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Summary Article: **King, Stephen**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*

Stephen King (1947–) is the most prolific contemporary writer of Gothic fiction, and arguably the most significant. As of 2011, he has published approximately fifty novels, nine collections of short stories, seven graphic novels, seven screenplays, eight teleplays, four e-books, and two nonfiction works, *Danse Macabre* (1979) on horror in various media, and the autobiographical *On Writing* (2000). Forty-five of his works have been made into theatrical films and twenty-two adapted for television, not including sequels. Early novels such as *Salem's Lot* (1975) or *Pet Sematary* (1983) appeal primarily to the consumers of conventional horror in all media. But Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) are among the best horror movies ever made, and in 1990 Kathy Bates won an Oscar for best actress in *Misery* (see film). King has received forty-eight literary awards and in 2003 the Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters from the National Book Foundation.

Stephen King was born in Portland, Maine in 1947. Shortly after his birth his father deserted the family, leaving his mother to raise him and his older brother David. A sickly child, Stephen "read [his] way through approximately six tons of comic books, progressed to Tom Swift and Dave Dawson [...] then moved on to Jack London's bloodcurdling animal tales" (2010: 27). Encouraged by his mother, he began writing stories, completing his first tale around the age of six or seven (2010: 28–9) and first submitting one in 1960. It was rejected, but he persevered, collecting a mass of rejection slips. His first published work appeared in a horror fanzine under the (editor's) title of "In a Half-World of Terror," though King remains fond of his own: "I Was a Teen-Age Grave Robber" (2010: 36).

King graduated in 1971 with a degree in English from the University of Maine at Orono, and married a fellow student, Tabitha Spruce. He briefly taught high-school English, but always continued to write, earning small amounts of money by publishing in magazines such as *Dude*, *Cavalier*, *Adam*, and *Swank* (2010: 69), and moonlighting in an industrial laundry. Tabitha found a discarded draft of *Carrie* and insisted that he complete it. Published by Dutton, the successful sale of the paperback rights enabled King to write full-time.

During the years of early success, King became addicted to drugs and alcohol. Around 1986, his wife arranged an intervention by his family and friends: "I was treated to a kind of *This Is Your Life* in hell [...] what finally decided me was Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in *Misery*. Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided that I was tired of being Annie's pet writer" (2010: 97–8). "I decided," he continues, "that I would trade writing for staying married and watching the kids grow up. If it came to that" (2010: 98). Fortunately it did not.

King spends most mornings writing, often producing around two thousand words a day. He writes that a book draft should demand no more than a season – three months – to complete. Ironically, *On Writing* is an exception to this rule. While working on it in 1999, he experienced a real-life horror when he was struck and seriously injured by a driver when he was walking on a small country road. Despite several operations and painful physical therapy, King returned to writing only a couple of months after the accident (2010: 265–8).

But why have King's readers so greedily consumed his brand of Gothic horror for decades? Early in his career, King did not see himself as a Gothic novelist. In *Danse Macabre* he identifies "Gothic" in terms of the governess-in-the-haunted-house fiction popular in the 1960s. He also cites the then received critical opinion that "the gothic novel has always been considered something of a curiosity" (1979: 244). But King's body of work, like the Gothic tradition itself, has fed on changing cultural anxieties, rediscovering or inventing genres to confront with monstrous otherness. King has used almost all the tradition's literary tropes and archetypes: haunted houses, haunted people, doubles, vampires, werewolves, inescapable disasters, disruptions of time and space, apocalyptic visions of cultural collapse. Most significantly, however, *Carrie* invoked an alternative mode of Gothic Walpole initiated in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (see walpole, horace). Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) revived this tradition of characters tormented by the supernatural, but King definitively reestablished it in mass-market fiction (see horror fiction).

This heritage explains critics' accusations that King's early fiction is misogynistic. In Walpole's Gothic, female characters are most interesting in their capacity to suffer. In M. G. Lewis' notorious *The Monk* (1796) the hero/villain Ambrosio rapes and murders innocent Antonia and murders her guardian Elvira, then learns that they were his sister and mother. The second heroine Agnes is discovered in her convent's crypt, cradling the maggot-infested body of her dead infant; "to every eye [it] was a loathsome and disgusting object. To every eye but a Mother's" (1973: 412). Lewis' readers also thrilled to his tale of "The Bleeding Nun," a ghost who had murdered her lover and now haunts her distant relation, a hapless young man. In short, this Gothic incorporates the Western symbolic order encoding darkness, materiality, blood, madness, and death as "female" and ultimately "evil" (see lewis, matthew). Thus in *Danse Macabre* King also acknowledges his allegiance to a founding Gothic aesthetic: "I recognize terror as the finest emotion and so I will try to terrorize my reader. But if I find that I cannot terrify, I will try to horrify, and if I find that I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud" (1979: 34–6) (see terror).

Carrie, though a victim of Western assumptions about female sexuality, also triumphs within them. Like Lewis' Bleeding Nun she is no stranger to violence, and is all the more horrific because of it. But the source of Carrie's horror is internal, in her psychokinetic power. Thus King's early fiction also extended the process occurring since the beginnings of Gothic: the gradual "migration" of its haunted spaces from medieval, Roman-Catholic Italy and Spain to Britain's foul industrial cities (*Bleak House*) to contemporary London (*Dracula*) to the dark interior of the human self (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). King transposed that space into mid-twentieth-century working-class America, where casually profane characters eat Ritz Crackers and drink Pepsi, wear blue jeans, drive Plymouths, and cherish household pets. King entranced his early readers by rendering the mundane, implicitly sacred things implicitly the opposite: a cat named Church (*Pet Sematary*), a Saint Bernard (*Cujo*), or a Plymouth Fury (*Christine*) all become objects of horror, vehicles of inescapable violence. In relocating horror within everyday American life, he also imported the comic-book sensibility of the male adolescent, the chief connoisseurs of "the gross-out," for King had grown up immersed in popular culture: horror comics, science fiction, and horror movies such as Roger Corman's adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe.

During the 1990s, however, King began writing novels featuring heroines imprisoned within the implacable cruelties of patriarchal marriage. Indeed, *Gerald's Game* (1991), despite its sexual explicitness and gruesome violence, conforms to the female Gothic formula. (The single apparently supernatural event is explained and the protagonist finds a happy ending.) *Dolores Claiborne* (1992)

explores the horrible ramifications of domestic violence, as does *Rose Madder* (1994), though it retreats from the realism of the first two. These and other stories such as "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption" (1982) or *Full Dark, No Stars* (2010), show why King allies himself with the American naturalists, who explore the fragile boundary between civilized "reality" and the human propensity to violence.

King's popular success stems from his skill in "going for the gross-out." The careless reader may assume that his prose is merely serviceable and transparent, but it is in fact both literate and literary. *Danse Macabre* demonstrates his encyclopedic knowledge of his tradition and a keen appreciation of the finest writers, such as Shirley Jackson. Attentive readers will, however, also notice his debt to the canons of English and American literature. From *Carrie* onwards one hears allusions to many writers, not only Poe, but T. S. Eliot, Coleridge, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, or Robert Browning ("Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"). Furthermore, as John Sears argues, King's fiction shares the epistemological anxiety about writing itself that has haunted Gothic fiction, its dubious function in conveying and perhaps constructing "reality." Walpole published the first "Gothic Story" pretending to be the translator of an antique Italian text of mysterious provenance. Numerous stories told through collections of documents, such as *Dracula* or *Carrie*, are always potentially unreliable. Sears writes that *Carrie* "emphasizes the written-ness of human subjectivity that King's writings will henceforth relentlessly elaborate in his Gothic vision" (2012: 51). King's major works exploring the dynamics of fiction and reality, of reader and writer, of his past and his present, of his conscious and unconscious minds include *Misery* (1987), *The Dark Half* (1989), *Bag of Bones* (1998), and *Duma Key* (2008). *Lisey's Story* (2006) views these mysteries refracted through the subjectivity of a writer's wife.

With few exceptions King always includes the paranormal in his fiction. But Gothic supernaturalism encodes received (psychoanalytic) opinion about our selves. According to Freud, we are heavily defended structures enfolding forgotten secrets and forbidden desires. In *On Writing* King defines his craft (or art) as "Telepathy, of course" (2010: 103), implicitly endorsing the Romantic notion that the writer's power is magical. Poets (as Coleridge observed) create new worlds from the materials of the old one. Thus King's seemingly permanent place on the best seller lists leads one to wonder whether his fiction constitutes for his readers a therapeutic psychoanalysis of themselves and their culture, an opportunity to confront and work through their nightmares. As he writes in *Danse Macabre*, "It may well be that the mass-media dream of horror can become a national analyst's couch" (1979: 26). He implicitly constructs his readers as analysands: "I believe that horror does not horrify unless the reader has been personally touched [...] It is a combat waged in the secret recesses of the heart" (1979: 25); "The job of the fantasy-horror writer is to make you, for a little while, a child again" (1979: 378). Horror is a dream, and "the dream of horror is in itself a lancing or an out-letting" (1979: 26). These excursions, King believes, have a fundamentally conservative purpose, as they in the end reassert a status quo; our confrontations with hysterical misery return us to common unhappiness. Thus for future readers, Stephen King offers not only a portrait of post-World War II American culture, but also evidence of its most terrible fear, the omnipresent threat of violence that haunts our lives (see psychoanalysis).

SEE ALSO: American Gothic; Female Gothic; Film; Horror Fiction; Lewis, Matthew; Psychoanalysis; Terror; Walpole, Horace.

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