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# STEPHEN KING

**A Biography**

**ALBERT ROLLS**

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# STEPHEN KING

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## A Biography

Albert Rolls

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*Photo essay follows page 104*

## SERIES FOREWORD

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In response to high school and public library needs, Greenwood developed this distinguished series of full-length biographies specifically for student use. Prepared by field experts and professionals, these engaging biographies are tailored for high school students who need challenging yet accessible biographies. Ideal for secondary school assignments, the length, format and subject areas are designed to meet educators' requirements and students' interests.

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While the emphasis is on fact, not glorification, the books are meant to be fun to read. Each volume provides in-depth information about the subject's life from birth through childhood, the teen years, and adulthood.

A thorough account relates family background and education, traces personal and professional influences, and explores struggles, accomplishments, and contributions. A timeline highlights the most significant life events against a historical perspective. Bibliographies supplement the reference value of each volume.

## PREFACE

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Stephen King, who is primarily known as a writer of horror fiction, has become, with more than 50 books published since 1974, one of the best-selling authors ever to put pen to paper. His sales figures, however, have not always brought him the respect of the literary establishment, and in 2003, when he was awarded a medal for his distinguished contribution to American Letters by the National Book Foundation, he called attention to the ambiguous place he holds in the literary marketplace. He observed in his acceptance speech that the foundation's board had taken "a huge risk in giving this award to a man many people see as a rich hack." King went on to say:

For far too long the so-called popular writers of this country and the so-called literary writers have stared at each other with animosity and a willful lack of understanding. This is the way it has always been. . . . But giving an award like this to a guy like me suggests that in the future things don't have to be the way they've always been. Bridges can be built between the so-called popular fiction and the so-called literary fiction.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction between popular and literary fiction that King refers to, and attempts to dismiss here, has haunted him since well before he began publishing books. As early as high school his creative work, as well as his reading interests, was discounted as trash by his school's arbiters of taste, even as he was creating outlets for his writing and finding fans among his peers. As a college student he fought against academic tastes in literature

and convinced his college's English department to offer a seminar in popular fiction.

Since the appearance of his first novel, *Carrie*, in 1974, King has wavered between accepting his position as a mere popular writer, whose work shouldn't be categorized as serious fiction, and lamenting the small-mindedness of those who discount the value of a book simply because it sells well. In his afterword to *Different Seasons* (1982), for example, he observed that most of his novels and stories "have been plain fiction for plain folks, the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald's."<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, he has shown a desire to garner the respect accorded to other literary figures, telling *Publisher's Weekly* in the early 1990s, "I'd like to win the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, the Nobel Prize; I'd like to have someone write a *New York Times Book Review* piece that says, 'Hey, wait a minute guys, we made a mistake—this guy is one of the great writers of the 20th century.'"<sup>3</sup> King went on to note that he would be unlikely to earn any of the abovementioned awards or read such an admission in the *New York Times Book Review*. "It's clear in the critical stance; I hear it in the voice of people from literary journals where somebody will start by saying, 'I don't read Stephen King,' and they are really saying, 'I don't lower myself.'"<sup>4</sup>

The critical response to King has not always been as bad as he suggests. The eminent literary critic Harold Bloom might have attacked the National Book Foundation for honoring King with a medal, arguing that the decision to do so was "another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life."<sup>5</sup> Others, however, have been more supportive. Critic Susan Bolotin, writing for the *New York Times*, clearly placed King among the literati of his day, commenting: "Stephen King's fiction, at its best, is equivalent to the post-Expressionist art found in the tiny galleries of Manhattan's East Village, where painters, sculptors and collagists often turn to the aggressive headlines of tabloid newspapers for inspiration."<sup>6</sup> In fact, King's work has long distinguished itself from that of other popular writers by inspiring a critical body of work, which runs the spectrum from popular celebration to academic high seriousness. King, regardless of what some arbiters of taste may think, has become a literary figure in his own right—one who is as concerned as Bloom about the dumbing down of American culture. "I can find out where you live. I have my resources," King said at a commencement speech at the University of Maine in 2005. "And if I show up at your house 10 years from now, and find nothing in your living room but *Reader's Digests*, nothing in your bedroom but the latest Dan Brown novel, and nothing in your bathroom but *Jokes for the John*, I will chase you down to the end of your driveway and back shouting,

‘Where are the damn books? . . . Why are you living the mental equivalent of a Kraft Macaroni & Cheese life?’<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. Stephen King, National Book Awards Acceptance Speeches, [http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech\\_sking.html](http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_sking.html).
2. Stephen King, *Different Seasons* (New York: Signet, 1983 [1982]), p. 504.
3. Quoted in Linnea Lannon, “Stephen King: Too Many Books, Not Enough Awards?” *Oregonian* (June 19, 1991), p. D5, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Harold Bloom, “Dumbing Down American Readers,” *Boston Globe* (September 24, 2003), [http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing\\_down\\_american\\_readers](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers).
6. Susan Bolotin, “Don’t Turn Your Back on This Book,” *New York Times* (June 9, 1985), sec. 7, p. 11, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.
7. Judy Harrison, “King to UM Grads: Please Stay in Maine,” *Bangor Daily News* (May 9, 2005), p. A1, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.



# TIMELINE: EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF STEPHEN KING

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- 1947 September 21: Stephen Edwin King is born to Donald Edwin King and Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, in Portland, Maine
- 1949 Donald Edwin King walks out on his family
- 1953 or 1954 Stephen King writes his first stories, first copying *Combat Casey* comics and then creating his own, which featured the character Mr. Rabbit Trick
- 1958 After moving from town to town in the Midwest and the Northeast for nine years, King's family settles in Durham, Maine, where Ruth King begins to care for her parents, Guy and Nellie Pillsbury, in whose house the Kings begin to live
- 1959 Begins writing for his older brother's newspaper *Dave's Rag*
- 1959 or 1960 Discovers a box of his father's books, among them H. P. Lovecraft's *The Lurking Fear and Other Stories*
- 1962 Enters Lisbon High School, located in Lisbon Falls, a town near Durham
- 1963–1964 Begins writing for the sports pages of the Lisbon *Weekly Enterprise*, a local newspaper
- 1965 Publishes his first story, "I Was a Teenage Grave Robber," in Mike Garrett's *Comics Review*
- 1966 Graduates from Lisbon High School and enters the University of Maine, at Orono (UMO)

- 1967 Makes his first short-story sale, getting \$35 for “The Glass Floor” from *Startling Mystery Stories*, edited by Robert A.W. Lowndes
- 1969 Begins writing a weekly column, King’s Garbage Truck, for the *Maine Campus*, UMO’s student newspaper; meets and falls in love with Tabitha Jane Spruce
- 1970 Graduates from UMO and takes a job pumping gas; later gets a job pressing sheets at New Franklin Laundry in Bangor
- 1971 January 2: Marries Tabitha Spruce
- 1971 Daughter Naomi King is born
- 1971 September: Takes a teaching job at Hampden Academy, where he had done his student teaching
- 1972 First son, Joe, is born
- 1973 March: First novel, *Carrie*, is bought by Doubleday for \$2,500
- 1973 May: The paperback rights for *Carrie* are bought for \$400,000; King quits teaching
- 1974 February: Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King dies
- 1974 *Carrie* appears in bookstores; King moves to Boulder, Colorado
- 1975 ‘*Salem’s Lot*’ is published; King moves back to Maine and buys a home in Bridgton, Maine
- 1976 First film based on a King novel, Brian De Palma’s *Carrie*, is released in theaters; King meets Kirby McCauley, who becomes his agent
- 1977 Second son, Owen, is born; King publishes *The Shining* and, under the pseudonym Richard Bachman, *Rage*
- 1978 Publishes *Night Shift*, a collection of short stories, and *The Stand*; leaves Doubleday
- 1979 Publishes *The Dead Zone* and, under the Bachman pseudonym, *The Long Walk*; the miniseries based on King’s novel ‘*Salem’s Lot*’ appears on CBS
- 1980 Publishes *Firestarter*; Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* appears in theaters; moves to Bangor
- 1981 Publishes *Cujo*, *Danse Macabre*, and, under the Bachman pseudonym, *Roadwork*; receives Career Alumni award from UMO
- 1982 Publishes, under the Bachman pseudonym, *Running Man*; *Different Seasons*, a collection of novellas; *Creepshow*, a collection of graphic stories, which served as a tie-in to the movie of the same name; *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*; and privately issues the first part of *The Plant*; the film *Creepshows*, in which King plays the title character in the segment “The Lonesome Death of Jordy Verrill,” is released; wins the nonfiction Hugo Award and Locus Award for *Danse Macabre* and a World Fantasy Award for the short story “Do the Dead Sing?”

- 1983 Publishes *Christine*, *Pet Sematary*, and *Cycle of the Werewolf*; buys WZON, a radio station in Bangor. The movies *Christine*, *Cujo*, and *The Dead Zone* are released
- 1984 Publishes *The Talisman*, with Peter Straub, and *Thinner*, under the Bachman pseudonym; Privately issues *The Eyes of the Dragon*. The movies *Children of the Corn* and *Firestarter* are released
- 1985 Publicly acknowledges that he is Richard Bachman; publishes *Skeleton Crew*, a collection of short stories, and *The Bachman Books*, a collection containing the first four Bachman novels; adapts his short story "Word Processor of the Gods" for *Tales from the Darkside*; the movies *Cat's Eye* and *Silver Bullet* are released
- 1986 Publishes *It*. The movies *Maximum Overdrive*, which King directed himself, and *Stand By Me* are released. Wins a Locus Award for the collection *Skeleton Crew*
- 1987 Publishes *Misery*, *The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three*, and *The Tommyknockers*; releases *The Eyes of the Dragon* for general audiences. The movies *Creepshow II* and *The Running Man* are released. Wins a Bram Stoker Award in the best novel category for *Misery*
- 1988 Publishes, with the Whitney Museum, a limited edition of the story "My Pretty Pony"
- 1989 Publishes *The Dark Half* and a limited edition of the short story "Dolan's Cadillac"; the movie *Pet Sematary* is released
- 1990 Reissues *The Stand: The Complete & Uncut Edition*; publishes *Four Past Midnight*, a collection of novellas. The movies *Graveyard Shift* and *Misery* are released; the miniseries *It* airs on television; wins a Bram Stoker Award for best collection for *Four Past Midnight*
- 1991 Publishes *Needful Things* and *The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands*; *Stephen King's Golden Years*, a TV series, and the movie *Sometimes They Come Back* appear on CBS
- 1992 Publishes *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*; the movie *Sleepwalkers* appears
- 1993 Publishes *Nightmares & Dreamscapes*, a collection of short stories; the miniseries *The Tommyknockers* appears on television; the movies *Needful Things* and *The Dark Half* are released
- 1994 Publishes *Insomnia*; the miniseries *The Stand* airs on television; the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* is released
- 1995 Publishes *Rose Madder*; the movies *Dolores Claiborne* and *The Mangler* are released; the miniseries *The Langoliers* airs on ABC; wins a World Fantasy Award for the short story "The Man in the

- Black Suit” and wins a Bram Stoker Award for best long fiction for “Lunch at the Gotham Café”
- 1996** Publishes *The Green Mile* as a monthly serial consisting of six parts—“The Two Dead Girls,” “The Mouse on the Mile,” “Coffey’s Hands,” “The Bad Death of Eduard Delacroix,” “Night Journey,” and “Coffey on the Mile”—*Desperation*, and, under the Bachman pseudonym, *The Regulators*; the movie *Thinner* is released; wins an O. Henry Award for “The Man in the Black Suit” and wins a Bram Stoker Award in the best novel category for *The Green Mile*
- 1997** Publishes *The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass* and privately issues *Six Stories*; the movies *Quicksilver Highway*, *Trucks*, and the miniseries *The Shining* appear on TV. The movie *The Night Flier* is released; wins a Locus Award and a best novel award from the Horror Guild for *Desperation*
- 1998** Publishes *Bag of Bones*; co-writes script for an episode of *The X-Files*; the movie *Apt Pupil* is released; wins a Bram Stoker Award for best novel for *Bag of Bones*
- 1999** Publishes *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*
- 1999** June 19: King is severely injured when he is struck by a van
- 1999** Publishes *Hearts in Atlantis* and the audio book *Blood and Smoke*. The movie *The Green Mile* is released. *Storm of the Century* appears on television. Wins a Locus Award for *Bag of Bones*
- 2000** Releases “Riding the Bullet” on the Internet with the aid of his publisher; electronically releases six parts of *The Plant* on his own Web site; publishes *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* and *Secret Windows: Essays and Fiction on the Craft of Writing*; wins a Bram Stoker Award for nonfiction for *On Writing*
- 2001** Publishes *Dreamcatcher* and *Black House*, with Straub; the movie *Hearts in Atlantis* appears; wins a Locus Award for *On Writing* and the award for best nonfiction for *On Writing* and the award for best long fiction for “Riding the Bullet” from the Horror Guild
- 2002** Publishes *From a Buick 8* and *Everything’s Eventual: 14 Dark Tales*; the miniseries *Rose Red* appears on television; wins an award, with Straub, for best novel for *Black House* from the Horror Guild
- 2003** Publishes a revised edition of *The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger* and *The Dark Tower V: Wolves of the Calla*; the movie *Dreamcatcher* is released; receives The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and a Lifetime Achievement Award from Horror Writers Association; wins an award for best novel for *From A Buick 8* and an award for best collection for *Everything’s Eventual* from the Horror Guild

- 2004 Publishes *The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah*, *The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower*, and *Faithful: Two Diehard Boston Red Sox Fans Chronicle the Historic 2004 Season*, with Stewart O’Nan; the TV series *Kingdom Hospital* and a remake of the miniseries *Salem’s Lot* appear on television; the movies *Riding the Bullet* and *Secret Window* are released; receives Lifetime Achievement World Fantasy Award
- 2005 Publishes *The Colorado Kid*; the movie *Desperation* airs on television
- 2006 Publishes *Cell*, *Lisey’s Story*, and *The Secretary of Dreams*, a collection of short stories
- 2007 Publishes, under the Bachman pseudonym, *Blaze*; the movie *The Mist* is released
- 2008 Publishes *Duma Key* and *Just after Sunset*, a collection of short stories



## Chapter 1

# TAKING UP THE PEN

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Stephen Edwin King was born in Portland, Maine, on September 21, 1947, to Donald Edwin King, whose original family name was Spansky, and Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King. Donald King had been a captain in the Merchant Marines but had become a door-to-door salesman for Electrolux, a vacuum company, in Scarborough, a town about eight miles outside Portland. Something of a philanderer and not above breaking the law, he was apparently unhappy about being a family man, and after telling his wife—a little more than two years after Stephen was born—that he needed a pack of cigarettes, he went out and never returned. Thereafter, Ruth King, who claimed to have come “from the same family that produced the Pillsburys who now make cake mixes and flour,”<sup>1</sup> was left to raise Stephen and his older brother, David—who had been adopted in 1945—by herself. “After my father took off,” King recalled, “my mother landed on her feet, scrambling. My brother and I didn’t see a great deal of her over the next nine years. She worked at a succession of low-paying jobs: presser in a laundry, doughnut-maker on the night shift at a bakery, store clerk, housekeeper. . . . We never had a car (nor a TV set until 1956), but we never missed any meals.”<sup>2</sup>

King’s mother not only changed jobs often during those nine years, but she also moved quite a lot, going first to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where Donald King’s family lived. She may have been hoping to find her husband. If that were the case, she was disappointed. Donald King was never heard from again, though what he left behind him did contribute, as we will see, to King’s development. From Fort Wayne the Kings moved to De Pere, Wisconsin, where Carolyn, one of Ruth’s four sisters, lived. It

was probably at the end of his time in Illinois that Stephen had his first encounter with horror, both real and fictitious. When he was four, his mother later told him—though he has no memory of the event—he came home one day very pale and would not speak. She later discovered that he had witnessed a friend being run over by a train. During that same year an adaptation of Ray Bradbury's "Mars is Heaven" (1948) was broadcast on the radio. King begged his mother to allow him to listen to the show, but she, believing he would be scared by it, forbade him to do so. He disobeyed, listening to the radio from the door of his bedroom. As his mother had predicted, King was too frightened to sleep that night and remained awake in the spot from which he had heard the broadcast, keeping the light in the hallway in view.

Other stops on the family's itinerary included Chicago, Illinois; Malden, Massachusetts (the setting of the novel *Cell* [2006]), where his aunt Molly lived; and Stratford, Connecticut, where his aunt Lois lived. King began school and a love affair with the movies in Stratford. The first movie he can recall seeing, at a drive-in theater, was *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, which was first released in 3-D in 1954 (though King does not remember having to wear 3-D glasses, so the version he saw may have been released later). Another formative experience of King's early years was his mother's introducing him, when he was seven, to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). She had brought the book home from the library, and King, assuring her that it would not be too scary for him, convinced her to read it to him. "I lived and died with that story, with Mr. Utterson and with poor Dr. Jekyll, and particularly with Dr. Jekyll's other side, which was every vestige of pretense of civilization thrown away. I can remember lying in bed, wakeful after that night's reading was done, and what I usually thought of was how Mr. Hyde walked over the little girl, back and forth, breaking her bones; and it was such a terrible image and I thought, *I have to do that; but I have to do that worse,*" King recalled.<sup>3</sup>

The family settled in Durham, Maine, when King was 11, moving into the house of his grandparents, Guy and Nellie Pillsbury, which was located in a section of the town known as Methodist Corners. (Methodists themselves, the Kings attended the nearby West Durham Methodist Church.) Guy and Nellie were no longer able to care for themselves, so King's mother took on that responsibility on a full-time basis. King has written little of his grandparents, though he does remember listening to radio plays "with my grandfather when I was growing up (and he was growing old)."<sup>4</sup> The Kings continued living in the house after Guy and Nellie died, when Ruth took a job at Pineland, a home for the mentally disabled.

King attended Durham Elementary, a one-room schoolhouse that would grow to four rooms by the time he graduated in 1962. More important to his development at this point was the fact that reading became, at his grandparents', a household activity. The family had a subscription to the *Saturday Evening Post*, which published fiction in serial form—a new episode of a larger story appeared each week—as nineteenth-century publications had done with the novels of Charles Dickens, among other authors. King looked forward to receiving the episodes of these stories, but “[b]est of all,” he recalled in the foreword to *The Green Mile* (1996), “in my house we often read them aloud—my brother, David, one night, myself the next, my mother taking a turn on the third, then back to my brother again. It was a rare chance to enjoy a written work as we enjoyed the movies we went to and the TV programs (*Rawhide*, *Bonanza*, *Route 66*) that we watched together; they were a family event.”<sup>5</sup>

In Durham King began to be identified as a writer, although he had begun writing a few years before arriving there, taking it up while he was homebound during an extended illness—measles followed by ear infections—that kept him away from school and the first grade for about nine months. His first efforts were pure imitation: he copied *Combat Casey* comics verbatim, though he sometimes provided extra descriptions. His mother was proud but cajoled King into admitting that he had mostly copied from his comic books. “Write one of your own, Stevie,” she told him. “Those *Combat Casey* funny-books are just junk—he’s always knocking someone’s teeth out. I bet you could do better.”<sup>6</sup> Soon afterward he followed her advice, writing a four-page story about animals who, led by Mr. Rabbit Trick, went around in a car and helped small children. His mom, having been assured by King that he had not copied another’s work that time, told him that the story was good enough to be published. He produced four more stories using the same characters; his mother paid him twenty-five cents for each piece. “That was the first buck I made in this business.”<sup>7</sup>

King has not recorded most of what he wrote between those early stories and January 1959, when his older brother, the source of many of King’s childhood adventures, came up with the idea of publishing a newspaper, which was called *Dave’s Rag*. King, however, had already been writing fairly regularly, as is evidenced by his receiving, in 1958, a Royal typewriter for Christmas. His stories, at that point, included one about dinosaurs that terrorize a small town but are defeated after the townspeople discover that the dinosaurs are allergic to leather and another called “Jonathan and the Witches” (1956; published in Paul Mandelbaum’s *First Words* in 1993), which tells the story of a poor cobbler who gets employed