zone)*, Frannie Goldsmith *(The Stand* [1978]), Alan Pangborn *(Needful Things* [1991]), and Trisha McFarland, King provides us with examples of heroism. Common men and women with few pretensions, these Maine natives embody an independent resolve sweetly tempered by a genuine commitment to others. Surrounded by situations that both torment and threaten their psychological stability, these characters—due in no small part to their obstinate streak of Yankee self-reliance—are in possession of unwavering moral centers. They maintain healthy psyches that stand in contrast to the forces of oppression, perversity, and corruption that often characterize their immediate familial and social relationships.

While King clearly admires their independent opposition, he also provides less flattering portraits of small-town Maine life to counterbalance their moral resolve. King seems to understand intuitively that while the small-town Maine environment is capable of producing courageous individuals, it can destroy others because of its pride of isolation, pressures to conform, and lack of compassion. As the writer revealed in a 1980 interview, “Maine is different. Really different. People keep themselves to themselves, and they take the outsiders’ money, and on the surface, at least, they’re polite about it. But they keep themselves to themselves. That’s the only way I can put it.”

The towns of Derry, Haven, Salem’s Lot, and Castle Rock are places where evil is challenged only by small groups of individuals. Throughout King’s canon, evil manifests itself as a conforming presence, particularly appropriate to the social microcosm of Maine’s small-town life. Whether it takes the form of a religious fanatic, the fascistic authority of Randall Flagg *(The Stand, The Eyes of the Dragon* [1987], *The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass* [1997]), or the social homogeneity dictated by the Tommyknockers and It, evil thrives in closed, self-contained worlds. Malefic forces in King’s work are remarkably consistent: they manipulate, restrict, and silence opposition. And usually the narrative itself, while projecting such a consciousness, is appropriately reduced to a single authoritarian voice. In novels such as *IT, The Tommyknockers* (1988), *Bag of Bones* (1998) and *Salem’s Lot* (1975), the majority exerts a defining will that demands rigid conformity from all the inhabitants of the town—a monological merging in speech, thought, and action. The vampires that eventually take over Salem’s Lot, for example, merely reflect the homogeneity of the town itself; the progressive degradation of individuals into a spiritless mass of hungry undead completes the moral disintegration of the community. Hatlen views these regional

portraits as a kind of “chronic soul-bsickness prevalent, King implies, throughout post-Vietnam America, but working away with a

special insidiousness in the heart of Maine, beguiled by its myth of itself as the Pastoral Paradise.”

THE BODY UNDER THE STREET: GIVING SHAPE TO KING’S CANON

Like Emily Dickinson, another New Englander who drew art from her close scrutiny of place, if Stephen King has found himself geographically isolated in rural Maine for most of his life, he has more than compensated by creating a multilayered fictional landscape imaginatively rendered. Trying to generalize about King’s extensive oeuvre is a daunting task. Nevertheless, for the sake of this present analysis, King’s canon can be divided roughly in half, since the books prior to *Misery* (1987) constitute the first part of his career, while those narratives that follow tend to reflect a markedly different set of priorities for the writer.

The early novels are large, ambitious books that encompass enormous narrative scope and revolve around recognizable genre themes (sometimes conflating two or more in a single text): horror, dystopian technology, epic fantasy, and journey quest. King’s first fifteen years of work produced novels such as *The Shining* (1977), *The Stand* (1978), *Firestarter* (1980), *The Talisman* (1984), and *IT* (1987). These are fictions that present a macrocosmic view of postmodern America, providing the reader with a journey to the center of a post-Watergate heart of darkness. These books are further linked because they are rendered from a tremendous narratological range and vision; King’s epic propensities are never stronger evinced than in *The Stand, The Talisman*, and *IT*, texts that weave a vast historical, mythological, and social matrix into a journey quest.

Many of the books from this period are also unified by virtue of being road narratives; indeed, the reader would be well served in keeping a roadmap of the United States close at hand. In each of these tales, King takes us across contemporary America on a system of interstates fraught with danger. The concrete highways that crisscross these books frequently come to symbolize the hard-hearted uniformity of American towns and the personalities populating them that King’s young men and women—who often are no more than adolescent boys and girls—must somehow confront and overcome. The influence of the epic tradition, particularly J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, on these early King novels cannot be underestimated. Like Tolkien’s Frodo, King’s young American travelers encounter magical realms and dark challenges that they survive only at the expense of their innocence and in the sharpening of their wits.

It is in the context of this sobering portrait of a postmodern America that King’s road epics sometimes point the way back to Maine. At the conclusion of *The Stand*, for example, Frannie Goldsmith and Stu Redman choose to return to the isolation of a depopulated Maine rather than remain a part of the new social order currently under construction in the Boulder Free Zone. Maine no doubt represents Frannie’s image of a nostalgic past, and this is a partial explanation for her wish to raise her children there. But Maine also offers this post-plague first family a sanctuary from the complicated societal issues that are beginning to reemerge at the end of the novel and that were responsible for creating the superflu disaster in the first place: the rise of technology, the imposition of a paranoid technobureaucracy, and the anonymity of mass culture.

In contrast to this macrocosmic examination of America frequently considered from the off-ramps of its interstate highway system, the books that follow *Misery* (as well as *Misery* itself) show evidence of King’s ability to produce highly circumscribed, tightly wrought fictions bearing few of his early epic tendencies toward narrative and thematic expansiveness. If *The Shining* and *The Stand*

can be likened to an epic saga played out on a big screen to accommodate their involvement with history and dramatic social dynamics, then books such as *Misery* or *Gerald's Game* (1992) are more like classic Greek drama presented on a circumscribed stage, employing a consistent scenic backdrop and a small cast of characters, and performed in front of an intimate theatre audience.

Moreover, King's work of the 1990s, in addition to being generally shorter and more compact, also tended to include a more realistic treatment of women. The novels *Gerald's Game, Dolores Claiborne*, and *Rose Madder* (1995)—a trio that should be considered together, because the narratives share similar themes as well as being written and published consecutively—differ markedly from King's previous fiction. Feminist in orientation, the novels present most of the action from a woman's point of view. If the first half of King's literary canon can be read as an accurate and potent rendition of Everyman wandering amidst the wastelands of postmodern America, the second half of this body of work can be read as a focus on representations of the American Everywoman and her disgruntled home life.

In their introduction to *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representations of Women* (1998), Kathleen Margaret Lant and Theresa Thompson wrote that King's female characters "often provoke hostility as well as admiration. When analyzing King's depiction of women, it is tempting to relegate him to the category of un-regenerate misogynist or conversely to elevate him to the status of newly sensitive male." This lukewarm evaluation notwithstanding, Lant and Thompson were correct in noting that King's more women-centered novels are a clear departure from his precedent portraits of women. These books likewise represented a substantial risk in potentially alienating King's popular readership. After two decades, his loyal audience had come to expect tales of supernatural horror and fantasy rather than reality-based stories depicting the horror of sexual fantasies.

In light of these differing orientations that can be said to distinguish the two halves of Stephen King's prolific career, it is worthwhile to speculate about their respective influences on the writer's popularity, especially as translated into book sales. How has King's considerable and diverse audience greeted the dual tendencies that separate his early work from his later efforts? The length of time each of his novels has spent on the *New York Times* Bestseller List serves as an interesting barometer for distinguishing King's first decade of work from that published after *Misery*. Each of King's narratives from *The Shining* to the publication of *Misery* maintained a miminum of 23 weeks on the *New York Times* list; most were on the list longer: for example, *Firestarter*, 35 weeks; *IT*, 35 weeks; *Misery*, 30 weeks. In contrast, none of his books published after *Misery* has remained on the *New York Times* list longer than 23 weeks, and most have been on the list for a much shorter period: for example, *The Dark Half* (1989), 19 weeks; *Dolores Claiborne*, 14 weeks; *The Regulators* (1996), 14 weeks. (These statistics were partly responsible for King's contentious decision in 1997 to abandon an eighteen-year publishing relationship with Viking and to sign a three-book contract with Scribner; King believed that Viking failed to market, promote, and package his books sufficiently to boost sales figures that have, for at least the past decade, clearly reached a plateau.)

There are, however, probably several other explanations for this sharp fluctuation, one being that King published a book a year for three decades, and the *New York Times* statistics underscore the market's saturation point. But it is also possible that this dramatic shift in volume sales, far more than being a consequence of inadequate packaging and promotion, reflects King's laudable efforts to challenge himself as a writer by composing narratives that are not neatly categorized

into the horror-fantasy genre. Nor are the books of the 1990s similar in subject matter to the narratives that originally established King's massive audience and forged his reputation in the 1970s and 1980s as the master of the macabre. Because work after *Misery* so seldom

resembles the novels that preceded it, King has apparently disappointed a large segment of the audience that expected from him a consistency in genre and style of fiction. And ironically, while the books published in the 1990s have tended to be more “mainstream” in subject matter—focusing on domestic and gender issues—because of King’s established reputation as a popular male horror novelist, his audience base has not enlarged to the point where his work is now included (as it legitimately should be) on the syllabi of women’s studies curricula.

EARLY NOVELS: THE REIGN OF TERROR BEGINS

The early novels of Stephen King underscore the prodigious energies that distinguish this writer’s canon in the literal size of the books as well as in their ambitious narrative design. If King is frequently criticized for composing narratives that are undisciplined and perhaps overly digressive, they are that way because their author has attempted to accomplish so much within them. Early in his career King produced a body of work that would undoubtedly have benefited tremendously from some judicious editing and revising; this point notwithstanding, these novels are also informed by a depth of energy and range of imagination seldom found in a young writer.

King’s initial publishing efforts are demarcated by a distinct fascination with children, perhaps reflective of the writer’s immediate personal experience during the time of their composition as a father raising three young children. As King’s children have entered adulthood, his own interest in writing about childhood has diminished accordingly.

In his first decade of publishing, however, King’s most important books usually center on a child (or group of children) often imperiled by violence or oppressive codes of behavior imposed by families, social institutions, and jaded adults. Many of these early narratives are rites of passage featuring the innocence of adolescence confronting adult realities, a journey that is always fraught with violence and danger. King’s children cling to their youthful idealism and romantic innocence, both of which come under fierce attack in his novels from the oppressive forces of societal institutions and the supernatural creatures that frequently emerge as a direct consequence of adult moral lapses. If these young people are to survive—morally as well as physically—they must somehow find a way to resist the prevailing values of a society that transforms its adults into monsters.

King’s kids are not responsible for their parents’ divorces or for governmental errors in judgment, but they are nonetheless forced into coping with the consequences of such events. King’s children, like the female protagonist in an eighteenth-century gothic novel, appear as perfect victims—their confrontations with evil are initially overwhelming—and their plights elicit intense sympathetic responses from the reader. To offset the oppressive nature of their relationships with adults and social authority, King endows his young protagonists with tremendous energies; indeed, they often possess imaginative capacities or supernatural abilities so potent that the children who wield them must learn to “grow into” their powers. As Clive Barker has opined, “In King’s work, it is so often the child who carries the wisdom; the child who synthesesizes ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ experience without question, who knows instinctively that imagination can tell the truth the way the senses never can.” As King’s children come to discipline their attributes, they

evolve as human beings, slowly maturing into childadults who exhibit traits of adaptability, survival skills, and most important, a level of sensitivity seldom present in King’s adults. (When King does supply an adult with these qualities, as in the case of Johnny Smith in *The Dead Zone*, usually the adult has not progressed far beyond the realm of adolescence and maintains childlike loyalties and a romantic faith in life.)

In King's fiction, children embody the full spectrum of human experience. Many of his youthful protagonists occupy the epicenters of his books, and from them all other actions seem to radiate. Some represent the nucleus for familial love. They are often healing agents, as in the first halves of *The Shining, Pet Sematary*, and *Cujo*, enabling parents in unstable marriages to hold their union together. Moreover, King seems inordinately fond of testing the moral capacities of his adolescent protagonists; most of his childheroes represent a Wordsworthian ideal of goodness struggling against the forces of a corrupt world.

In one of the most important books from King's early period, *The Shining*, we are introduced to a child who embodies both the spirit of endurance and the propensity for goodness that characterizes most of King's other youthful protagonists. As Samantha Figliola argued in "The Thousand Faces of Danny Torrance," "Danny epitomizes King's own mythos of childhood. He is the 'marvelous third eye' of childhood perception magnified ten thousand times, a seer who is nonetheless simple and innocent. A psychological sieve for his parents' most deeply buried emotions, a hero forced to enter and escape hell." Danny captivates us with his sweet innocence; his peril at the hands of a psychologically unstable father and agents of an evil design located at the Overlook Hotel only serves to endear him even more to the reader. Danny overcomes these obstacles, in part, because of his supernatural attribute—a precognitive ability to view the past and future called "shining"—and a tremendous capacity for love. Although he undergoes traumatic experiences throughout the better part of the novel, we never doubt his resiliency and place in the future once he is freed from his father and the spirits at the Overlook. Unlike his father, Jack, Danny has a solid support system in his mother and surrogate-father figure, Dick Hallorann, to help him move outside the shadow of his father's dysfunctional behavior.

In contrast, Jack Torrance is never freed from his own childhood traumas. *The Shining* is, in fact, a book that centers on the persistent importance of childhood experience. The novel issues a strong statement about environmental determinism in its portrayal of a severely disturbed adult male whose memory of his own father is dominated by violence and alcoholism. Jack's identification is certainly exacerbated through his involvement with the history of patriarchal abuse in place at the Overlook, but it is likewise clear that such behavior originated in Jack's childhood and that this past continues to haunt his present. The novel steadily details Jack's inexorable transformation into his father, adhering to his alcoholism and propensity for violence, as being at the hotel helps to reawaken and reanimate recollected patterns of domestic abuse that Jack has struggled to repress as an adult.

The Shining is a book that owes a great debt to the Gothic literary tradition. Not only does it revisit the haunted house as a conceit that centers all of the narrative action, it also advances the tradition by making the house-hotel into a malefic locus of energy capable of manifesting itself directly into the lives of its inhabitants. By the end of the novel, Jack's initial interest in the hotel's nefarious history and his own writer's dream to be rich and famous merge together into a single obsession: the hotel usurps the place Jack's family once held in his life. Unable to separate himself from the influences of the past—his own identification with his father as well as the hotel's infamous history—Jack surrenders his future. In

order to survive, his family must move out from beneath the long shadow Jack casts and move forward in his absence.

The conclusion of *The Shining* ultimately embodies Stephen King's profound faith in the resiliency of human nature and the enduring power of love. This novel's ending is often repeated in other King texts; evil is either vanquished, or at least recognized and confronted by the force of human morality, whatever form it happens to assume. As King generally affirms throughout his novels as well as in *Danse Macabre* (1981), his nonfictional treatise on horror art, "If the horror story is our rehearsal for death, then its strict moralities make it also a reaffirmation of life and good will and simple imagination—just one more pipeline to the infinite."

This moral vision or “pipeline to the infinite” is a recurring resource available throughout King’s fictional landscape. In *The Shining*, it is the energy of the shining itself that bonds Danny to Dick Hallorann and the latter with his mother. In *Salem’s Lot*, this force is found in the “inevitable rightness, of whiteness” that Mark Petrie discovers when he assumes the role of the “white knight” by pouring holy water over the blade of an axe in preparation for battle against the vampires. In *The Stand*, this magical property radiates from Mother Abigail, the source of human faith and conduit for divine goodness who counterbalances the evil of Randall Flagg. While in the novel *IT*, it is the circle created by the sexual and emotional union of the Losers’ Club and their unwavering faith in the turtle and one another that ultimately defeats the monster It. King may have achieved his reputation by writing about threatening and disconcerting subject matter, but this does not necessarily impose a corollary that his vision is hopeless. As he expressed in a 1981 interview, “I really do believe in the White force. Children are part of that force, which is why I write about them the way I do. There are a lot of horror writers who deal with this struggle, but they tend to concentrate on the Black. But the other force is there, too.”

In nearly every one of King’s major novels, there exists the presence of goodness—the white force, blind faith, small group human solidarity, the power of a writer’s or child’s imagination, simple love—that essentially breaks the strangle-hold of evil, regardless of how its corruption is manifested in human or supernatural form. This unselfish force is always expressed as a highly romantic, antirational impulse. In *The Shining*, for example, Hallorann’s decision to rescue the Torrances is not a rational decision, as he knows it will jeopardize his very life: “Was he willing to chance the end of that—the end of him—for three white people he didn’t even know?” Yet Hallorann chooses to make the journey to Colorado against his own best interests because “the boy was stuck in that place, and he would go. For the boy.”

The life-affirming, emotionally charged choices that compel the heroes and heroines of King’s early fiction into action stand in direct contrast to the highly rational powers of evil that seek to isolate individuals into states of moral indifference. *The Stand* is King’s most persuasive statement on the struggle between these two opposing ideologies, but it is likewise a paramount concern in other early narratives such as *Firestarter, The Talisman, The Dead Zone, The Tommyknockers*, and “The Mist” (in *Skeleton Crew* [1985]). Randall Flagg and his followers are aligned with the same technobureaucracy that created *The Stand’s* superflu and its subsequent social devastation. According to Douglas Winter in *Stephen King: The Art of Darkness*, Flagg “wanders the corridors of the haunted castle of the American landscape, symbolizing the inexplicable fear of the return of bygone powers—both technological and, as his last name intimates, sociopolitical.” Although Flagg is affiliated with ubiquitous forces of evil throughout the novel, he is best represented in technological

terms. Glen Bateman, the novel’s resident observer of social dynamics, describes Flagg as a natural consequence of the technological god that was worshiped prior to the plague and that ends up destroying most of the earth’s population in the creation of the superflu itself: “‘Maybe he’s just the last magician of rational thought, gathering the tools of technology against us.’”

The Las Vegas empire that Flagg recreates revolves around reestablishing conduits of energy and communication. And while we learn of his success at reconnecting air conditioning systems and telephones, his ultimate goal is to reactivate the technologies of war. Highly capable of manipulating the deadly machinery that litters the landscape of postmodern America, Flagg’s empire of “tech people [who] like to work in an atmosphere of tight discipline and linear goals” ironically can create nothing; it can only destroy. At the core of Flagg’s nature are the same impulses toward self-destruction and betrayal that characterize King’s elaborate portrait of technology throughout his canon. Thus, it is appropriate that the Dark Man himself is betrayed by Trashcan Man, Flagg’s ideological “id,” and by the very machinery of mass destruction that the two men would use to secure their conquest of the world. In the end, Flagg and Trashcan Man

are emblematic of “blind science”; their personal madness is symptomatic of the greater insanity that has led to the construction and deployment of America’s lethal gadgetry.

If Flagg and his Vegas denizens are linked to technology and the urge to recreate another version of the preplague world, the Free Zone unconsciously revels in the distinctions that separate it from modern Western societies: “Whole groups of people were living together in small sub communities like communes. Boulder itself was a closed society, a *tabula* so *rasa* that it could not sense its own novel beauty.” Moreover, perhaps reflective of King’s own progressive politics, the central protagonists based in the Free Zone represent a more democratic social and gender mix than the exclusively patriarchal world of Flagg’s Las Vegas. While Flagg’s followers in Vegas are attracted to their white male leader because of his technological affinity and expertise, the men and women who compose the Free Zone are drawn to an old black woman and her simple faith in a primitive Christianity. Mother Abigail’s “white magic” is decidedly antitechnological. Her farm in Nebraska operates without electricity and she must pump her own well water; when she seeks aid in guiding the community in Boulder, she adheres to the examples of biblical prophets by wandering into the woods to request correspondence with the inhuman powers of the natural world. The four men from the Free Zone who make their “stand” against Flagg and who initiate the collapse of his dominion follow Abigail’s lead: eschewing automobiles, weapons, and the machinery of modern America, they journey across the desert relying on their instincts and intuition.

In most of Stephen King’s epic fantasies, the forces of “white magic” exist in Manichaean opposition to the powers of supernatural evil. The potential for King’s characters to produce acts of good or evil is always dependent on the individual’s ability to control his or her selfish impulses. In *The Stand*, perhaps more than any other King novel, free will and moral choice are solidly within the individual’s purview; all of the major characters in this book participate directly in determining their own fates. And while this determination is never an easy one to make—*The Stand’s* most complicated and engaging characters are pulled in opposing directions simultaneously—personal choices become, nonetheless, a barometer for measuring an individual’s capacity for ethical development. Two of the more interesting characters in this book, Harold Lauder and Larry Underwood, illustate this principle insofar as these young men travel in opposite moral directions through the novel’s unfolding. Lauder

rejects the potential available to him in the future, symbolized in his newly acquired nickname, “Hawk,” by clinging to a need to avenge the accumulated insults from his past; in contrast, Underwood learns that his current condition is better than his sordid past, and he matures into man-hood when he accepts responsibility for the future of the Free Zone. Late in the novel, Harold un-consciously acknowledges the full burden of free will in one of his ledger entries: “To follow one’s star is to concede the power of some greater Force, some Providence; yet is it not possible that the act of following itself is the taproot of even greater Power? Your GOD, your DEVIL, owns the keys to the lighthouse; … but to each of us he has given the responsibility of NAVIGATION.”

All through the novel readers witness illustrations highlight

ing this “responsibility of navigation” in personalized contexts. Nadine Cross chooses to sacrifice her sexuality and her soul to Flagg’s destiny; the men who operate “the zoo,” a motorized bordello where women are systematically drugged, raped, and executed, do so because in a world devoid of formal law they themselves lack the will to impose self-control; Mother Abigail supplies a plan of action that suggests Glen, Stu, Ralph, and Larry engage in direct confrontation against Flagg’s empire, but it is up to each individual man to choose whether to trust that plan and head west. When Larry asks, “Do we have a choice?,” Abigail’s response is that “There is always a choice. That’s God’s way, always will be. Your will is still free. Do as you will.”

Clearly, a paramount concern in King's early fiction is dramatizing the will of men and women making proactive choices to oppose the dictatorial design of evil. In one of King's largest and most ambitious novels to date, *IT*, the epic scope of *The Stand* is channeled into a single city. The history of Derry, Maine, is carefully documented and its legacy of corruption must be confronted by the childadults who are also its principal victims. In preceding works, such as *The Shining* and *Salem's Lot*, King's portrayal of evil is defined in terms of the "accumulated sum" of its parts: a chronicle of human depravity occurs in one place over an extended period. This locale and patterned behavior enables maleficence to emerge as a living organism capable of sustaining itself on renewable instances of violence and corruption. This paradigm is repeated in novels such as *Needful Things* and *IT*, where a town or village assumes core aspects of the Gothic haunted house, including the need for heroes and heroines to do battle against its resident evil force.

The individual members of the Losers' Club choose to return to Derry (all except for Stan Uris, who commits suicide) because they recognize their commitment to one another and to the cause of destroying the shape-changing monster that feeds on children. They confront It not merely for purposes of self-preservation; Bill Denbrough wishes to avenge his brother's death, but he and the others also seem genuinely disposed to saving the lives of Derry's children. Like Dick Hallorann in *The Shining* and the Free Zone citizens who journey west at various points to confront Flagg in *The Stand*, the Losers in *IT* are united in a quest to vanquish evil for reasons that are nobler than themselves. As Thomas R. Edwards remarked in his review of the novel, "Only brave and imaginative children, or adults who learn to remember and honor their childish selves, can hope to foil It." The novel is arguably King's most persuasive argument for keeping open the passageway that connects adolescence to adulthood. As King remarked in his interview in *The Second Decade*, "I'm interested in the mythic power that childhood holds over our imagination and, in particular, the point at which the adult is able to link up with his or her own childhood past and the powers therein." This is why the seven friends must return to Derry: to

defeat It once and for all, the Losers' Club members must reopen their personal and collective conduits to childhood.

LATER FICTION: CHALLENGES TO EMPHASIS AND FORM

Over the past several years, feminist scholars have observed that the roles King has traditionally allotted women in his fiction and specifically female sexuality itself are patronizingly restrictive and frequently negative. Critic Chelsea Quinn Yarbro was first to lament that "it is disheartening when a writer with so much talent and strength of vision is not able to develop a believable woman character between the ages of seventeen and sixty." Mary Pharr, in a seminal essay that broadens and deepens Yarbro's position, noted that "Despite his best efforts, King's women are reflective of American sterotypes…. His most convincing female characters are precisely those who are least threatening to men." In a critique devoted to language ideologies in King's novels, Karen Hohne likewise opined that his women characters

> are never allowed to speak themselves, to make themselves with words. They get little dialogue, their speech is generally flat and undistinguished or stereotyped, or, worse, their language is distinctive but it is not their own; it is instead that of officiality, a set of languages from whose power they are excluded by their very being.

Burns and Kanner were even more specific when they examined King's treatment of female sexuality: "Menstruation, mothering, and female sexual desire function as bad omens, prescient clues that something will soon be badly awry." And in her discussion of *IT*, Karen Thoens reduced the monster in the text to an essentially feminine archetype:

> It could be sexual intercourse. It could be repulsive female sexuality. But mostly, it is actually She… . It is your mother. It, nameless terror. It is bloody, filthy, horrible. The boy-men heroes have returned to Derry to face IT again, HER, the bitch, the force that is really responsible for their lost youth.

Sharply aware of such criticism and generally concurring with it, Stephen King has labored to create more human and less stereotypical female personalities, at least since the publication of *Misery*. In *Dolores Claiborne*, for example, the writer completely eschewed his traditional third-person narrative form in order to provide Dolores with an autobiographical voice and consciousness. This departure from omniscient point of view to a first-person monologue signals the importance King is willing to invest in legitimizing Dolores' perspective and the domestic issues her narrative explores. Perhaps the truism that middle-aged males begin to explore their "feminine" side is another explanation for King's interest in developing better women characters. In focusing much of his energy on women's issues, King's later fiction became more circumscribed, centering on one or two individuals almost exclusively.

Misery holds a pivotal position in King's canon; the novel signals a transition that begins to emphasize a new significance for women characters, an intense scrutiny provided to the roles of writer and reader, and a willingness to experiment with a more restricted narratological structure and style. The book takes place almost entirely in the bedroom of a remote Colorado farmhouse. The principal characters—a famous writer named Paul Sheldon, who is held captive by his "number one fan," Annie Wilkes—could easily be figures in a one-act play, where the deliberately oppressive stage backdrop helps to highlight their verbal and physical conflicts. In *Misery*, the reader encounters one of King's first attempts to create a fiercely independent woman who is neither a madonna nor a whore. Her psychopathology

notwithstanding, Annie Wilkes is one of the few women in King's canon who possesses real power, even if she ultimately fails to exercise it responsibly. In her systematic torturing of Paul Sheldon, Annie appears as a figure who demands to be taken seriously; she is a kind of revenging agent for all past Gothic heroines who have suffered physical and psychological abuse from men. Although *Misery* is not a feminist text, as it remains mired in the destructive, potentially castrating nature of women, its female character is a prototype—at least in terms of her strength, intelligence, and angry resolve—for King's female protagonists who follow her in a series of heroine-centered books published during the 1990s.

Until the publications of *Gerald's Game, Dolores Claiborne*, and *Rose Madder*, the hero in Stephen King's fictional microcosm was usually from the young, white, male middle class, an American Everyman, exemplified in characters such as Andy Dufresne in "The Shawshank Redemption" (in *Different Seasons* [1982]), Stu Redman in *The Stand*, John Smith in *The Dead Zone*, or Dennis Guilder in *Christine*. These individuals find themselves in situations where their ordinary lives have become suddenly extraordinary. What King appears most interested in testing in works such as "The Shawshank Redemption" and *The Dead Zone* is the mettle of these ordinary men faced with extraordinary circumstances, watching them struggle and become greater than they ever thought they were capable of becoming. Until the 1990s, King's landscape was populated almost exclusively with heroes rather than heroines. In *Gerald's Game, Dolores Claiborne, Rose Madder*, and *Bag of Bones*, however, the writer expands the center of his fictional universe to include women. The females in all these narratives—even the ghost women, Sara Tidwell and Jo Noonan in *Bag of Bones*, who do battle against one another in the afterlife—differ markedly from women characters who appear elsewhere in King's fiction. All of these wives and mothers possess highly impressive levels of inner strength and independence. And like King's male hero counterparts in the earlier works, the heroines of these books are situated at crisis points in their lives where they must either rise above their oppression or capitulate to it entirely.

Gerald's Game and *Misery* should be viewed as bedroom bookends: both texts are intense psychological explorations of gendered relationships that feature very little physical action, as the protagonists of these narratives are literally tied to their beds. As Linda Badley accurately assessed: "*Misery* blamed a sadistic and all-devouring matriarchy for the protagonist's victimization. *Gerald's Game*, as its title announces, condemns the patriarchy. The latter 'corrects' the misogyny implicit in *Misery*, transporting its situation and setting into Female Gothic and taking the woman's point of view." *Gerald's Game* and *Misery* are two of the most complex and ambitious efforts King has yet undertaken. The tales concern nothing less than a wrestling with the destruction and recreation of selfhood.

The first chapter of *Gerald's Game* is a beautifully orchestrated introduction to all of the major elements that will unfold in the remainder of the text. The major character, Jessie Burlingame, has her hands handcuffed to a bed by her husband, Gerald, during kinky sexplay that has gone terribly awry. Far from arousing her sexually, this particular instance of "Gerald's game" revivifies a deeply repressed episode in her childhood that underscores the self-induced psychological bondage she has imposed over her memory of this event. As a young girl, Jessie experienced a sexual molestation while sitting on her father's lap during a full solar eclipse. But even worse than acting on his incestual urge was her father's successful effort to cover his involvement by making his daughter into a coconspirator: "I guess we have a bargain," he said. "I say nothing, you say nothing. Right? Not to anyone else, not even to

each other. Forever and ever, amen. When we walk out of this room, Jess, it never happened."

For many years, as the girl matures into a woman, the truth is repressed, even as Jessie's relationship with her father deteriorates. Her later involvement with Gerald's bondage fantasy, however, reawakens Jessie's feelings of being powerless and demeaned: "Her response was not so much directed at Gerald as at that hateful feeling that came flooding up from the bottom of her mind." While Gerald interprets her verbal objections as part of a scripted sexual scenario, "She was *supposed* to protest; after all, that was the game," Jessie is actually beginning to confront the secret she has maintained since adolescence. Her husband's unwillingness to consider her feelings, the undeterred urgency of his arousal, his line of spittle and its nexus to sperm, even the darkening windows of the late fall afternoon in a secluded cottage by a lake transport Jessie back to her father and the day of the eclipse. As a result, her lethal kick to Gerald's crotch, viewed in this context, is less of an accident than an unconscious urge to castrate her father. Gerald's death occurs in the novel's dramatic first chapter; the remainder of the book centers on Jessie's self-induced psychotherapy as she struggles to resolve the opposing voices in her head and to extricate herself from the bondage that literally and symbolically binds her to Gerald's bed.

Throughout the first half of *Gerald's Game*, an abandoned dog named Prince shadows Jessie's situation and even makes a meal out of her dead husband. The dog and woman parallel one another's situations: Jessie is the former Princess, as the dog is the former Prince. Both have been cast off by careless and cruel men-owners, the prerogative of those who exercise power and control in a disposable culture. Both pet and wife had at one time been insulated from hunger, harm, and self-responsibility. Now, however, Prince's emaciated body foreshadows Jessie's potential fate; without a man to protect them, Jessie and Prince are alone, masterless, and in grave jeopardy. Like Donna Trenton in *Cujo* and Wendy Torrance in *The Shining*, two other women in King's canon who eventually realize that they cannot wait for a soap opera rescue from a white knight, Jessie decides that if she is to be rescued she must do it herself. Donna Trenton waits too long and sacrifices her son. Wendy Torrance's survival effort is aided by the timely arrival of Dick Hallorann. But Jessie remains entirely on her own and acts in time. The most feminist of King's heroines concentrate on saving themselves and saving others instead of waiting to be saved.

Gerald's Game and *Dolores Claiborne* are arguably the most effective illustrations of King's fascination with creating interrelated plots and subject themes in his work. These narratives share not only the issue of father-daughter incest and moments where Dolores and Jessie either view or sense each other's presence in each respective text, but they also employ the same 1963 eclipse as a defining moment. In *Gerald's Game*, the eclipse signals the start of Jessie's descent into the silent darkness of shame and loss, whereas in *Dolores Claiborne* it is the event that liberates both Dolores and her daughter from the oppressive shadow of their husband-father. It is important to note that a detailed map of the path of the eclipse through Maine is provided as a frontispiece to both novels. The point at which the "path of totality" begins is Dark Score Lake, where Jessie is molested by her father. In contrast, its solar path ends at Little Tall Island, where Dolores kills her husband because he has sexually abused their daughter, Selena. The movement of the eclipse parallels the movement of evolving female empowerment in these two texts: from the shadow that begins Jessie's passive victimization on the lap of her father to its passing in Dolores Claiborne's bid for freedom against an oppressive male.

For Jessie to follow Dolores' path of liberation,

she must return to the eclipse and recognize it not only as the moment of her father's betrayal, but also as a symbol of the "eclipsed" relationships she has since constructed between herself and her parents, her friendship with Ruth Neary (a lesbian feminist who suspects that Jessie harbors a dark secret), her gender positioning as a wife, and her own identity as a woman. While the actual physical eclipse in both narratives is important, its metaphorical significance is even more so. In each book, the father interposes himself between daughter and mother (essentially "eclipsing" the latter). In addition, the eclipse becomes a metaphor for the condition of being female in a patriarchal culture: cut off, blocked, obscured. Furthermore, as a solar eclipse creates an unnatural ambiance for those who observe it, the incestual acts that both fathers perpetrate upon their daughters wreck havoc on the natural order of the respective families and the psychosexual development of the victims.

If male abuse, by objectification and oppression, is what continues to eclipse women, then King argues in these feminist texts that women must face the truth, like facing the sun, even at the risk of "burning yourself without knowing you were doing it." It may seem easier for Jessie and Dolores to ignore gender oppression to get along in the world, but as Jessie remarks of Dolores, "She is in the path of the eclipse, too," as are all women. The eclipse in a woman's life, King suggests, occurs in that period when a man is sexually prominent in it: from Jessie's and Selena's adolescence to the end of Dolores' wife-hood. Both novels argue that a woman is only free when she escapes from beneath the sexual shadow cast by a man—be that man her father or her husband. Silence is equivalent to darkness in these novels, and King insists that true survival depends not on silence, but in confronting the past by revealing its secrets. Remembering the past not only gives Jessie the solution to her current physical entrapment—the smoked glass fashioned by her father to obscure the eclipse forms a nexus to the glass she uses to cut herself free—but also liberates her psychologically by challenging the privileged and passive bondage into which she has willingly submitted herself as a Republican housewife. Jessie gains her freedom through a literal shedding of her skin/former self. Extricating her hand by pulling it through Gerald's single handcuff is a bloody and painful birthing process, an especially interesting metaphor in light of the fact that Jessie has never been a mother.

Dolores and Jessie similarly emerge from their shadowed lives through the guidance offered by women around them. Vera (Latin for "truth") shapes Dolores' action as much as Ruth and Punkin influence Jessie. And although Jessie's "voices" are primarily extensions of herself, they serve in a role that is similar to Vera's relationship with Dolores: forming an often harsh, but always honest and sympathetic, support group. (A women's support group is also critical to the psychological recovery of Rose Daniels, the oppressed wife in *Rose Madder*, who finally summons the courage to leave her abusive husband.) In contrast to the singular actions that characterize male

behavior in *Gerald's Game, Dolores Claiborne*, and *Rose Madder*, women are defined in each of these narratives by virtue of their relationships with other women. The bond that women form through their common experience is so important that King acknowledges it in the dedication to *Gerald's Game* by recognizing various female relatives who have borne his wife's maiden name—Spruce. Presumably, these are the women who have influenced her most profoundly, and at the same time, all the women whom Stephen King understands Tabitha to be. Moreover King's dedication may reflect upon himself as well as his wife; all these Spruce women have also exerted a shaping influence on King himself, as a writer and as a male. It's a simple acknowledgment of domestic evolution:

after enough years a husband comes to understand that his own life owes a debt to the wife—and to female relatives—with whom he has chosen to live.

MEDIUMS OF OUR SOCIETY: THE RECURRING WRITER-PROTAGONIST

Gerald's Game begins in King's typical third-person narration but concludes in a first-person letter that Jessie is writing to Ruth Neary. This is a significant signal to readers, since Jessie's new role as writer—telling her own story in her own voice and through her own words—is indicative of her continuing rehabilitation and promise of future recovery. As a writer, Jessie is linked to the many other authors who populate King's fictional landscape, all of whom are invariably invested with impressive powers of self-understanding, imagination, even magic. In the interview published in *The Second Decade*, King reminded me that "Wherever you go in my little part of the landscape, the writer is always there, looking back at the reader. [Writers] do have powers. [They] are the only recognized mediums of our society."

The plethora of writers—both private and professional—scattered across King's landscape share at least one thing with their creator: they view writing as a means for establishing control in a universe where madness always threatens to reign. In his essay on the role of writing in King's novella "The Body," Leonard Heldreth argued that "writing succeeds for Gordon [the protagonist] because it offers control over experience. … Writing permits a systematic formulation of the plan or world view and provides the means for keeping it before not only the author but all his readers." Heldreth's assertions about the stabilizing influence of writing in *The Body* apply to every fictional work in King's canon in which an author makes an appearance. The one exception to this thesis is really no exception at all: Jack Torrance in *The Shining* is a writer whose abrogation of his mind and spirit to the powers at the Overlook Hotel is paralleled in the loss of his desire to write. When he abandons all further efforts at writing by the novel's midpoint, Torrance loses the release that "let something out of him that might otherwise have swelled and swelled until he burst." Jack is initially seduced by the idea that the hotel is a subject worthy of inspiring his greatest written composition, when in reality his creative energies are being siphoned away. In Jack's case, writer's block signals the onset of psychosis.

Like the child-savants found in King's early novels, the writer-protagonists are similarly endowed with tremendous imaginative capacities. Indeed, King's writers often share much in common with his children; certainly both are distinguished from conventional adulthood by virtue of their relative independence and romantic optimism. As early as *Salem's Lot* King proposes that to combat evil an individual must first possess enough imaginative freedom to believe in its material existence—only then does evil become recognizable and therefore vulnerable. In this novel, it is a literary man, the novelist Ben Mears, who is one of the few inhabitants of the town with the childlike conduit to his imagination still open enough to believe in the reality of vampires. Other writer-protagonists occupy similar heroic status throughout King's canon. From Bill Denbrough in *IT*, to Paul Sheldon in *Misery*, to Mike Noonan in *Bag of Bones*, the writer's job is to reassert order in the midst of chaos and destruction. While these individuals may not possess the supernatural abilities of a divinity, their

powers are considerable. Without his craft, Paul Sheldon could not have survived his sentence as a prisoner in Annie Wilkes' house of horrors; similarly, Jessie Burlingame's truest moment of survival occurs not in her release from Gerald's handcuffs, but in the act of writing to Ruth, in communicating

her experience rather than continuing to hide it. For it is only after she finishes the letter (and here is King's constant emphasis on the importance of writing as a vehicle for self-control) that "for the first time in months her dreams were not unpleasant."

Long ago Stephen King ceased writing out of financial necessity. His consistent rate of production over the past three decades, however, indicates that writing is necessary to preserving some sort of equilibrium in his life and temperament. That he works at his art so diligently—at least half a day, seven days a week, except for his birthday, Christmas, and the Fourth of July—indicates that the composing process for Stephen King is much more than an occupation or mere pleasurable experience; it is a methodology for survival.

HE SPEAKS AMERICAN: SOME CONCLUSIONS

Over the past three decades Stephen King has produced a body of literature that is as diverse as it is popular. His work should not be labeled exclusively—and, for some, diminutively—as horror fiction, for it draws on many literary genres and traditions: epic fantasy *(The Stand, The Talisman*, and IT), classical tragedy *(The Shining* and *Pet Sematary)*, feminism *(Gerald's Game, Dolores Claiborne, Rose Madder)*, the romance novel *(Misery)*, the American western *(The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* [1984]), the fairy tale *(The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* and *Eyes of the Dragon)*, naturalism *(Cujo* and the Bachman books) and political-history metafiction *(The Dead Zone* and "Apt Pupil" [in *Different Seasons])*. King is one of those rare artists who has managed to capture the defining spirit of his ear at the same time that he has influenced it. Of his contemporaries, perhaps only The Beatles, Steven Spielberg, and maybe Madonna can be said to have accomplished a similar feat. The admonishments of English teachers notwithstanding, Stephen King has already influenced an entire generation of fiction writers, readers, and film students.

Vampiric monsters and supernatural phenomena may be the great popular attractions of King's canon, but at the heart of his fictional universe is a profound sensitivity to the most emotional and deepseated American anxieties. King himself maintains that his novels, when "taken together, form an allegory for a nation that feels it's in a crunch and things are out of control." No less than Nathaniel Hawthorne a century earlier, King is a moralist rendering a vivid portrait of white, middle-class American life in the latter half of the twentieth century. He has tended to celebrate traditional bourgeois values—family, children, and heterosexual love are central to his work. On the other hand, his critique of American bureaucratic institutions and government itself suggests his continued commitment to the radical politics he first encountered as an undergraduate during the 1960s. The conclusions of his novels are often sentimental and overly optimistic; at the same time, his understanding of patriarchal abuses, particularly as they oppress women, children, and minorities, is uncompromisingly realistic. In the end, it is not just his phenomenal popularity that has made Stephen King America's storyteller, but also his vision of the possibilities and contradictions that are inherent in being American.

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