



**STEPHEN KING**

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**America's Storyteller**

**TONY MAGISTRALE**

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Stephen King

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America's Storyteller

Tony Magistrale

**PRAEGER**

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# Preface

This book undertakes the intriguing task of wrestling with several imposing questions. How do we account for Stephen King's enormous success both on best-seller lists and in movie theaters in light of a body of work that is so often critical of American life—its institutions, gender myths and relationships, and small-town communities? How do we explain the phenomenon of Stephen King, who is, on the one hand, an embodiment of the Horatio Alger story, rising from obscure poverty to the Forbes list of wealthiest Americans, and, on the other hand, a politically subversive writer? Is Stephen King merely another popular purveyor of horror—a *hack*, as some critics have insisted for years—or does he have something important to say about America, its past and its future direction? Is the culture that has embraced Stephen King as America's Storyteller, transforming him into arguably the most popular writer in history, reading him carefully enough?

Over the past four decades, Stephen King's movies and books have made him one of the most recognizable names on the planet. Certainly part of his popularity comes from his visualization of the dark side, feeding the Western world's postmodern fascination with indulging Gothic expressions in music and art. King's narratives, however, are also associated with describing very particular elements of America—its positive and negative group dynamics, its post-Vietnam identity, New England as a distinct regional place, to mention a few—especially for people reading them in other countries. Ten years ago, I was riding in a train from Paris to Augsburg, Germany. I shared the car with twenty or so high school students from Munich returning from a week spent touring the City of Light.

In casual conversation with several of the students sitting closest to me, I mentioned that I was an American and a professor of literature at the University of Vermont. After asking questions to ascertain where Vermont was located in the United States—was it somewhere near California, the universal surprise that Vermont itself is a state—my fellow travelers wanted to know about the courses I taught at UVM. When I mentioned my class entitled *The Films of Stephen King*, we immediately traversed both cultural and chronological differences. These teenagers didn't know much about Vermont, but they certainly had heard of Stephen King.

Each of my new friends had seen at least one Stephen King film, often bearing a different title in its Teutonic translation, and just as many had read some of his fiction—in English. I was not surprised to learn that *IT*, *Misery*, and *The Shining* were the most popular among them, and somewhat dismayed that none of these German children had even heard of *Apt Pupil*, King's mesmeric dark study that weds a fugitive Nazi with a not-so-innocent American blue-eyed boy. The point is that for many people around the world, Stephen King represents more than just a good Gothic scare; he is also synonymous—at least as much as the *Dallas* reruns dubbed on television and other ubiquitous elements of American popular culture, like Coca-Cola, that have found their way across the globe—with what they know of America and the extent to which they can identify with it. That said, how many Americans have come to view King in the same light: as a chronicler of contemporary culture, as much a sociologist of postmodern American life as he is a tremendously gifted storyteller?

Every artist is, at least in part, a product of his or her moment in time, even as that writer, if she or he is good enough, helps to define that era for future generations. Thomas Hardy's novels managed to capture the moment in which industrialization was transforming agrarian English life; Ernest Hemingway described the gap that existed between a generation of soldiers and artists who either fought in World War I or understood the cultural consequences attendant with millions dead and thousands maimed, and those who were insulated from the war's trauma; the British painter Francis Bacon captured on canvas the existential dread of modern man adrift in a universe where he is ultimately alone, bereft of God as well as a meaningful community of human others.

While Stephen King's universe is really not so far removed from any of the artists described above, for four decades he has worked incessantly to produce his own inimitable portrait of America at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. He has detailed the personal tragedies associated with divorce, alcoholism, and drug and child abuse. He has held a mirror up to our various prisons—those constructed with

tax dollars and cement as well as the invisible ones that exist behind closed bedroom and kitchen doors that we ourselves create. For several decades now, he has been warning Americans about the degradation of the environment—most specifically, of the consequences that ensue from unholy alliances between the military and science, which in turn lead to dangerous experiments and the unleashing of nightmares. He has found a persuasive way to connect monstrosity with the loss of childhood vision, and to critique adults who have fallen out of touch with their imaginative capacities. Supernatural vampires and monsters may be the great popular attractions long associated with King's art, but at the heart of his best work is a deep-seated awareness of the very real anxieties about how Americans live and where we are going, as a nation and as individuals. More positively, he has also provided us with a range of unlikely friendships that mirror the success of the American melting pot, fusing the differences that typically separate race, class, age, and even worlds. In short, in the past forty years, Stephen King has supplied America with a national portrait. It is not always a flattering one, suitable for framing in the National Gallery or the White House, as it reveals our historical and cultural foibles and scars. But it also describes our transcendent, uniquely American survival instincts, fellowship, and acts of heroism from the least likely sources.

This book is concerned with defining the particular *American-ness* of Stephen King's fiction and films, from a biographical first chapter tracing his formative years and rise to the status of America's Storyteller, both in print and on Hollywood's big screen, to the second chapter's exploration of some of King's major influences: as a New England regionalist—profoundly shaped by his life in Maine—as well as his extensive reading of other writers both in and outside the horror genre.

Chapter 3 treats those various American social institutions—school, church, government, penal system, small-town communities—that reappear continually in King's fiction and function primarily to entrap and disempower individuals. The politically subversive nature of King's work is perhaps best exemplified in his constant equating of social institutions with prisons, and his consummate faith in the individual as superior to the groupthink of the community—particularly the small-town zeitgeist. Although rich in fantasy and speculation when envisioning the ravages of a post-apocalyptic future, King's work also employs the collapse of civilization and civilized values to construct a kind of laboratory for his characters to experiment in situations in which they must reinvent society and themselves.

Chapter 4 continues to stress the primacy of the individual in King's fictional universes, including both the real and the speculative, but it does

so in terms of sexual choices and preferences. Using *The Stand* as an illustrative text among several others, the chapter explores various expressions of sexuality in King's art, as sexual behavior is often a barometer in his work to a character's moral baseline. If sexual deviance is the outgrowth of unrestrained impulse and expressions of fear and mental instability, conversely, people of good will in King's world tend to be affiliated with what the writer has defined as a "normative" (i.e., heterosexual and monogamous) sexuality.

Chapter 5 makes the case for revisiting arguably the single most important text in the King canon and repertory of film adaptations: *The Shining*. Entwining discussion of the novel with Kubrick's film and the televised miniseries, this chapter and the first part of chapter 6 explore all three *Shining(s)* and the various treatments of class, racial, and gender issues that have transformed these narratives into a highly relevant cultural critique of America, past and present.

The last two chapters in this book trace the most evolutionary aspects of King's work: his women characters and the career-long writing of *The Dark Tower*. In chapter 6, I examine the range of women characters that populate this writer's fictions and films—and their evolution from stereotyped peripheral helpmates and femmes fatales to individualized characters located at the center of his art. The trajectory of King's career includes a movement from early American road epics to a more circumscribed focus on domestic family life. Correspondingly, the road epics tend to be male-centered, whereas the later domestic narratives revolve around women caught in abusive relationships and struggling to define their own narrative voice.

*The Dark Tower* is the subject of this book's last chapter. The seven-volume adventure is best appreciated as an umbrella text encompassing the whole of King's fictional canon; it encapsulates and interfaces with many of the core plots, characters, and subject matter that King has configured over the course of his writing career. This chapter links the saga's main character, Roland Deschain, to images of American masculinity found elsewhere in King's work as well as in the construction of the American Western archetype. The chapter views *The Dark Tower* in keeping with King's tendency to blend genres, borrowing an admixture of identifiable elements from the American Western, the epic tradition, and the Gothic melodrama.

In the end, Stephen King's work remains as paradoxical in nature as the America he has been describing since *Carrie*. On the one hand, King would appear to be as fearfully conscious of the American urge toward institutionalization and conformity—in high schools, in small towns, in

the blind trust of the government and its platitudes, and in our collective faith in technology and science—as were his fellow New Englanders, Thoreau and Hawthorne, a century earlier. On the other hand, King is also archetypically American in his adherence to the ideology of individualism. In so many King narratives his heroes are in flight from a corrupt and monstrous society. They possess the power and courage to leave these societies, but not the ability to change them. While King's faith in the moral supremacy of the individual (and in small groups of like-minded individuals) goes uncontested, these characters cannot effectively confront the surrounding forces of evil. Thus, the psychology of escapism becomes a central motif in Stephen King's canon, and it connects him directly to a core tendency that is inimitably American—from Thoreau's deliberate life in the woods, to Huck Finn's retreat to the river, to the lost generation of antiheroes in Hemingway, to the road-obsessed Beats. While he may have attained all the apparent trappings of the American dream in terms of financial wealth, multiple homes and cars, and celebrity status since declaring himself a writer, Stephen King has maintained a complex relationship with the culture that has now embraced him as its Storyteller. That relationship is the subject of this book.

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# Chronology

- 1947 Stephen King born September 21 in Portland, Maine, second son to Donald and Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King.
- 1949 Donald King, father, leaves house on trip to store and never returns.
- 1954 Begins writing short fiction modeled after science fiction adventure stories and movies.
- 1962–66 Attends high school in Lisbon Falls, Maine.
- 1966–70 Undergraduate years as English major at the University of Maine, Orono (UMO). Meets future wife, Tabitha Spruce, also a UMO undergraduate. Works as a laborer in an industrial laundry.
- 1971–73 Marries Tabitha Spruce. Teaches high school English at Hampden Academy in Hampden, Maine; lives in mobile home. Publishes several short stories. Sells *Carrie* to Doubleday. Mother dies of cancer.
- 1974 *Carrie*. Moves with wife and daughter to Boulder, Colorado.
- 1975 *'Salem's Lot*. Returns to Maine and purchases home in Bridgton.
- 1976 Film version of *Carrie*, directed by Brian De Palma.
- 1977 *The Shining* and *Rage* (first novel to appear under Bachman pseudonym). Introduced to Peter Straub during three-month trip to England.
- 1978 *The Stand* and *Night Shift*. Writer in Residence at UMO. Teaches classes in creative writing and Gothic fiction. Uses later course to launch theories on the horror genre that will inform his study *Danse Macabre*.

- 1979 *The Dead Zone* and Bachman's *The Long Walk*. Concludes teaching duties at UMO.
- 1980 *Firestarter* and "The Mist." Buys current residence on West Broadway, Bangor. Kubrick's film adaptation of *The Shining*.
- 1981 *Cujo*, *Danse Macabre*, and third Bachman title, *Roadwork*. Receives Career Alumni Award from UMO.
- 1982 *Different Seasons* and fourth Bachman book, *The Running Man*, first volume of *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*. Wins World Fantasy Award for short story "The Reach" and Hugo Award for *Danse Macabre*.
- 1983 *Christine* and *Pet Sematary*. Film releases of *Cujo*, *The Dead Zone*, and *Christine*.
- 1984 *The Talisman* (coauthored with Peter Straub), *Eyes of the Dragon*, and fifth Bachman novel, *Thinner*.
- 1985 *Skeleton Crew*. Reveals "Richard Bachman" pseudonym.
- 1986 *IT*. Film version of *Stand by Me* based on King's novella, *The Body*.
- 1987 *Misery* (originally intended as a Bachman book), *Eyes of the Dragon*, *Silver Bullet*, *The Tommyknockers*, and *The Dark Tower: The Drawing of the Three*. Film release of *The Running Man*.
- 1989 *The Dark Half* (1.5 million hardcover copies—largest first-edition printing in publishing history). Film version of *Pet Sematary*.
- 1990 *The Stand*, revised and unexpurgated; *Four Past Midnight*. Film adaptation of *Misery*; Kathy Bates wins Academy Award for Best Actress. *IT* televised as ABC miniseries. Begins publishing essays and stories in *The New Yorker*.
- 1991 *Needful Things*, *The Dark Tower: The Waste Lands*.
- 1992 *Gerald's Game*, *Dolores Claiborne*. Film version of *Pet Sematary*.
- 1993 *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*.
- 1994 *Insomnia*. Film release of *The Shawshank Redemption*, nominated for several Academy Awards, including Best Picture. *The Stand* televised as ABC miniseries.
- 1995 *Rose Madder*. Film version of *Dolores Claiborne*.
- 1996 *The Green Mile*, published in six installments; *Desperation*; *The Regulators* published under Bachman pseudonym. Wins O.

- Henry Award for “The Man in the Black Suit,” as year’s best short story.
- 1997 *The Dark Tower: Wizard and Glass*. Film adaptation of *Apt Pupil*. Stephen King’s *The Shining* televised as ABC miniseries.
- 1998 *Bag of Bones*.
- 1999 *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Hearts in Atlantis*; *Storm of the Century* televised as ABC miniseries. Car accident hospitalizes King in mid-summer. Film version of *The Green Mile* is nominated for several Academy Awards, including Best Film.
- 2000 *On Writing*, *Secret Window*; *The Plant* (online publishing venture).
- 2001 *Dreamcatcher*, *Black House* (coauthored with Peter Straub, sequel to *The Talisman*).
- 2002 *From a Buick 8*, *Everything’s Eventual*. *Rose Red* televised as ABC miniseries.
- 2003 *The Dark Tower: Wolves of the Calla*. Begins writing “The Pop of King,” King’s take on popular American culture, a monthly column for the magazine *Entertainment Weekly*. Wins National Book Award’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.
- 2004 Last two volumes of *The Dark Tower* saga, *Song of Susannah* and *The Dark Tower*.
- 2005 Signs a deal with Marvel Comics to publish a seven-issue graphic comic series adapting *The Dark Tower*; *Faithful* (with Stewart O’Nan); *The Colorado Kid*.
- 2006 *Cell*, *Lisey’s Story*. *1408* is released as a film.
- 2007 *Duma Key*, *Blaze* published as a Bachman book. *The Mist* released as Frank Darabont’s fourth King film adaptation. Endorses Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. Marvel Comics publishes *The Gunslinger Born*, the first volume of a color comic book adaptation of *The Dark Tower*.
- 2008 *Just after Sunset*. King, Scribner’s, and Marvel Comics reach an agreement for a color comic adaptation of *The Stand*.
- 2009 *Under the Dome* scheduled release.
- 2010 Scheduled release of *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*, an original Southern gothic musical collaboration between Stephen King and rock musician John Mellencamp.

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# Chapter 1

## The Writer's Life: A Stephen King Biography

Born September 21, 1947, in Portland, Maine, Stephen Edwin King—following in the astrological footsteps of fellow novelists Herman Melville and Leo Tolstoy—is a loquacious Virgo. Apparently, that was always the case even when a young Steve whiled away parts of deathless adolescent summers in 1959 and 1960 typing science-fiction stories and tales of mystery and suspense on his manual typewriter for mimeographed distribution to family and neighborhood friends. This may be one of those rare examples of a precocious child who knew exactly what he wanted to be when he grew up—and ended up so thoroughly achieving it, that he exceeded even his most ambitious dreams.

Stephen King has led an interesting life, especially for a writer. Since the novel *Carrie* began his reign of terror over the publishing world in 1974, he has become one of the most popular and widely recognized novelists of all time. Some estimates place the total number of Stephen King books worldwide at 300 million copies. King commentators have speculated that the only writers more popular than Mr. King were those who authored the Biblical gospels, and they had Jesus on their side. In the 1980s alone, King wrote seven of the top twenty-five fiction best sellers in America. His books have been translated into nearly every language. Last year on a visit to a bookstore in downtown Stockholm, I found three complete shelves containing many of his most recognizable titles translated into Swedish. Remarkably prolific, by the year 2004 King had averaged more than a book a year during three decades of publishing. Most of his novels and many of his short stories have been made into Hollywood films, and many people know King's work primarily through the movies.

Perhaps because of his best-seller popularity, his strong, plot-dominated narratives, his deftly drawn characters, or a combination of these elements, Hollywood discovered long ago that any Stephen King work is a bankable project; none of the 100-plus films from his literary canon theatrically released or televised in a miniseries format have failed to make money. As just a small example of his enormous financial clout, in 1995–1996 Stephen King placed #12 on the *Forbes* magazine list of the forty highest-paid entertainers. King was reported to have made \$56 million that year, slightly less than Jerry Seinfeld (\$59 million) or The Beatles (\$130 million), but more than Mel Gibson (\$28 million) and David Letterman (\$27 million) combined. This is rarified company for sure, and the only other writer on the *Forbes* list who made more than King that year was Michael Crichton (\$59 million).

Certainly every artist, mogul, and musical group whose talent was prodigious enough to merit an appearance with King on this list has his or her own remarkable success story, emerging from general obscurity and, in some cases, humble origins, to the riches and name recognition associated with fame. None of their stories, however, could possibly be more dramatic than the Horatio Alger tale of triumph that is Stephen King's biography. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. We need first to return to Stephen King, the man who spent many of his earliest years struggling mightily before that awkward teenage girl with telekinetic powers, a misunderstanding of her menarche, and an urge to attend her senior prom interceded and transformed King's world even more than her own.

Perhaps the single most important moment in King's childhood took place when he was merely two years old. His father, Donald King, a vacuum cleaner salesman and merchant mariner, went out one night to buy a pack of cigarettes in 1949, leaving his wife, Nellie Ruth, and two small sons at home. To borrow from the song "Hungry Heart" by Bruce Springsteen, one of King's friends and favorite musicians, his father went "went out for a ride and he never came back." The King family, never well off financially when Donald was part of it, grew more desperate still. The middle years of Steve's childhood were spent in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Stratford, Connecticut, with frequent trips back to Maine to visit his mother's relatives. While King often reminds interviewers that the family always had food on the table and that his mother was a constant source of support and a welcome sense of humor, it is also clear that the King family moved around so much because they relied on financial help from relatives to make ends meet: "I guess in many ways it was a hard-scrabble existence, but not an impoverished one in the most important sense of the word. Thanks to my mother, the one thing that was never in short supply, corny as it may