Table of Contents

22 Lessons From Stephen King on How to be a Great Writer
America the Literate (Fictional Essay)
And Furthermore Part II - A Booklist
Article 1
Article 2
Carrie - The Bestseller I Threw in the Bin
The Early Years
Elements of Tragedy (The Weapon)
The Genius of the Tell-Tale Heart
Let's Talk About Fear
My Little Serrated Security Blanket
Notes From Nightmares and Dreamscapes
On Alcoholism and Returning to the Shining
On Impact (aka The Accident)
Straight Up Midnight
Top 20 Rules for Writers
Why I Was Bachman
Will We Close the Book on Books
Writing Successfully in 10 Minutes

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And Furthermore Part II - A Booklist
Article 1
Article 2
Carrie - The Bestseller I Threw in the Bin
The Early Years
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On Impact (aka The Accident)
Straight Up Midnight
Top 20 Rules for Writers
Why I Was Bachman
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22 LESSONS FROM STEPHEN KING ON HOW TO BE A GREAT WRITER

Stephen King

Renowned author Stephen King has written over 50 books that have captivated millions of people around the world.

In his memoir, “On Writing,” King shares valuable insights into how to be a better writer. And he doesn’t sugarcoat it. He writes, “I can’t lie and say there are no bad writers. Sorry, but there are lots of bad writers.”

Don’t want to be one of them? Here are 22 great pieces of advice from King’s book on how to be an amazing writer.

This is an update of an article written by Maggie Zhang.

1. Stop watching television. Instead, read as much as possible.

If you’re just starting out as a writer, your television should be the first thing to go. It’s “poisonous to creativity,” he says. Writers need to look into themselves and turn toward the life of the imagination.

To do so, they should read as much as they can. King takes a book with him everywhere he goes, and even reads during meals. “If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot,” he says. Read widely, and constantly work to refine and redefine your own work as you do so.

2. Prepare for more failure and criticism than you think you can deal with.

King compares writing fiction to crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a bathtub, because in both, “there’s plenty of opportunity for self-doubt.” Not only will you doubt yourself, but other people will doubt you, too. “If you write (or paint or dance or sculpt or sing, I suppose), someone will try to make you feel lousy about it, that’s all,” writes King.

Oftentimes, you have to continue writing even when you don't feel like it. "Stopping a piece of work just because it's hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea," he writes. And when you fail, King suggests that you remain positive. "Optimism is a perfectly legitimate response to failure."

3. Don't waste time trying to please people.

According to King, rudeness should be the least of your concerns. "If you intend to write as truthfully as you can, your days as a member of polite society are numbered anyway," he writes. King used to be ashamed of what he wrote, especially after receiving angry letters accusing him of being bigoted, homophobic, murderous, and even psychopathic.

By the age of 40, he realized that every decent writer has been accused of being a waste of talent. King has definitely come to terms with it. He writes, "If you disapprove, I can only shrug my shoulders. It's what I have." You can't please all of your readers all the time, so King advises that you stop worrying.

4. Write primarily for yourself.

You should write because it brings you happiness and fulfillment. As King says, "I did it for the pure joy of the thing. And if you can do it for joy, you can do it forever."

Writer Kurt Vonnegut provides a similar insight: "Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about," he says. "It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style."

5. Tackle the things that are hardest to write.

"The most important things are the hardest things to say," writes King. "They are the things you get ashamed of because words

diminish your feelings.” Most great pieces of writing are preceded with hours of thought. In King’s mind, “Writing is refined thinking.”

When tackling difficult issues, make sure you dig deeply. King says, “Stories are found things, like fossils in the ground … Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world.” Writers should be like archaeologists, excavating for as much of the story as they can find.

6. When writing, disconnect from the rest of the world.

Writing should be a fully intimate activity. Put your desk in the corner of the room, and eliminate all possible distractions, from phones to open windows. King advises, “Write with the door closed; rewrite with the door open.”

You should maintain total privacy between you and your work. Writing a first draft is “completely raw, the sort of thing I feel free to do with the door shut — it’s the story undressed, standing up in nothing but its socks and undershorts.”

7. Don’t be pretentious.

“One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you’re maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones,” says King. He compares this mistake to dressing up a household pet in evening clothes — both the pet and the owner are embarrassed, because it’s completely excessive.

As iconic businessman David Ogilvy writes in a memo to his employees, “Never use jargon words like reconceptualize, demassification, attitudinally, judgmentally. They are hallmarks of a pretentious ass.” Furthermore, don’t use symbols unless necessary. “Symbolism exists to adorn and enrich, not to create an artificial sense of profundity,” writes King.

8. Avoid adverbs and long paragraphs.

As King emphasizes several times in his memoir, “the adverb is not your friend.” In fact, he believes that “the road to hell is paved with adverbs” and compares them to dandelions that ruin your lawn. Adverbs are worst after “he said” and “she said” — those phrases are best left unadorned.

You should also pay attention to your paragraphs, so that they flow with the turns and rhythms of your story. “Paragraphs are almost always as important for how they look as for what they say,” says King.

9. Don’t get overly caught up in grammar.

According to King, writing is primarily about seduction, not precision. “Language does not always have to wear a tie and lace-up shoes,” writes King. “The object of fiction isn’t grammatical correctness but to make the reader welcome and then tell a story.” You should strive to make the reader forget that he or she is reading a story at all.

10. Master the art of description.

“Description begins in the writer’s imagination, but should finish in the reader’s,” writes King. The important part isn’t writing enough, but limiting how much you say. Visualize what you want your reader to experience, and then translate what you see in your mind into words on the page. You need to describe things “in a way that will cause your reader to prickle with recognition,” he says.

The key to good description is clarity, both in observation and in writing. Use fresh images and simple vocabulary to avoid exhausting your reader. “In many cases when a reader puts a story aside because it ‘got boring,’ the boredom arose because the writer grew enchanted with his powers of description and lost sight of his priority, which is to keep the ball rolling,” notes King.

11. Don’t give too much background information.

“What you need to remember is that there’s a difference between lecturing about what you know and using it to enrich the story,” writes King. “The latter is good. The former is not.” Make sure you only include details that move your story forward and that persuade your reader to continue reading.

If you need to do research, make sure it doesn’t overshadow the story. Research belongs “as far in the background and the back story as you can get it,” says King. You may be entranced by what you’re learning, but your readers are going to care a lot more about your characters and your story.

12. Tell stories about what people actually do.

“Bad writing is more than a matter of shit syntax and faulty observation; bad writing usually arises from a stubborn refusal to tell stories about what people actually do — to face the fact, let us say, that murderers sometimes help old ladies cross the street,” writes King. The people in your stories are what readers care about the most, so make sure you acknowledge all the dimensions your characters may have.

13. Take risks; don’t play it safe.

First and foremost, stop using the passive voice. It’s the biggest indicator of fear. “I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing,” King says. Writers should throw back their shoulders, stick out their chins, and put their writing in charge.

“Try any goddamn thing you like, no matter how boringly normal or outrageous. If it works, fine. If it doesn’t, toss it,” King says.

14. Realize that you don’t need drugs to be a good writer.

“The idea that the creative endeavor and mind-altering substances are entwined is one of the great pop-intellectual myths of our time,” says King. In his eyes, substance-abusing writers are just substance-abusers. “Any claims that the drugs and alcohol are

necessary to dull a finer sensibility are just the usual self-serving bullshit."

15. Don't try to steal someone else's voice.

As King says, "You can't aim a book like a cruise missile." When you try to mimic another writer's style for any reason other than practice, you'll produce nothing but "pale imitations." This is because you can never try to replicate the way someone feels and experiences truth, especially not through a surface-level glance at vocabulary and plot.

16. Understand that writing is a form of telepathy.

"All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing is the purest distillation," says King. An important element of writing is transference. Your job isn't to write words on the page, but rather to transfer the ideas inside your head into the heads of your readers.

"Words are just the medium through which the transfer happens," says King. In his advice on writing, Vonnegut also recommends that writers "use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted."

17. Take your writing seriously.

"You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or despair," says King. "Come to it any way but lightly." If you don't want to take your writing seriously, he suggests that you close the book and do something else.

As writer Susan Sontag says, "The story must strike a nerve — in me. My heart should start pounding when I hear the first line in my head. I start trembling at the risk."

18. Write every single day.

“Once I start work on a project, I don’t stop, and I don’t slow down unless I absolutely have to,” says King. “If I don’t write every day, the characters begin to stale off in my mind … I begin to lose my hold on the story’s plot and pace.”

If you fail to write consistently, the excitement for your idea may begin to fade. When the work starts to feel like work, King describes the moment as “the smooch of death.” His best advice is to just take it “one word at a time.”

19. Finish your first draft in three months.

King likes to write 10 pages a day. Over a three-month span, that amounts to around 180,000 words. “The first draft of a book — even a long one — should take no more than three months, the length of a season,” he says. If you spend too long on your piece, King believes the story begins to take on an odd foreign feel.

20. When you’re finished writing, take a long step back.

King suggests six weeks of “recuperation time” after you’re done writing, so you can have a clear mind to spot any glaring holes in the plot or character development. He asserts that a writer’s original perception of a character could be just as faulty as the reader’s.

King compares the writing and revision process to nature. “When you write a book, you spend day after day scanning and identifying the trees,” he writes. “When you’re done, you have to step back and look at the forest.” When you do find your mistakes, he says that “you are forbidden to feel depressed about them or to beat up on yourself. Screw-ups happen to the best of us.”

21. Have the guts to cut.

When revising, writers often have a difficult time letting go of words they spent so much time writing. But, as King advises, “Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart, kill your darlings.”

Although revision is one of the most difficult parts of writing, you need to leave out the boring parts in order to move the story along. In his advice on writing, Vonnegut suggests, “If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.”

22. Stay married, be healthy, and live a good life.

King attributes his success to two things: his physical health and his marriage. “The combination of a healthy body and a stable relationship with a self-reliant woman who takes zero shit from me or anyone else has made the continuity of my working life possible,” he writes.

It’s important to have a strong balance in your life, so writing doesn’t consume all of it. In writer and painter Henry Miller’s 11 commandments of writing, he advises, “Keep human! See people, go places, drink if you feel like it.”

AMERICA THE LITERATE: A FICTIONAL ESSAY

Stephen King

With Jonathan Franzen and his pals making all the big bucks, times are tough for guys like me.

I didn't care a great deal for The Corrections — I found it patronizing and self-indulgent — but anyone reading it would be hard put, I think, not to respond to its style and language. Those were the things that kept the book in my hand when my impulse was — I'm not lying here — to heave it across the room (and then maybe piss on it). That awesome grasp of the language is also on view in Jonathan Franzen's collection of essays (How to Be Alone), and here's what's nice about it: That maddening New York 'tude that seems to whisper, "I'm smarter than you, more sophisticated than you, better-read than you, just better than you" at least once on every single page is gone.

The sense of comic snortiness is gone, too, at least for the time being (Mr. Franzen may be one of those people who only feel it's necessary to do the I'm-a-smart-but-world-weary-guy thing in his fiction). There is, in fact, something almost endearing about his nearly constant need to take his own creative temperature. How is Jonathan faring today? he asks himself over and over. Will Jonathan be able to write tomorrow, in spite of the Internet, the decay of artistic sensitivity, and the growing idea that television might just be culturally important?

The idea to which Mr. Franzen returns over and over again in these essays (and with the obsessiveness of a child who has just lost his first tooth) is that serious literature no longer matters in America, and that writers of it have lost their audience. That they are essentially talking to each other and no one else. I wondered if this could really be true of what R.J. Franklin, the author of American Intelligence and Creativity, calls "the most literate society that has ever existed upon the face of the earth."(1) So I did some investigating, and it turns out that Mr. Franzen's fears of talking to no one but himself and his peers (one suspects that, in his most secret heart, Mr. Franzen believes he has none) are unfounded. He is, in fact, farting through silk.

Let us begin with Ulysses, James Joyce's tale of Leopold Bloom's big day. In 1998, eighty-one million copies of Ulysses were sold — not worldwide, but in the United States alone.(2) Since there are roughly 290 million people in America,(3) the math works out to one copy of Ulysses for every three and a half Americans. I think even Mr. Franzen would have to admit that, when it comes to serious literature, "Ulysses pretty much wrote the book."(4) And in the vernacular of sales, these are mighty tall tickets.

I wondered how it could be that so many copies of Ulysses — generally acknowledged to be a "tough read" — could have sold in a single year. Although I can offer no definitive answer to this question, it's certainly interesting to note that the novel is taught in more than seven hundred American high schools and even in thirty American junior high schools.(5) In his article on teaching literature to teenagers, Justin Reeve points out that "smoking and drinking are tough habits to pick up, but once they are formed, they are even tougher to break. The same is true of great literature, which is, let's face it, Jim Beam for the brain."(6)

If asked to name the novels most students are reading, a high school graduate from the 1950s or 1960s might be apt to name such "teenager-friendly" books as The Red Badge of Courage, The Old Man and the Sea, and Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. It's perhaps hard to think of them reading Last Exit to Brooklyn by Hubert Selby Jr. (sixty million copies sold in 1998)(7) or The Tunnel by William H. Gass (forty million sold in 1998),(8) but the numbers don't lie, and neither do the curricula. When asked about the latter, Andrea Gernet, a seventeen-year-old junior at Berlin (N.H.) High School, wrote: "It's hard at first, but once the guy started digging his tunnel, it was pretty easy to see the vaginal symbolism, unless you're a post-Freudian. Mr. Yardley [a teacher of modern American literature at BHS] helped us a lot, and we acted out the climax in class. That was fun, even though my mom was mad that I took my chest of drawers to school and the janitor said we'd have to clean up the dirt ourselves."(9) She further pointed out that, after reading Mr. Gass, "Danielle Steel and V.C. Andrews seem pretty lame."(10) It's

clear that the general American reader has come to share Andrea's growing thirst for serious literature (which, in her letter, she charmingly refers to as "the real deal"). Last year in America, Graham Greene's The Quiet American sold 110 million copies. One might compare this with Ms. Steel, whose entire backlist sold less than a million copies. Mr. Franzen's own novel The Corrections sold more than eighty million copies,(11) and while some of this may be attributed to the "Oprah flap,"(12) what can we say about sales of Mr. Franzen's previous novel (Strong Motion), which sold fourteen million copies in a single month?(13)

Certainly such sales have changed the idea that serious novelists live in poverty. William H. Gass, for instance, has moved to Nassau, a notorious tax haven, and late last year Mr. Franzen quietly bought an island in the South Pacific.(14) According to Forbes, in the fall of 2000 the well-known New York developer Donald Trump quietly acquired the novelist Joyce Carol Oates as a financial partner; when she joined his team, Trump Enterprises became Mulvaney Enterprises, Inc.(15) One might say that these days Mr. Trump is "feeling his oats"!

Given such numbers (and such a clear resurgence of serious fiction in the marketplace), one has a right to ask why the myth of the literate novelist as "a voice crying in the wilderness" persists. There are a number of answers to this question. One has to do with simple practicality. As Cynthia Ozick confided in a recent interview, "If my relatives knew that I make more money than Tom Clancy, Sue Grafton and John Grisham combined, I would never get any peace."(16) And Cormac McCarthy added, "I spend more time dealing with the IRS these days than I do working on my new novel, although there was nothing sneaky about my acquisition of El Paso; it was a straightforward nine-year lease with an option to buy."(17) And the novelist Ian McEwan describes his purchase of EMI Records not as a business decision — "Writers make lousy businessmen," he points out with a poignant grin(18) — but as "a decision of the heart." And when asked about her decision to buy a

tract of land that is, essentially, eastern Montana, Annie Proulx offers a terse, two-word response: “Bidness, partner.”(19)

Historically speaking, wealth has made writers uncomfortable. (“Money is writer’s block colored green,” Charles Dickens once wrote to Wilkie Collins, to which Collins reportedly responded, “Send me your crayons, Chuck.”)(20) This has always been less true of the more easily recognized “popular” writers (we’ll get to them in a moment), but the erroneous idea that money destroys serious thought continues to exist. This is probably why such books as Ada, by Vladimir Nabokov, have never appeared on the USA Today bestseller list, although it sells more than nine million copies a year. (21) One critic has, in fact, called it “The Bridges of Madison County for smart people.”(22) The truth is simply this: A powerful group of “literary novelists” have purchased all the major newspaper and Internet sites that publish bestseller lists, and any novel considered “too literary” is blocked from those lists. When asked for a clearer explanation for the rationale behind this decision, Annie Proulx — who, along with Cynthia Ozick, Don DeLillo and John Updike, now owns The Wall Street Journal — offers a terse, two-word response: “Bidness, partner.” (23)

Where, you might ask, are the more readily acknowledged bestselling novelists in this equation? Where are Clive Cussler, Anne Rice, Jonathan Kellerman? Where are such new kids on the block as Dennis Lehane and Michael Connelly?

Where is Stephen King?

Well, partner, let me explain it this way. You may have seen me photographed on a vintage Harley-Davidson Softail, but that is a lease job from Central Maine Harley (“The Boys With the Toys”). You may have seen me behind the wheel of a Mercedes-Benz, but that’s also a lease. The vehicle I actually own is a year-old Dodge Ram pickup truck, bought during the Year-End Blow-Out at McDonald Motors in western Maine. I, like virtually every other popular novelist in America, live mostly on a subsidy check of just over twelve thousand dollars a month (I barely clear a hundred grand a year,

after taxes). The check comes from Literature ‘R’ Us, a company incorporated in the Bahamas.(24) The president of this company is Ms. “Bidness, Partner” herself, Annie Proulx. The treasurer who signs my checks (the signature is not quite legible) appears to be Margaret Drabble.

As for my last novel, From a Buick 8? It sold just over a thousand copies.(25)

After that humiliating admission I shouldn’t have to state what’s going on, but for those of you who are a trifle “slow on the uptake,”(26) here it is: America’s so-called “popular novelists” are actually fronts, created so that TV and the press will have someone to bother when they have an extra five minutes at the end of the nightly news or space to fill in the arts-and-leisure section of the Sunday paper. As Margaret Atwood so succinctly puts it, “Why would I want to give an interview to some newspaper nutter when I’m trying to write a novel? The idea is absurd.”(27)

On a personal level I must admit I wish my books sold more, but sometimes the movies give me a boost; thanks to Frank Darabont’s film of The Green Mile, for instance, my novel sold an extra fifteen thousand copies.(28) And as J.K. Rowling admits, “Without the movies, Harry Potter would actually be a total unknown.”(29) At first, one might tend to scoff at this, or to call it unbelievable. But then, one realizes one has never actually met someone who has read these “wildly popular” novels. As Andrea Gernet says in her letter to me, “I have dozens of friends who’ve read all the Harry Potter novels, but I’ve been too busy, myself. I had to read The Brothers K for a class, and I’m working my way through a number of contemporary Chinese novelists in my leisure time. I might read the Harry Potter books next year.” (30)

The most important thing is that literature is alive and well in America, and Jonathan Franzen need not worry (as though he ever did; as I’ve told you, it’s all a front, but the Ever-Popular Tortured Artist Effect is a hard one to give up). And if he persists in worrying, he can do it in his Jaguar K-type as he drives to his ski lodge in Vail.

Vail, Colorado, by the way, is owned by the same consortium of writers I mentioned earlier. One likes to imagine Margaret Drabble, Don DeLillo and Mr. Franzen himself unwinding on the slopes. And as far as the profit involved in such a nifty resort acquisition? Well, writing is one thing. Vail, on the other hand… That's bidness, partner.

1. This quote and this source — like all the quotes and sources in this essay — are, of course, fictitious. One may argue that this to some extent negates the arguments that the essay makes, but since actual sources supporting those arguments don't exist, all I can say is that it seemed necessary.

2. Beverly Stonehouse and staff, "Year-End Survey," BookScan, February 1998, pp. 18-26.

3. American Population Clock (Internet).

4. John Kapp and Justin Reeve, Literature's Funny! (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), p. 89.

5. Justin Reeve, "Smart Books, Smart Kids," The English Teacher, Vol. LXXV, No. 7, June 1999.

6. Ibid.

7. BookScan.

8. Ibid.

9. Letter from Andrea Gernet to Stephen King, dated November 16, 2002.

10. Ibid.

11. BookScan.

12. Mr. Franzen expressed some reluctance about being a selection of Oprah's Book Club, which so distressed Ms. Winfrey that she quite rightly canceled the whole thing.

13. August 2000, prompting George Stillsbury to speculate, in BookScan's February 2001 "Year-End Survey," that readers saw it as "an upscale beach book."

14. Jacob Frisch, "Serious Writers Who Have It All," Ritzy Hideaways, Vol. 3, No. 2, October 2001.

15. According to BookScan ("Year End Survey," February 2001), Ms. Dates' We Were the Mulvaneys sold forty million copies in hardcover and an additional eighty million copies in paperback, surpassing sales of her previous bestseller, Them, by almost thirty million copies.

16. Ellen Prosser, "The Problem of Too Much Money," Rich Folks Magazine, Vol. 19, No. 9, September 2000.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Letter from Annie Proulx to Stephen King, dated December 9, 2002. (She adds, "Hope you'll have a merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year.")

20. Richard Woofington, Dickens and the Money Question (Paris: Paris Literary Press, 1976), p. 291.

21. BookScan.

22. Jacob LaFountain, Literature As I See It (Rahway: New Jersey Literary Press, 1995), p. 743.

23. Letter, Annie Proulx to Stephen King, op. cit.

24. U.S. Tax Haven Guide, 2001-2002; also The Secret Wealth of America, published on the Internet by www.stinger.corn.

25. Scribner royalty statement, November 9, 2002.

26. Eric Partridge, Slanguage (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 1023.

27. Margaret Atwood, “Why I Don’t Bother With Newspaper Nutters,” The Canadian Quarterly, Vol. 4, No. 4 (a whole number 16), Winter 2000.

28. Royalty statements, Scribner and Penguin Putnam, 1999-2001.

29. Anthony Crackbottom, “The Truth About Harry,” The Daily Mail, Vol. CCCXXXIX, No. 159, June 19, 2000.

30. Letter, Andrea Gernet to Stephen King, op. cit.

Scan Notes, v3.0: Proofed carefully against magazine article (Barnes and Noble’s Book - July/August 2003 Issue), jpgs included in zip file.

AND FURTHERMORE, PART II: A BOOKLIST

Stephen King

The Observer Extracted from On Writing September 17, 2000

When I talk about writing, I usually offer my audiences an abbreviated version of the “On Writing” section which forms the second half of this book. That includes the Prime Rule, of course: Write a lot and read a lot. In the Q-and-A period which follows, someone invariably asks: “What do you read?”

I’ve never given a very satisfactory answer to that question, because it causes a kind of circuit overload in my brain. The easy answer-“Everything I can get my hands on”-is true enough, but not helpful. The list that follows provides a more specific answer to that question. These are the best books I’ve read over the last three or four years, the period during which I wrote The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon, Hearts in Atlantis, On Writing, and the as-yet-unpublished From a Buick Eight. In some way or other, I suspect each book in the list had an influence on the books I wrote.

As you scan this list, please remember that I’m not Oprah and this isn’t my book club. These are the ones that worked for me, that’s all. But you could do worse, and a good many of these might show you some new ways of doing your work. Even if they don’t, they’re apt to entertain you. They certainly entertained me.

Abrahams, Peter: A Perfect Crime Abrahams, Peter: Lights Out Abrahams, Peter: Pressure Drop Abrahams, Peter: Revolution #9 Agee, James: A Death in the Family Bakis, Kirsten: Lives of the Monster Dogs Barker, Pat: Regeneration Barker, Pat: The Eye in the Door Barker, Pat: The Ghost Road Bausch, Richard: In the Night Season Blauner, Peter: The Intruder Bowles, Paul: The Sheltering Sky Boyle, T. Coraghessan: The Tortilla Curtain Bryson, Bill: A Walk in the Woods

Buckley, Christopher: Thank You for Smoking

Carver, Raymond: Where I’m Calling From

Chabon, Michael: Werewolves in Their Youth

Chorlton, Windsor: Latitude Zero

Connelly, Michael: The Poet

Conrad, Joseph: Heart of Darkness

Constantine, K. C.: Family Values

DeLillo, Don: Underworld

DeMille, Nelson: Cathedral

DeMille, Nelson: The Gold Coast

Dickens, Charles: Oliver Twist

Dobyns, Stephen: Common Carnage

Dobyns, Stephen: The Church of Dead Girls

Doyle, Roddy: The Woman Who Walked into Doors

Elkin, Stanley: The Dick Gibson Show

Faulkner, William: As I Lay Dying

Garland, Alex: The Beach

George, Elizabeth: Deception on His Mind

Gerritsen, Tess: Gravity

Golding, William: Lord of the Flies

Gray, Muriel: Furnace

Greene, Graham: A Gun for Sale (aka This Gun for Hire)

Greene, Graham: Our Man in Havana

Halberstam, David: The Fifties

Hamill, Pete: Why Sinatra Matters

Harris, Thomas: Hannibal

Haruf, Kent: Plainsong

Hoeg, Peter: Smilla's Sense of Snow

Hunter, Stephen: Dirty White Boys

Ignatius, David: A Firing Offense

Irving, John: A Widow for One Year

Joyce, Graham: The Tooth Fairy

Judd, Alan: The Devil's Own Work

Kahn, Roger: Good Enough to Dream

Karr, Mary: The Liars' Club

Ketchum, Jack: Right to Life

King, Tabitha: Survivor

King, Tabitha: The Sky in the Water (unpublished)

Kingsolver, Barbara: The Poisonwood Bible

Krakauer, Jon: Into Thin Air

Lee, Harper: To Kill a Mockingbird

Lefkowitz, Bernard: Our Guys

Little, Bentley: The Ignored

Maclean, Norman: A River Runs Through It and Other Stories

Maugham, W. Somerset: The Moon and Sixpence

McCarthy, Cormac: Cities of the Plain

McCarthy, Cormac: The Crossing

McCourt, Frank: Angela's Ashes

McDermott, Alice: Charming Billy

McDevitt, Jack: Ancient Shores

McEwan, Ian: Enduring Love

McEwan, Ian: The Cement Garden

McMurtry, Larry: Dead Man's Walk

McMurtry, Larry, and Diana Ossana: Zeke and Ned

Miller, Walter M.: A Canticle for Leibowitz

Oates, Joyce Carol: Zombie

O'Brien, Tim: In the Lake of the Woods

O'Nan, Stewart: The Speed Queen

Ondaatje, Michael: The English Patient

Patterson, Richard North: No Safe Place

Price, Richard: Freedomland

Proulx, Annie: Close Range: Wyoming Stories

Proulx, Annie: The Shipping News

Quindlen, Anna: One True Thing

Rendell, Ruth: A Sight for Sore Eyes

Robinson, Frank M.: Waiting

Rowling, J. K.: Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Rowling, J. K.: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azakaban

Rowling, J. K.: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone

Russo, Richard: Mohawk

Schwartz, John Burnham: Reservation Road

Seth, Vikram: A Suitable Boy

Shaw, Irwin: The Young Lions Slotkin, Richard: The Crater Smith, Dinitia: The Illusionist Spencer, Scott: Men in Black Stegner, Wallace: Joe Hill Tartt, Donna: The Secret History Tyler, Anne: A Patchwork Planet Vonnegut, Kurt: Hocus Pocus Waugh, Evelyn: Brideshead Revisited Westlake, Donald E.: The Ax

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RETIREMENT RUMORS SWIRL ANEW FOR KING

Stephen King

(Dale McGarrigle)

Are reports of Stephen King's retirement from publishing greatly exaggerated?

Rumors of the Bangor author's being done with publishing novels have swirled about in recent years, often fed by statements from King himself.

Now comes a report that King is three novels away from not publishing any more books.

The headline on the Sept. 27 issue of Entertainment Weekly screams: "Stephen King Calls It Quits: America's Most Popular Author Tells Us Why He's Written His Last Book."

In an interview given grudgingly to promote his new novel, "From a Buick 8," King, 55, tells EW writer Chris Nashawaty, "I've killed enough of the world's trees."

King's current plans call for him to publish the last three volumes of his gunslinger fantasy series "The Dark Tower." Books five and six are already written, and he's hard at work on the final installment.

Why walk away at the time when critics are finally beginning to embrace his work?

"First of all, I'd never stop writing because I don't know what I'd do between 9 and 1 every day," he told EW. "But I'd stop publishing. I don't need the money."

Just file them away in a drawer?, Nashawaty asked.

"Why not?" King replied. "What's wrong with that? J.D. Salinger's been doing it for years!"

King also worries about not having anything new to say.

“From a Buick 8” is, he told EW, “as close as I want to get to repeating myself — it’s not ‘Christine,’ but it’s a novel about a car … I mean, experience tells us that every writer gets to a point where he starts to lose his power. And you have to ask yourself this: How much is enough? Yeah, I might have some more books I can write, but honest to God, I’ve published damn near 50 books now. That’s a lot more than Norman Mailer’s ever gonna publish, I guarantee you.”

Susan Moldow, his publisher at Scribner, is skeptical about King actually retiring.

“That rumor is older than Methusaleh, and yet he keeps writing and publishing,” she said in a phone interview Monday. “I’ve heard him describe a novel that I know he wants to write, that isn’t a part of the ‘Dark Tower’ series and that doesn’t seem to duplicate anything he’s done before. And since he’s described it to me, it would be harsh and cruel for him to withhold it from me.”

Even if he retires from publishing, King will remain busy. He will executive-produce and write a 13-hour ABC miniseries, “The Kingdom,” about a haunted hospital built on an ancient graveyard. It’s inspired by director Lars von Trier’s 1994 Danish miniseries. Also, he’s collaborating with John Mellencamp on a musical about the fatal relationship between a pair of feuding Indiana brothers.

Taken from “Bangor Daily News”, September 24, 2002

HOW DOES THE KING OF HORROR PLAN TO SPEND HIS RETIREMENT?

Stephen King

Devote more time to getting rammed by vans.

Trim front-yard hedges under alias of Richard Bachman.

Learn how to build ship in a bottle, make thousands of them.

Finally get around to cleaning out that back room where for years he'd been throwing shopping bags full of cash.

Spend more time terrifying family.

Walk slowly down basement steps, each step creaking ominously as he descends into the darkness, to grab the weed whacker.

Hit his boneless leg over and over with hammer.

Rid flower garden of woodchucks in most disturbing way possible.

Scream "No! No! Never again!" at typewriter for six hours a day.

Taken from the http://www.theonion.com/

CARRIE: THE BESTSELLER I THREW IN THE BIN

Stephen King

The Observer Extracted from On Writing September 17, 2000

My wife made a crucial difference during those two years I spent teaching at Hampden. If she had suggested that the time I spent writing stories was wasted time, I think a lot of the heart would have gone out of me.

Two unrelated ideas, adolescent cruelty and telekinesis, came together, and I had an idea. The story remained on the back burner for a while, and I had started my teaching career before I sat down one night to give it a shot.

I did three single-spaced pages of a first draft, then crumpled them up in disgust and threw them away.

The next night, when I came home from school, Tabby had the pages. She'd spied them while emptying my waste-basket, had shaken the cigarette ashes off the crumpled balls of paper, smoothed them out, and sat down to read them. She wanted me to go on with it, she said. She wanted to know the rest of the story. I told her I didn't know jack-shit about high school girls. She said she'd help me with that part. She was smiling in that severely cute way of hers. 'You've got something here,' she said. 'I really think you do.'

The manuscript of Carrie went off to Doubleday, where I had made a friend named William Thompson. I pretty much forgot about it and moved on with my life - teaching school, raising kids, loving my wife, getting drunk on Friday afternoons, and writing stories. My free period that semester was five, right after lunch. I usually spent it in the teachers' room, grading papers and wishing I could stretch out on the couch and take a nap. The intercom came on. I had a phone call. My wife, sounding out of breath, but deliriously happy, read me a telegram. Bill Thompson (who would later go on to discover a Mississippi scribbler named John Grisham) had sent it after trying to call and discovering the Kings no longer had a

phone. ‘Congratulations,’ it read. ‘Carrie officially a Doubleday book. Is $2,500 advance OK? The future lies ahead. Love, Bill.’

We spent the advance on a new car and I signed a teaching contract for the 1973-4 academic year. Carrie had fallen off my radar screen almost completely. Then one Sunday, I got a call from Bill Thompson at Doubleday.

‘Are you sitting down?’ Bill asked.

‘No,’ I said. Our phone hung on the kitchen wall.‘Do I need to?’ ‘You might,’ he said. ‘The paperback rights to Carrie went to Signet Books for $400,000.’

I was completely speechless.Bill asked if I was still there, kind of laughing as he said it. He knew I was.

When the conversation was over, I tried to call Tabby at her mother’s. Her youngest sister, Marcella, said Tab had already left. I walked back and forth through the apartment, shaking all over. At last I pulled on my shoes and walked downtown. The only store that was open on Bangor’s Main Street was the LaVerdiere’s Drug. I suddenly felt that I had to buy Tabby a Mother’s Day present, something wild and extravagant. I tried, but here’s one of life’s true facts: there’s nothing really wild and extravagant for sale at LaVerdiere’s. I did the best I could.

I got her a hairdryer.

When I got back home she was in the kitchen, unpacking the baby bags and singing along with the radio. I gave her the hairdryer. She looked at it as if she’d never seen one before. ‘What’s this for?’ she asked.

I took her by the shoulders. I told her about the paperback sale. She didn’t appear to understand. I told her again. Tabby looked over my shoulder at our shitty little four-room apartment, just as I had, and began to cry.

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THE EARLY YEARS

Stephen King

The Observer Extracted from On Writing September 17, 2000

I was born in 1947 and we didn't get our first television until 1958. The first thing I remember watching on it was Robot Monster, a film in which a guy dressed in an ape suit with a goldfish bowl on his head - Ro-Man, he was called - ran around trying to kill the survivors of a nuclear war. I felt this was art of quite a high nature. But TV came relatively late to the King household, and I'm glad. I am, when you stop to think of it, a member of a fairly select group: the final handful of American novelists who learned to read and write before they learned to eat a daily helping of video bullshit. This might not be important. On the other hand, if you're just starting out as a writer, you could do worse than strip your television's electric plug-wire, wrap a spike around it, and then stick it back into the wall. See what blows, and how far. Just an idea.

By the time I was 14 (and shaving twice a week whether I needed to or not), the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips impaled upon it. I replaced the nail with a spike and went on writing. By the time I was 16 I'd begun to get rejection slips with hand-written notes. The first of these hopeful notes was from Algis Budrys, then the editor of Fantasy and Science Fiction, who read a story of mine called The Night of the Tiger and wrote: 'This is good. Not for us, but good. You have talent. Submit again.' Those four brief sentences, scribbled by a fountain pen that left big ragged blotches in its wake, brightened the dismal winter of my 16th year.

My mother knew I wanted to be a writer, but she encouraged me to get a teacher's credential 'so you'll have something to fall back on'. 'You may want to get married, Stephen, and a garret by the Seine is only romantic if you're a bachelor,' she'd said once. 'It's no place to raise a family.'

I did as she suggested, entering the College of Education at the University of Maine and emerging four years later with a teacher's certificate… sort of like a Golden Retriever emerging from a pond with a dead duck in its jaws. It was dead, all right. I couldn't find a

teaching job and so went to work at New Franklin Laundry for wages not much higher than those I had been making at Worumbo Mills and Weaving four years before. I was keeping my family in a series of garrets which overlooked not the Seine but some of Bangor's less appetising streets.

I never saw personal laundry at New Franklin unless it was a 'fire order' being paid for by an insurance company (most fire orders consisted of clothes that looked OK, but smelled like barbecued monkeymeat). The greater part of what I loaded and pulled were motel sheets from Maine's coastal towns and table linen from Maine's coastal restaurants. The table linen was desperately nasty. When tourists go out to dinner in Maine, they usually want clams and lobster. Mostly lobster. By the time the tablecloths upon which these delicacies had been served reached me, they stank to high heaven and were often boiling with maggots.

I thought I'd get used to them in time, but I never did. The maggots were bad; the smell was even worse. 'Why are people such slobs?' I would wonder, loading feverish linens from Testa's of Bar Harbor into my machines. 'Why are people such fucking slobs?'

Hospital sheets and linens were even worse. There were often little extras in the hospital laundry; those loads were like nasty boxes of Cracker Jacks with weird prizes in them. I found a steel bedpan in one load and a pair of surgical shears in another (the bedpan was of no practical use, but the shears were a damned handy kitchen implement). Ernest 'Rocky' Rockwell, the guy I worked with, found $20 in a load from Eastern Maine Medical Center and punched out at noon to start drinking.

On one occasion I heard a strange clicking from inside one of the Washex. I hit the emergency stop button, thinking the goddam thing was stripping its gears or something. I opened the doors and hauled out a huge wad of dripping surgical tunics and green caps, soaking myself in the process. Below them, lying scattered across the colander-like inner sleeve of the middle pocket, was what looked like a complete set of human teeth. It crossed my mind that they would

make an interesting necklace, then I scooped them out and tossed them in the trash.

From a financial point of view, two kids were probably two too many for college grads working in a laundry and the second shift at Dunkin' Donuts. The only edge we had came courtesy of magazines like Dude, Cavalier, Adam and Swank - what my Uncle Oren used to call 'the titty books'. By 1972 they were showing quite a lot more than bare breasts, and fiction was on its way out, but I was lucky enough to ride the last wave.

I wrote after work; when we lived on Grove Street, which was close to the New Franklin, I would sometimes write a little on my lunch hour, too. I suppose that sounds almost impossibly Abe Lincoln, but it was no big deal - I was having fun. Those stories, grim as some of them were, served as brief escapes from the boss, Mr Brooks, and Harry the floor-man.

Harry had hooks instead of hands as a result of a tumble into the sheet-mangler during the Second World War (he was dusting the beams above the machine and fell off). A comedian at heart, he would sometimes duck into the bathroom and run water from the cold tap over one hook and water from the hot tap over the other. Then he'd sneak up behind you while you were loading laundry and lay the steel hooks on the back of your neck. Rocky and I spent a fair amount of time speculating on how Harry accomplished certain bathroom clean-up activities. 'Well,' Rocky said one day while we were drinking our lunch in his car, 'at least he doesn't need to wash his hands.'

There were times - especially in summer, while swallowing my afternoon salt-pill - when it occurred to me that I was simply repeating my mother's life. Usually this thought struck me as funny. But if I happened to be tired, or if there were extra bills to pay and no money to pay them with, it seemed awful. I'd think, 'This isn't the way our lives are supposed to be going.' Then I'd think, 'Half the world has the same idea.'

The stories I sold to the men's magazines between August 1970, when I got my $200 cheque for Graveyard Shift, and the winter of 1973-4, were just enough to create a rough sliding margin between us and the welfare office (my mother, a Republican all her life, had communicated her deep horror of 'going on the county' to me; Tabby [Tabitha, his wife] had some of that same horror).

I think we had a lot of happiness in those days, but we were scared a lot, too. We weren't much more than kids ourselves, and being friendly helped keep the mean reds away. We took care of ourselves and the kids and each other as best we could. Tabby wore her pink uniform out to Dunkin' Donuts and called the cops when the drunks who came in for coffee got obstreperous.

I washed motel sheets and kept writing one-reel horror movies.

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ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY - THE WEAPON

Stephen King

People keep saying “like a movie,” “like a book,” “like a war zone,” and I keep thinking: No, not at all like a movie or a book - that’s no computer-generated image, because you can’t see any wash or blur in the background. This is what it really looks like when an actual plane filled with actual human beings and loaded with jet fuel hits a skyscraper. This is the truth. Certainly, it seems to me that the idea of an enormous intelligence breakdown is ludicrous; again, this was not like a book, not like a movie; this was men armed with nothing but knives and box cutters relying on simple speed to keep people off balance long enough to accomplish their goals. In the case of the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, they failed. With the other three, however, they succeeded quite nicely. Cost of weaponry? Based on what we know now, less than $100.

This qualifies them as cut-rate, low-tech, stealth guerrillas flying well under the radar of American intelligence. We must realize this and grasp an even more difficult truth: although it is comforting to have a bogyman, and every child’s party needs a paper donkey to pin the tail on, this Osama bin Laden fellow may not have been the guy responsible. It wouldn’t hurt to remember that the boys who shot up Columbine High School planned to finish their day by hijacking a jetliner and flying it into - yes, that’s right - the World Trade Center. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris weren’t exactly rocket scientists, and the guys who did this didn’t have to be either. All you had to be was willing to die, and these guys were. It could happen again. And now that crazos the world over see that it’s possible to get 72 hours of uninterrupted air time on a budget, it will almost certainly happen again.

September 23, 2001

THE GENIUS OF “THE TELL-TALE HEART”

Stephen King

When I do public appearances, I'm often—no, always—asked what scares me. The answer is almost everything, from express elevators in very tall buildings to the idea of a zealot loose with a suitcase nuke in one of the great cities of the world. But if the question is refined to "What works of fiction have scared you?" two always leap immediately to mind: Lord of the Flies by William Golding and "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe.

Most people know that Poe invented the modern detective story (Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is in many ways the same detective as Poe's C. Auguste Dupin), but few are aware that he also created the first work of criminal sociopathy in "The Tell-Tale Heart," a story originally published in 1843. Many great crime writers of the twentieth century, from Jim Thompson and John D. MacDonald to Thomas Harris (who in Hannibal Lecter may have created the greatest sociopath of them all), are the children of Poe.

The details of the story are still gruesome enough to produce nightmares (the cutting up of the victim's body, for instance, or the old man's one dying shriek), but the terror that lingers—and the story's genius—lies in the superficially reasonable voice of the narrator. He is never named, and that is fitting, because we have no idea how he picked his victim, or what drove him to the crime. Oh, we know what he says: it was the old man's gruesomely veiled eye. But of course, Jeffrey Dahmer said he wanted to create zombies, and the Son of Sam at one point claimed his dog told him to do it. We understand, I think, that psychopaths offer such wacky motivations because they are as helpless as the rest of us to explain their terrible acts.

This is, above all, a persuasive story of lunacy, and Poe never offers any real explanations. Nor has to. The narrator's cheerful laughter ("A tub had caught…all [the blood]—ha! ha!") tells us all we need to know. Here is a creature who looks like a man but who really belongs to another species. That's scary. What elevates this story beyond merely scary and into the realm of genius, though, is that Poe foresaw the darkness of generations far beyond his own.

Ours, for instance.

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Stephen King was born in Portland, Maine, in 1947, the second son of Donald and Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King. He made his first professional short-story sale in 1967 to Startling Mystery Stories. In the fall of 1973, he began teaching high school English classes at Hampden Academy, the public high school in Hampden, Maine. Writing in the evenings and on the weekends, he continued to produce short stories and work on novels. In the spring of 1973, Doubleday & Company accepted the novel Carrie for publication, and the book's success provided him with the means to leave teaching and write full-time. He has since published more than forty books and become one of the world's most successful writers. Stephen lives in Maine and Florida with his wife, novelist Tabitha King. They are regular contributors to a number of charities, including many libraries, and have been honored locally for their philanthropic activities.

LET’S TALK ABOUT FEAR

Stephen King

Let’s talk, you and I. Let’s talk about fear.

The house is empty as I write this; a cold February rain is falling outside. It’s night. Sometimes when the wind blows the way it’s blowing now, we lose the power. But for now it’s on, and so let’s talk very honestly about fear. Let’s talk very rationally about moving to the rim of madness … and perhaps over the edge.

My name is Stephen King. I am a grown man with a wife and three children. I love them, and I believe that the feeling is reciprocated. My job is writing, and it’s a job I like very much. The stories—Carrie, ‘Salem’s Lot, and The Shining—have been successful enough to allow me to write full-time, which is an agreeable thing to be able to do. At this point in my life I seem to be reasonably healthy. In the last year I have been able to reduce my cigarette habit from the unfiltered brand I had smoked since I was eighteen to a low nicotine and tar brand, and I still hope to be able to quit completely. My family and I live in a pleasant house beside a relatively unpolluted lake in Maine; last fall I awoke one morning and saw a deer standing on the back lawn by the picnic table. We have a good life.

Still … let’s talk about fear. We won’t raise our voices and we won’t scream; we’ll talk rationally, you and I. We’ll talk about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness.

At night, when I go to bed I still am at pains to be sure that my legs are under the blankets after the lights go out. I’m not a child anymore but … I don’t like to sleep with one leg sticking out. Because if a cool hand ever reached out from under the bed and grasped my ankle, I might scream. Yes, I might scream to wake the dead. That sort of thing doesn’t happen, of course, and we all know that. In the stories that follow you will encounter all manner of night creatures; vampires, demon lovers, a thing that lives in the closet, all sorts of other terrors. None of them are real. The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle isn’t real. I know that, and I also know that if I’m

careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle.

Sometimes I speak before groups of people who are interested in writing or in literature, and before the question-and-answer period is over, someone always rises and asks this question: Why do you choose to write about such gruesome subjects?

I usually answer this with another question: Why do you assume that I have a choice?

Writing is a catch-as-catch-can sort of occupation. All of us seem to come equipped with filters on the floors of our minds, and all the filters have differing sizes and meshes. What catches in my filter may run right through yours. What catches in yours may pass through mine, no sweat. All of us seem to have a built-in obligation to sift through the sludge that gets caught in our respective mind-filters, and what we find there usually develops into some sort of sideline. The accountant may also be a photographer. The astronomer may collect coins. The schoolteacher may do gravestone rubbings in charcoal. The sludge caught in the mind's filter, the stuff that refuses to go through, frequently becomes each person's private obsession. In civilized society we have an unspoken agreement to call our obsessions "hobbies."

Sometimes the hobby can become a full-time job. The accountant may discover that he can make enough money to support his family taking pictures; the schoolteacher may become enough of an expert on grave rubbings to go on the lecture circuit. And there are some professions which begin as hobbies and remain hobbies even after the practitioner is able to earn his living by pursuing his hobby; but because "hobby" is such a bumpy, common-sounding little word, we also have an unspoken agreement that we will call our professional hobbies "the arts."

Painting. Sculpture. Composing. Singing. Acting. The playing of a musical instrument. Writing. Enough books have been written on these seven subjects alone to sink a fleet of luxury liners. And the

only thing we seem to be able to agree upon about them is this: that those who practice these arts honestly would continue to practice them even if they were not paid for their efforts; even if their efforts were criticized or even reviled; even on pain of imprisonment or death. To me, that seems to be a pretty fair definition of obsessional behavior. It applies to the plain hobbies as well as the fancy ones we call “the arts”; gun collectors sport bumper stickers reading YOU WILL TAKE MY GUN ONLY WHEN YOU PRY MY COLD DEAD FINGERS FROM IT, and in the suburbs of Boston, housewives who discovered political activism during the busing furor often sported similar stickers reading YOU’LL TAKE ME TO PRISON BEFORE YOU TAKE MY CHILDREN OUT OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD on the back bumpers of their station wagons. Similarly, if coin collecting were outlawed tomorrow, the astronomer very likely wouldn’t turn in his steel pennies and buffalo nickels; he’d wrap them carefully in plastic, sink them to the bottom of his toilet tank, and gloat over them after midnight.

We seem to be wandering away from the subject of fear, but we really haven’t wandered very far. The sludge that catches in the mesh of my drain is often the stuff of fear. My obsession is with the macabre. I didn’t write any of the stories which follow for money, although some of them were sold to magazines before they appeared here and I never once returned a check uncashed. I may be obsessional but I’m not crazy. Yet I repeat: I didn’t write them for money; I wrote them because it occurred to me to write them. I have a marketable obsession. There are madmen and madwomen in padded cells the world over who are not so lucky.

I am not a great artist, but I have always felt impelled to write. So each day I sift the sludge anew, going through the cast-off bits and pieces of observation, of memory, of speculation, trying to make something out of the stuff that didn’t go through the filter and down the drain into the subconscious.

Louis L’Amour, the Western writer, and I might both stand at the edge of a small pond in Colorado, and we both might have an idea at

exactly the same time. We might both feel the urge to sit down and try to work it out in words. His story might be about water rights in a dry season, my story would more likely be about some dreadful, hulking thing rising out of the still waters to carry off sheep … and horses … and finally people. Louis L'Amour's "obsession" centers on the history of the American West; I tend more toward things that slither by starlight. He writes Westerns; I write fearsomes. We're both a little bit nuts.

The arts are obsessional, and obsession is dangerous. It's like a knife in the mind. In some cases—Dylan Thomas comes to mind, and Ross Lockridge and Hart Crane and Sylvia Plath—the knife can turn savagely upon the person wielding it. Art is a localized illness, usually benign—creative people tend to live a long time—sometimes terribly malignant. You use the knife carefully, because you know it doesn't care who it cuts. And if you are wise you sift the sludge carefully … because some of that stuff may not be dead.

After the why do you write that stuff question has been disposed of, the companion question comes up: Why do people read that stuff? What makes it sell? This question carries a hidden assumption with it, and the assumption is that the story about fear, the story about horror, is an unhealthy taste. People who write me often begin by saying, "I suppose you will think I'm strange, but I really liked 'Salem's Lot" or "Probably I'm morbid, but I enjoyed every page of The Shining …"

I think the key to this may lie in a line of movie criticism from Newsweek magazine. The review was of a horror film, not a very good one, and it went something like this: "… a wonderful movie for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents." It's a good snappy line, but when you stop and think about it, it applies to all horror films and stories. The Night of the Living Dead, with its gruesome scenes of human cannibalism and matricide, was certainly a film for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents; and how about that little girl puking pea soup all over the priest in The Exorcist? Bram Stoker's Dracula, often a basis of comparison

for the modern horror story (as it should be; it is the first with unabashedly psycho-Freudian overtones), features a maniac named Renfield who gobbles flies, spiders, and finally a bird. He regurgitates the bird, having eaten it feathers and all. The novel also features the impalement—the ritual penetration, one could say—of a young and lovely female vampire and the murder of a baby and the baby's mother.

The great literature of the supernatural often contains the same "let's slow down and look at the accident" syndrome: Beowulf slaughtering Grendel's mother; the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" dismembering his cataract-stricken benefactor and putting the pieces under the floorboards; the Hobbit Sam's grim battle with Shelob the spider in the final book of Tolkien's Rings trilogy.

There will be some who will object strenuously to this line of thought, saying that Henry James is not showing us a car accident in The Turn of the Screw; they will claim that Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories of the macabre, such as "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil," are also rather more tasteful than Dracula. It's a nonsensical idea. They are still showing us the car accident; the bodies have been removed but we can still see the twisted wreckage and observe the blood on the upholstery. In some ways the delicacy, the lack of melodrama, the low and studied tone of rationality that pervades a story like "The Minister's Black Veil" is even more terrible than Lovecraft's batrachian monstrosities or the auto-da-fe of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum."

The fact is—and most of us know this in our hearts—that very few of us can forgo an uneasy peek at the wreckage bracketed by police cars and road flares on the turnpike at night. Senior citizens pick up the paper in the morning and immediately turn to the obituary column so they can see who they outlived. All of us are uneasily transfixed for a moment when we hear that a Dan Blocker has died, a Freddie Prinze, a Janis Joplin. We feel terror mixed with an odd sort of glee when we hear Paul Harvey on the radio telling us that a woman walked into a propeller blade during a rain squall at a small country

airport or that a man in a giant industrial blender was vaporized immediately when a co-worker stumbled against the controls. No need to belabor the obvious; life is full of horrors small and large, but because the small ones are the ones we can comprehend, they are the ones that smack home with all the force of mortality.

Our interest in these pocket horrors is undeniable, but so is our own revulsion. The two of them mix uneasily, and the by-product of the mix seems to be guilt … a guilt which seems not much different from the guilt that used to accompany sexual awakening.

It is not my business to tell you not to feel guilty, any more than it is my business to justify my novels or the short stories which follow. But an interesting parallel between sex and fear can be observed. As we become capable of having sexual relationships, our interest in those relationships awakens; the interest, unless perverted somehow, tends naturally toward copulation and the continuance of the species. As we become aware of our own unavoidable termination, we become aware of the fear-emotion. And I think that, as copulation tends toward self-preservation, all fear tends toward a comprehension of the final ending.

There is an old fable about seven blind men who grabbed seven different parts of an elephant. One of them thought he had a snake, one of them thought he had a giant palm leaf, one of them thought he was touching a stone pillar. When they got together, they decided they had an elephant.

Fear is the emotion that makes us blind. How many things are we afraid of? We're afraid to turn off the lights when our hands are wet. We're afraid to stick a knife into the toaster to get the stuck English muffin without unplugging it first. We're afraid of what the doctor may tell us when the physical exam is over; when the airplane suddenly takes a great unearthly lurch in midair. We're afraid that the oil may run out, that the good air will run out, the good water, the good life. When the daughter promised to be in by eleven and it's now quarter past twelve and sleet is spatting against the window like dry sand, we sit and pretend to watch Johnny Carson and look occasionally at

the mute telephone and we feel the emotion that makes us blind, the emotion that makes a stealthy ruin of the thinking process.

The infant is a fearless creature only until the first time the mother isn't there to pop the nipple into his mouth when he cries. The toddler quickly discovers the blunt and painful truths of the slamming door, the hot burner, the fever that goes with the croup or the measles. Children learn fear quickly; they pick it up off the mother or father's face when the parent comes into the bathroom and sees them with the bottle of pills or the safety razor.

Fear makes us blind, and we touch each fear with all the avid curiosity of self-interest, trying to make a whole out of a hundred parts, like the blind men with their elephant.

We sense the shape. Children grasp it easily, forget it, and relearn it as adults. The shape is there, and most of us come to realize what it is sooner or later: it is the shape of a body under a sheet. All our fears add up to one great fear, all our fears are part of that great fear —an arm, a leg, a finger, an ear. We're afraid of the body under the sheet. It's our body. And the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths.

The field has never been highly regarded; for a long time the only friends that Poe and Lovecraft had were the French, who have somehow come to an arrangement with both sex and death, an arrangement that Poe and Lovecraft's fellow Americans certainly had no patience with. The Americans were busy building railroads, and Poe and Lovecraft died broke. Tolkien's Middle-Earth fantasy went kicking around for twenty years before it became an aboveground success, and Kurt Vonnegut, whose books so often deal with the death-rehearsal idea, has faced a steady wind of criticism, much of it mounting to hysterical pitch.

It may be because the horror writer always brings bad news: you're going to die, he says; he's telling you to never mind Oral Roberts and his "something good is going to happen to you" because something bad is also going to happen to you, and it may be cancer

and it may be a stroke, and it may be a car accident, but it's going to happen. And he takes your hand and he enfolds it in his own, and he takes you into the room and he puts your hands on the shape under the sheet… and tells you to touch it here … here … and here …

Of course, the subjects of death and fear are not the horror writer's exclusive province. Plenty of so-called "mainstream" writers have dealt with these themes, and in a variety of different ways—from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment to Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? to Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer stories. Fear has always been big. Death has always been big. They are two of the human constants. But only the writer of horror and the supernatural gives the reader such an opportunity for total identification and catharsis. Those working in the genre with even the faintest understanding of what they are doing know that the entire field of horror and the supernatural is a kind of filter screen between the conscious and the subconscious; horror fiction is like a central subway station in the human psyche between the blue line of what we can safely internalize and the red line of what we need to get rid of in some way or another.

When you read horror, you don't really believe what you read. You don't believe in vampires, werewolves, trucks that suddenly start up and drive themselves. The horrors that we all do believe in are of the sort that Dostoyevsky and Albee and MacDonald write about: hate, alienation, growing lovelessly old, tottering out into a hostile world on the unsteady legs of adolescence. We are, in our real everyday worlds, often like the masks of Comedy and Tragedy, grinning on the outside, grimacing on the inside. There's a central switching point somewhere inside, a transformer, maybe, where the wires leading from those two masks connect. And that is the place where the horror story so often hits home.

The horror-story writer is not so different from the Welsh sin-eater, who was supposed to take upon himself the sins of the dear departed by partaking of the dear departed's food. The tale of monstrosity and terror is a basket loosely packed with phobias; when

the writer passes by, you take one of his imaginary horrors out of the basket and put one of your real ones in—at least for a time.

Back in the 1950s there was a tremendous surge of giant bug movies—Them!, The Beginning of the End, The Deadly Mantis, and so on. Almost without fail, as the movie progressed, we found out that these gigantic, ugly mutants were the results of A-bomb tests in New Mexico or on deserted Pacific atolls (and in the more recent Horror of Party Beach, which might have been subtitled Beach Blanket Armageddon; the culprit was nuclear-reactor waste). Taken together, the big-bug movies form an undeniable pattern, an uneasy gestalt of a whole country's terror of the new age that the Manhattan Project had rung in. Later in the fifties there was a cycle of "teen-age" horror movies, beginning with I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf and culminating with such epics as Teen-Agers from Outer Space and The Blob, in which a beardless Steve McQueen battled a sort of Jell-O mutant with the help of his teen-aged friends. In an age when every weekly magazine contained at least one article on the rising tide of juvenile delinquency, the teen-ager fright films expressed a whole country's uneasiness with the youth revolution even then brewing; when you saw Michael Landon turn into a werewolf in a high-school letter jacket, a connection happened between the fantasy on the screen and your own floating anxieties about the nerd in the hot rod that your daughter was dating. To the teen-agers themselves (I was one of them and speak from experience), the monsters spawned in the leased American-International studios gave them a chance to see someone even uglier than they felt themselves to be; what were a few pimples compared to the shambling thing that used to be a high-school kid in I Was a Teen-Age Frankenstein? This same cycle also expressed the teen-agers' own feeling that they were being unfairly put upon and put down by their elders, that their parents just "did not understand." The movies are formulaic (as so much of horror fiction is, written or filmed), and what the formula expresses most clearly is a whole generation's paranoia—a paranoia no doubt caused in part by all the articles their parents were reading. In the films, some terrible, warty horror is menacing Elmville. The kids know, because the flying saucer landed

near lovers' lane. In the first reel, the warty horror kills an old man in a pickup truck (the old man was unfailingly played by Elisha Cook, Jr.). In the next three reels, the kids try to convince their elders that the warty horror is indeed slinking around. "Get outta here before I lock you all up for violating the curfew!" Elmville's police chief growls just before the monster slithers down Main Street, laying waste in all directions. In the end it is the quick-thinking kids who put an end to the warty horror, and then go off to the local hangout to suck up chocolate malteds and jitterbug to some forgettable tune as the end credits run.

That's three separate opportunities for catharsis in one cycle of movies—not bad for a bunch of low-budget epics that were usually done in under ten days. It didn't happen because the writers and producers and directors of those films wanted it to happen; it happened because the horror tale lives most naturally at that connection point between the conscious and the subconscious, the place where both image and allegory occurs most naturally and with the most devastating effect. There is a direct line of evolution between I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf and Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange and between Teen-Age Monster and Brian De Palma's film Carrie.

Great horror fiction is almost always allegorical; sometimes the allegory is intended, as in Animal Farm and 1984, and sometimes it just happens—J. R. R. Tolkien swore up and down that the Dark Lord of Mordor was not Hitler in fantasy dress, but the theses and term papers to just that effect go on and on … maybe because, as Bob Dylan says, when you got a lot of knives and forks, you gotta cut something.

The works of Edward Albee, of Steinbeck, Camus, Faulkner—they deal with fear and death, sometimes with horror, but usually these mainstream writers deal with it in a more normal, real-life way. Their work is set in the frame of a rational world; they are stories that "could happen." They are on that subway line that runs through the external world. There are other writers—James Joyce, Faulkner

again, poets such as T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton—whose work is set in the land of the symbolic unconsciousness. They are on the subway line running into the internal landscape. But the horror writer is almost always at the terminal joining the two, at least if he is on the mark. When he is at his best we often have that weird sensation of being not quite asleep or awake, when time stretches and skews, when we can hear voices but cannot make out the words or the intent, when the dream seems real and the reality dreamlike.

That is a strange and wonderful terminal. Hill House is there, in that place where the trains run both ways, with its doors that swing sensibly shut; the woman in the room with the yellow wallpaper is there, crawling along the floor with her head pressed against that faint grease mark; the barrow-wights that menaced Frodo and Sam are there; and Pickman's model; the wendigo; Norman Bates and his terrible mother. No waking or dreaming in this terminal, but only the voice of the writer, low and rational, talking about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness. He's telling you that you want to see the car accident, and yes, he's right—you do. There's a dead voice on the phone … something behind the walls of the old house that sounds bigger than a rat … movement at the foot of the cellar stairs. He wants you to see all of those things, and more; he wants you to put your hands on the shape under the sheet. And you want to put your hands there. Yes.

These are some of the things I feel that the horror story does, but I am firmly convinced that it must do one more thing, this above all others: It must tell a tale that holds the reader or the listener spellbound for a little while, lost in a world that never was, never could be. It must be like the wedding guest that stoppeth one of three. All my life as a writer I have been committed to the idea that in fiction the story value holds dominance over every other facet of the writer's craft; characterization, theme, mood, none of those things is anything if the story is dull. And if the story does hold you, all else can be forgiven. My favorite line to that effect came from the pen of Edgar Rice Burroughs, no one's candidate for Great World Writer,

but a man who understood story values completely. On page one of The Land That Time Forgot, the narrator finds a manuscript in a bottle; the rest of the novel is the presentation of that manuscript. The narrator says, “Read one page, and I will be forgotten.” It’s a pledge that Burroughs makes good on—many writers with talents greater than his have not.

In fine, gentle reader, here is a truth that makes the strongest writer gnash his teeth: with the exception of three small groups of people, no one reads a writer’s preface. The exceptions are: one, the writer’s close family (usually his wife and his mother); two, the writer’s accredited representative (and the editorial people and assorted munchkins), whose chief interest is to find out if anyone has been libeled in the course of the writer’s wanderings; and three, those people who have had a hand in helping the writer on his way. These are the people who want to know whether or not the writer’s head has gotten so big that he has managed to forget that he didn’t do it by himself.

Other readers are apt to feel, with perfect justification, that the author’s preface is a gross imposition, a multi-page commercial for himself, even more offensive than the cigarette ads that have proliferated in the center section of the paperback books. Most readers come to see the show, not to watch the stage manager take bows in front of the footlights. Again, with perfect justification.

I’m leaving now. The show is going to start soon. We’re going to go into that room and touch the shape under the sheet. But before I leave, I want to take just two or three more minutes of your time to thank some people from each of the three groups above—and from a fourth. Bear with me as I say a few thank-you’s:

To my wife, Tabitha, my best and most trenchant critic. When she feels the work is good, she says so; when she feels I’ve put my foot in it, she sets me on my ass as kindly and lovingly as possible. To my kids, Naomi, Joe, and Owen, who have been very understanding about their father’s peculiar doings in the downstairs room. And to my mother, who died in 1973, and to whom this book is dedicated.

Her encouragement was steady and unwavering, she always seemed able to find forty or fifty cents for the obligatory stamped, self-addressed return envelope, and no one—including myself—was more pleased than she when I “broke through.”

In that second group, particular thanks are due my editor, William G. Thompson of Doubleday & Company, who has worked with me patiently, who has suffered my daily phone calls with constant good cheer, and who showed kindness to a young writer with no credentials some years ago, and who has stuck with that writer since then.

In the third group are the people who first bought my work: Mr. Robert A. W. Lowndes, who purchased the first two stories I ever sold; Mr. Douglas Allen and Mr. Nye Willden of the Dugent Publishing Corporation, who bought so many of the ones that followed for Cavalier and Gent, back in the scuffling days when the checks sometimes came just in time to avoid what the power companies euphemistically call “an interruption in service”; to Elaine Geiger and Herbert Schnall and Carolyn Stromberg of the New American Library; to Gerard Van der Leun of Penthouse and Harris Deinstfrey of Cosmopolitan. Thanks to all of you.

There’s one final group that I’d like to thank, and that is each and every reader who ever unlimbered his or her wallet to buy something that I wrote. In a great many ways, this is your book because it sure never would have happened without you. So thanks.

Where I am, it’s still dark and raining. We’ve got a fine night for it. There’s something I want to show you, something I want you to touch. It’s in a room not far from here—in fact, it’s almost as close as the next page.

Shall we go?

Bridgton, Maine

February 27, 1977

MY LITTLE SERRATED SECURITY BLANKET

Stephen King

From: Outside Magazine, December 1995

The blacksmith of horror rejoices in the potentialities of an ice ax

This is not the sort of gadget to inspire nursery rhymes. I look at the DMM Predator ice ax and I think of murder. I take it out into the garage, find a piece of scrap wood, and drive the pick end into the grain, trying not to envision how easily this same tip could penetrate the skull and skewer the soft gray matter beneath. It makes a solid, satisfying chuk. This, I believe, makes the electroshock devices, the cans of pepper gas, and the ninja throwing stars in the pawnshop window look minor league. You could do some big damage with this. Real big damage.

The pick end is sharpened along the top and pointed at the tip. It is serrated beneath, presumably to keep it from slipping out once it's been plunged in, and when I examine the holes in the wood, I see that they are not the punch-points I expected—like a child's oversize, drawn periods, but lozenge-shaped— —like cough drops.

Looking at these holes, I am helpless not to imagine them peppered over the human body. I keep seeing the ax swung at the gut, the throat, the forehead. I keep seeing it buried all the way to its 11th serration in the nape of the neck or the orbit of an eyeball.

Boy, I think, you are one sick American.

Or maybe I'm not. Like many tools—hammers, screwdrivers, drills, augers, and chisels come to mind—the Predator ice ax has a certain gallows fascination, a bleak beauty with a sternness so extreme that it seems almost neurotic. But study it and you see that there's no part of the ax that doesn't work, from the rough-hewn butt end with its wrist-loop strap to the arched line of the handle to its wicked, burrowing tip. I'm not sure what the thing on the other end is for, the piece of metal that looks like Paul Bunyan's bottle opener, but I'm sure it has a clear purpose, which those dedicated enough—and

mad enough—to put their lives at risk climbing mountains and ice falls readily understand and utilize.

This brings me to a new conclusion: What I really feel when I hold this in my hand isn't so much the possibility of murder as the gravity of mortal things. It speaks to me of the vulnerability of human flesh, but also of the resilience and determination of the human mind: Lying on my desk, it whispers, "If you need me, I'll be there. If you need to hang all 215 pounds of you off me, I won't let go—if, that is, you plant me deep."

I have no plans to go climbing; I get vertigo when I ascend to the top of a stepladder. But I keep the Predator under my bed. Why not? One never knows when one might need a good tool, the sort of thing that might make the difference between life and death.

Among Stephen King's works of fright are The Shining, Tommyknockers, The Dark Half and Dolores Claiborne. His 29th and most recent novel is Rose Madder.

NOTES FROM NIGHTMARES AND DREAMSCAPES

Stephen King

Not long after I published Skeleton Crew, my previous book of short stories, I spoke to a reader who told me how much she had liked it. She had been able to ration the stories out, she said—one a night for about three weeks. “I skipped the notes at the end, though,” she said, keeping a close eye on me as she said it (I think she believed I might leap upon her in my anger at this terrible affront). “I’m one of those people who don’t want to know how the magician does his tricks.”

I simply nodded and told her that was her perfect right, not wanting to get into a long, involved discussion on the subject when I had errands to run, but I have no errands this morning, and I want to make two things perfectly clear, as our old pal from San Clemente used to say. First, I don’t care if you read the notes that follow or not. It’s your book, and you can wear it on your head in a horserace for all of me. Second, I am not a magician and these are not tricks.

That’s not to say there isn’t magic involved in writing; I happen to believe that there is, and that it twines around fiction with particular luxuriance. The paradox is this: magicians don’t have anything to do with magic, as most of them will readily admit. Their undeniable wonders—doves from handkerchiefs, coins from empty pitchers, silk scarves from empty hands—are achieved through exhaustive practice and well-tested misdirections and sleights of hand. Their talk of “ancient secrets of the Orient” and “the forgotten lore of Atlantis” is so much patter. I suspect that, by and large, stage-magicians would deeply identify with the old joke about the out-of-towner who asks the New York beatnik how to get to Carnegie Hall. “Practice, man, practice,” the beatnik replies.

All that goes for writers, too. After twenty years of writing popular fiction and being dismissed by the more intellectual critics as a hack (the intellectual’s definition of a hack seems to be “an artist whose work is appreciated by too many people”), I will gladly testify that craft is terribly important, that the often tiresome process of draft, redraft, and then draft again is necessary to produce good work, and

that hard work is the only acceptable practice for those of us who have some talent but little or no genius.

Still, there is magic in this job, and it comes most frequently at that instant when a story pops into a writer's head, usually as a fragment but sometimes as a complete thing (and having that happen is a little like being hit by a tactical nuke). The writer can later relate where he was when that happened, and what the elements were that combined to give him his idea, but the idea itself is a new thing, a sum greater than its parts, something that is created from nothing. It is, to paraphrase Marianne Moore, a real toad in an imaginary garden. So you need not fear to read the notes that follow on the grounds that I will spoil the magic by telling you how the tricks work. There are no tricks to real magic; when it comes to real magic, there is only history.

It is possible to spoil a story which hasn't been read yet, however, and so if you're one of those people (one of those awful people) who feel a compulsion to read the last thing in a book first, like a willful child who is determined to eat his or her chocolate pudding before touching the meatloaf, I'm going to invite you to get the hell out of here, lest you suffer what may be the worst of all curses: disenchantment. For the rest of you, here is a whirlwind tour of how some of the stories in Nightmares and Dreamscapes happened to happen.

"Dolan's Cadillac"—I'd guess the train of thought which led to this story is pretty obvious. I was idling my way through one of those seemingly endless road-repair sites where you breathe a lot of dust, tar, and exhaust and sit looking at the ass end of the same station wagon and the same I BRAKE FOR ANIMALS bumper sticker for what feels like about nine years … only the car in front of me that day was a big green Cadillac Sedan DeVille. As we inched our way past an excavation where huge cylinders of pipe were being laid, I remember thinking, Even a car as big as that Cadillac would fit in there. A moment later I had the idea of "Dolan's Cadillac" firmly in

place, fully developed, and none of the narrative elements ever changed so much as an iota.

That is not to say the story was an easy birth; it most definitely was not. I have never been so daunted—so nearly overwhelmed, in fact—by technical details. Now I'll give you what the Reader's Digest likes to call A Personal Glimpse: although I like to think of myself as a literary version of James Brown (the self-styled "Hardest-Working Man in Show Business"), I am an extremely lazy sod when it comes to research and technical details. I have been twigged again and again by readers and critics (most accurately and humiliatingly by Avram Davidson, who writes for the Chicago Tribune and Fantasy and Science Fiction magazine) for my lapses in these areas. When writing "Dolan's Cadillac," I came to realize that this time I could not simply fudge my way through, because the story's entire underpinning depended on various scientific details, mathematical formulae, and the postulates of physics.

If I had discovered this unpalatable truth sooner—before I had roughly 15,000 words already invested in the story of Dolan, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's Poe-esque husband, that is—I undoubtedly would have consigned "Dolan's Cadillac" to The Department of Unfinished Stories. But I didn't discover it sooner, I didn't want to stop, and so I did the only thing I could think of: I called my big brother and asked for help.

Dave King is what we New Englanders call "a piece of work," a child prodigy with a tested IQ of over 150 (you will find reflections of Dave in Bow-wow Fornoy's genius brother in "The End of the Whole Mess") who went through school as if on a rocket-sled, finishing college at eighteen and going right to work as a high-school math teacher at Brunswick High. Many of his remedial algebra students were older than he was. Dave was the youngest man ever to be elected Town Selectman in the state of Maine, and was a Town Manager at the age of twenty-five or so. He is a genuine polymath, a man who knows something about just about everything.

I explained my problems to my brother over the telephone. A week later I received a manila envelope from him and opened it with a sinking heart. I was sure he'd sent me the information I needed, but I was equally sure it would do me no good; my brother's handwriting is absolutely awful.

To my delight, I found a videocassette. When I plugged it in, I saw Dave sitting at a table piled high with dirt. Using several toy Matchbox cars, he explained everything I needed to know, including that wonderfully ominous stuff about the arc of descent. Dave also told me that my protagonist would have to use highway equipment in order to bury Dolan's Cadillac (in the original story he did it by hand), and explained exactly how to jump-start the big machines your local Highway Department is apt to leave around at various road-repair sites. This information was extremely good … a little too good, in fact. I changed just enough so that if anyone tries it according to the recipe in the story, nothing will happen.

One last point about this story: when it was finished, I hated it. Absolutely loathed it. It was never published in a magazine; it simply went into one of the cardboard boxes of Bad Old Stuff I keep in the hallway behind my office. A few years later, Herb Yellin, who publishes gorgeous limited editions in his function as head of Lord John Press, wrote and asked if he could do a limited edition of one of my short stories, preferably an unpublished one. Because I love his books, which are small, beautifully made, and often extremely eccentric, I went out into what I think of as the Hallway of Doom and hunted through my boxes to see if there was anything salvageable.

I came across "Dolan's Cadillac," and once again time had done its work—it read a lot better than I remembered, and when I sent it to Herb, he agreed enthusiastically. I made further revisions and it was published in a small Lord John Press edition of about five hundred copies. I have revised it again for its appearance here, and have changed my opinion of it enough to have put it in the lead-off position. If nothing else, it's a kind of archetypal horror story, with its mad narrator and its account of a premature burial in the desert. But

this particular story really isn't mine anymore; it belongs to Dave King and Herb Yellin. Thanks, guys.

"Suffer the Little Children"—This story is from the same period as most of the stories in Night Shift, and was originally published in Cavalier, as were most of the stories in that 1978 collection. It was left out because my editor, Bill Thompson, felt the book was getting "unwieldy"—this is the way editors sometimes tell writers that they have to cut a little before the price of the book soars out of sight. I voted to cut a story called "Gray Matter" from Night Shift. Bill voted to cut "Suffer the Little Children." I deferred to his judgement, and read the story over carefully before deciding to include it here. I like it quite a lot—it feels a little bit like the Bradbury of the late forties and early fifties to me, the fiendish Bradbury who revelled in killer babies, renegade undertakers, and tales only a Crypt-Keeper could love. Put another way, "Suffer the Little Children" is a ghastly sick-joke with no redeeming social merit whatever. I like that in a story.

"The Night Flier"—Sometimes a supporting character in a novel catches a writer's attention and refuses to go away, insisting he has more to say and do. Richard Dees, the protagonist of "The Night Flier," is such a character. He originally appeared in The Dead Zone (1979), where he offers Johnny Smith, the doomed hero of that novel, a job as a psychic on his awful paper, the supermarket tabloid Inside View. Johnny throws him off the porch of his dad's house, and that was supposed to be the end of him. Yet here he is again.

Like most of my stories, "The Night Flier" started off as nothing but a lark—a vampire with a private pilot's license, how amusingly modrun—but it grew as Dees grew. I rarely understand my characters, any more than I understand the lives and hearts of the real people I meet every day, but I find that it's sometimes possible to plot them, as a cartographer plots his or her maps. As I worked on "The Night Flier," I began to glimpse a man of profound alienation, a man who seemed to somehow sum up some of the most terrible and confusing things about our supposedly open society in the last quarter of the century. Dees is the essential unbeliever, and his confrontation with the Night

Flier at the end of the story recalls that George Seferis line I used in ‘Salem’s Lot—the one about the column of truth having a hole in it. In these latter days of the twentieth century, that seems to be all too true, and “The Night Flier” is mostly about one man’s discovery of that hole.

“Popsy”—Is this little boy’s grandfather the same creature that demands Richard Dees open his camera and expose his film at the conclusion of “The Night Flier”? You know, I rather think he is.

“It Grows On You”—A version of this story was originally published in a University of Maine literary magazine called Marshroots back in the early seventies, but the version in this book is almost entirely different. As I read through the original story, I began to realize that these old men were actually the survivors of the debacle described in Needful Things. That novel is a black comedy about greed and obsession; this is a more serious story about secrets and sickness. It seems a fitting epilogue to the novel… and it was great to glimpse some of my old Castle Rock friends one last time.

“Dedication”—For years, since I first met and was appalled by a now-dead famous writer, whom I will not name here, I have been troubled by the question of why some enormously talented people turn out to be such utter shits in person—woman-pawing sexists, racists, sneering elitists, or cruel practical jokers. I’m not saying that most talented or famous people are this way, but I have met enough who are—including that one undeniably great writer—to wonder why. This story was written as an effort to answer that question to my own satisfaction. The effort failed, but I was at least able to articulate my own unease, and in this case, that seemed enough.

It’s not a very politically correct story, and I think a lot of readers—the ones who want to be scared by the same comfy old bogies and funhouse demons—are going to be outraged by it. I hope so; I’ve been doing this job for quite awhile now, but I like to think I’m not quite ready for the old rocking chair yet. The stories in Nightmares and Dreamscapes are, for the most part, the sort that critics categorize (and then all too often dismiss, alas) as horror stories,

and the horror story is supposed to be a kind of evil-tempered junkyard dog that will bite you if you get too close. This one bites, I think. Am I going to apologize for that? Do you think I should? Isn't that—the risk of being bitten—one of the reasons you picked this book up in the first place? I think so. And if you get thinking of me as your kindly old Uncle Stevie, a sort of end-of-the-century Rod Serling, I will try even harder to bite you. To put it another way, I want you to be a little bit afraid every time you step into my parlor. I want you unsure about how far I'll go, or what I may do next.

Now that I've said all that, just let me add that if I really thought "Dedication" needed to be defended, I never would have offered it for publication in the first place. A story that can't serve as its own defense lawyer doesn't deserve to be published. It's Martha Rosewall, the humble maid, who wins this battle, not Peter Jefferies, the big-shot writer, and that should tell the reader all he or she needs to know about where my sympathies lie.

Oh, one other thing. It seems to me now that this story, originally published in 1985, was a trial cut for a novel called Dolores Claiborne (1992).

"The Moving Finger"—My favorite sort of short story has always been the kind where things happen just because they happen. In novels and movies (save for movies starring fellows like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger), you are supposed to explain why things happen. Let me tell you something, friends and neighbors: I hate explaining why things happen, and my efforts in that direction (such as the doctored LSD and resultant DNA changes which create Charlie McGee's pyrokinetic talents in Firestarter) aren't very good. But real life very rarely has what movie producers are this year calling "a motivation through-line"—have you noticed that? I don't know about you, but nobody ever issued me an instruction manual; I'm just muddling along as best I can, knowing I'm never going to get out of it alive but trying not to fuck up too badly in the meantime.

In short stories, the author is sometimes still allowed to say, “This happened. Don’t ask me why.” The story of poor Howard Mitla is that sort of tale, and it seems to me that his efforts to deal with the finger that pokes out of his bathroom drain during a quiz-show form a perfectly valid metaphor for how we cope with the nasty surprises life holds in store for all of us: the tumors, the accidents, the occasional nightmarish coincidence. It is the unique province of the fantasy story to be able to answer the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” by replying, “Feh—don’t ask.” In a tale of fantasy, this gloomy answer actually seems to satisfy us. In the end, it may be the genre’s chief moral asset: at its best, it can open a window (or a confessional screen) on the existential aspects of our mortal lives. It ain’t perpetual motion … but it ain’t bad, either.

“You Know They Got a Hell of a Band”—There are at least two stories in this book about what the lead female character here thinks of as “the peculiar little town.” This is one; “Rainy Season” is the other. There will be readers who may think I’ve visited “the peculiar little town” once or twice too often, and some may note similarities between these two pieces and an earlier story of mine, “Children of the Corn.” There are similarities, but does that mean “Band” and “Season” are lapses into self-imitation? It’s a delicate question, and one each reader must answer for him-or herself, but my answer is no (of course it is, what else am I gonna say?).

There’s a big difference, it seems to me, between working in traditional forms and self-imitation. Take the blues, for instance. There are really only two classic guitar chord-progressions for the blues, and those two progressions are essentially the same. Now, answer me this—just because John Lee Hooker plays almost everything he ever wrote in the key of E or the key of A, does that mean he’s running on autopilot, doing the same thing over and over again? Plenty of John Lee Hooker fans (not to mention fans of Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, Furry Lewis, and all the other greats) would say it doesn’t. It’s not the key you play it in, these blues aficionados would say; it’s the soul you sing it with.

Same thing here. There are certain horror-tale archetypes which stand out with the authority of mesas in the desert. The haunted-house story; the return-from-the-grave story; the peculiar-little-town story. It's not really about what it's about, if you can dig that; this is, by and large, the literature of the nerve-endings and the muscle-receptors, and as such, it's really about what you feel. What I felt here—the impetus for the story—was how authentically creepy it is that so many rockers have died young, or under nasty circumstances; it's an actuarial expert's nightmare. Many younger fans view the high mortality rate as romantic, but when you've boogied your way from The Platters to Ice T, as I have, you start to see a darker side, a crawling kingsnake side. That's what I've tried to express here, although I don't think the story really starts to move and groove and creep and crawl until the last six or eight pages.

"Home Delivery"—This is probably the only story in the book which was written to order. John Skipp and Craig Spector (The Light at the End, The Bridge, plus several other good horror splatterpunk-ish novels) came up with the idea of an anthology of stories exploring what things would be like if George Romero's zombies from his Dead trilogy (Night of, Dawn of, Day of) took over the world. The concept fired off in my imagination like a Roman candle, and this story, set off the coast of Maine, was the result.

"My Pretty Pony"—In the early eighties, Richard Bachman was struggling to write a novel called (naturally enough, I suppose) My Pretty Pony. The novel was about an independent hit-man named Clive Banning who is hired to put together a string of like-minded psychopaths and kill a number of powerful crime figures at a wedding. Banning and his string succeed, turning the wedding into a bloodbath, and are then double-crossed by their employers, who begin picking them off, one by one. The novel was to chronicle Banning's efforts to escape the cataclysm he had induced.

The book was a bad piece of work, born in an unhappy time of my life when a lot of things which had been working pretty well for me up until then suddenly fell over with a resounding crash. Richard

Bachman died during this period, leaving two fragments behind: an almost complete novel called Machine's Way under his pseudonym, George Stark, and six chapters of My Pretty Pony. As Richard's literary executor, I worked Machine's Way up into a novel called The Dark Half and published it under my own name (I did acknowledge Bachman, however). My Pretty Pony I junked … except for a brief flashback in which Banning, while waiting to begin his assault on the wedding party, remembers how his grandfather instructed him on the plastic nature of time. Finding that flashback—marvellously complete, almost a short story as it stood—was like finding a rose growing in a junkheap. I plucked it, and I did so with great gratitude. It turned out to be one of the few good things I wrote during an extremely bad year.

"My Pretty Pony" was originally published in an overpriced (and overdesigned, in my humble opinion) edition produced by the Whitney Museum. It was later issued in a slightly more accessible (but still overpriced and overdesigned, in my humble opinion) edition by Alfred A. Knopf. And here, I am pleased to see it, polished and slightly clarified, as it probably should have been in the first place—just another short story, a little better than some, not so good as others.

"Sorry, Right Number"—Remember how I started off, about a billion pages ago, talking about Ripley's Believe It or Not? Well, "Sorry, Right Number" almost belongs in it. The idea occurred to me as a "teleplaylet" one night on my way home from buying a pair of shoes. It came as a "visual," I suppose, because the telecast of a film plays such a central part. I wrote it, pretty much as it is presented here, in two sittings. My West Coast agent—the one who does film deals—had it by the end of the week. Early the following week, Steven Spielberg read it for Amazing Stories, a TV series which he then had in production (but which had not yet begun to air).

Spielberg rejected it—they were looking for Amazing Stories that were a little more upbeat, he said—and so I took it to my long-time collaborator and good friend, Richard Rubinstein, who then had a

series called Tales from the Darkside running in syndication. I won't say Richard blows his nose on happy endings—he likes a happily-ever-after as well as anyone, I think—but he's never shied away from a downer; he was the guy who got Pet Sematary made, after all (Pet Sematary and Thelma and Louise are, I think, the only major Hollywood films to end with the death of a major character or characters since the late 1970s).

Richard bought "Sorry" the day he read it, and had it in production a week or two later. A month after that, it was telecast … as a season premiere, if my recollection serves. It is still one of the fastest turns from in-the-head to on-the-screen that I've ever heard of. This version, by the way, is my first draft, which is a little longer and a little more textured than the final shooting script, which for budgetary reasons specified just two sets. It is included here as an example of another kind of story-telling … different, but as valid as any other.

"The Ten O'Clock People"—During the summer of 1992, I was walking around downtown Boston, looking for an address that kept eluding me. I eventually found the place I was looking for, but before I did, I found this story. My address-hunt took place around ten in the morning, and as I walked I began to notice groups of people clustered in front of every expensive highrise building, groups that made no sociological sense. There were carpenters hobnobbing with businessmen, janitors shooting the breeze with elegantly coiffed women in power clothes, messengers passing the time of day with executive secretaries.

After I'd puzzled over these groups—granfalloons Kurt Vonnegut never imagined—for half an hour or so, the penny dropped: for a certain class of American city dweller, addiction has turned the coffee-break into the cigarette-break. The expensive buildings are now all no-smoking zones as the American people go calmly about one of the most amazing turnabouts of the twentieth century; we are purging ourselves of our bad old habit, we are doing it with hardly any fanfare, and the result has been some very odd pockets of sociological behavior. Those who refuse to give up their bad old

habit—the Ten O'Clock People of the title—constitute one of these. The story is intended as no more than a simple amusement, but I hope it says something interesting about a wave of change which has, temporarily, at least, re-created some aspects of the separate-but-equal facilities of the forties and fifties.

"The House on Maple Street"—Remember Richard Rubinstein, my producer friend? He was the guy who sent me my first copy of Chris Van Allsburg's The Mysteries of Harris Burdick. Richard attached a note in his spiky handwriting: "You'll like this" was all it said, and all it really needed to say. I did like it.

The book purports to be a series of drawings, titles, and captions by the eponymous Mr. Burdick—the stories themselves are not in evidence. Each combination of picture, title, and caption serves as a kind of Rorschach inkblot, perhaps offering more of an index to the reader/viewer's mind than to Mr. Van Allsburg's intentions. One of my favorites shows a man with a chair in his hand—he is obviously prepared to use it as a bludgeon if he needs to—looking at a strange and somehow organic bulge under the living-room carpet. "Two weeks passed and it happened again," the caption reads.

Given my feelings about motivation, my attraction to this sort of thing should be clear. What happened again after two weeks? I don't think it matters. In our worst nightmares, there are only pronouns for the things which chase us back to wakefulness, sweating and shuddering with horror and relief.

My wife, Tabitha, was also taken with The Mysteries of Harris Burdick, and it was she who suggested that each member of our family write a short story based on one of the pictures. She wrote one; so did our youngest son, Owen (then twelve). Tabby chose the first picture in the book; Owen chose one in the middle; I chose the last one. I have included my effort here, with the kind permission of Chris Van Allsburg. There's no more to add, except that I've read a slightly bowdlerized version of the tale to fourth-and fifth-graders several times over the last three or four years, and they seem to like it a great deal. I have an idea that what they really get off on is the

idea of sending the Wicked Stepfather off into the Great Beyond. I certainly got off on it. The story has never been published before, mostly because of its tangled antecedents, and I am delighted to offer it here. I only wish I could offer my wife's and son's stories as well.

"The Fifth Quarter"—Bachman again. Or maybe George Stark.

"Umney's Last Case"—A pastiche—obviously—and paired with "The Doctor's Case" for that reason, but this one is a little more ambitious. I have loved Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald passionately since I discovered them in college (although I find it both instructive and a little scary to note that, while Chandler continues to be read and discussed, Macdonald's highly praised Lew Archer novels are now little-known artifacts outside the small circle of livre noir fans), and I think again it was the language of these novels which so fired my imagination; it opened a whole new way of seeing, one that appealed fiercely to the heart and mind of the lonely young man I was at that time.

It was also a style which was lethally easy to copy, as half a hundred novelists have discovered in the last twenty or thirty years. For a long time I steered clear of that Chandlerian voice, because I had nothing to use it for … nothing to say in the tones of Philip Marlowe that was mine.

Then one day I did. "Write what you know," the Wise Old Dudes tell us poor cometary remnants of Sterne and Dickens and Defoe and Melville, and for me, that means teaching, writing, and playing the guitar… though not necessarily in that order. As far as my own career-within-a-career of writing about writing goes, I'm reminded of a line I heard Chet Atkins toss off on Austin City Limits one night. He looked up at the audience after a minute or two of fruitless guitar-tuning and said, "It took me about twenty-five years to find out I wasn't very good at this part of it, and by then I was too rich to quit."

Same thing happened to me. I seem destined to keep going back to that peculiar little town—whether you call it Rock and Roll Heaven,

Oregon; Gatlin, Nebraska; or Willow, Maine—and I also seem destined to keep going back to what I do. The question which haunts and nags and won't ever completely let go is this one: Who am I when I write? Who are you, for that matter? Exactly what is happening here, and why, and does it matter?

So, with these questions in mind, I pulled on my Sam Spade fedora, lit up a Lucky (metaphorically speaking, these days) and started to write. "Umney's Last Case" was the result, and of all the stories in this volume, it's the one I like the best. This is its first publication.

"Head Down"—My first writing for pay was sports writing (for awhile I was the entire sports department of the weekly Lisbon Enterprise), but that didn't make this any easier. My proximity to the Bangor West All-Star team when it mounted its unlikely charge on the State Championship was either pure luck or pure fate, depending on where you stand in regard to the possible existence of a higher power. I tend toward the higher power thesis, but in either case, I was only there because my son was on the team. Nevertheless, I quickly realized—more quickly than Dave Mansfield, Ron St. Pierre, or Neil Waterman, I think—that something pretty extraordinary was either happening or trying to happen. I didn't want to write about it, particularly, but something kept telling me I was supposed to write about it.

My method of working when I feel out of my depth is brutally simple: I lower my own head and run as fast as I can, as long as I can. That was what I did here, gathering documentation like a mad packrat and simply trying to keep up with the team. For a month or so it was like living inside one of those corny sports novels with which many of us guys have whiled away our duller afternoon study-halls: Go Up for Glory, Power Forward, and occasional bright standouts like John R. Tunis's The Kid from Tomkinsville.

Hard or not, "Head Down" was the opportunity of a lifetime, and before I was done, Chip McGrath of The New Yorker had coaxed the best nonfiction writing of my life out of me. I thank him for that, but I owe the most thanks to Owen and his teammates, who first made

the story happen and then gave me permission to publish my version of it.

“Brooklyn August”—It pairs with “Head Down,” of course, but there’s a better reason for putting it here, at what is almost the end of this long book: it has escaped the wearisome cage of its creator’s questionable reputation and lived its own placid life quite apart from him. It has been reprinted several times in various anthologies of baseball curiosa, and appears to have been selected upon each occasion by editors who seem not to have the slightest idea of who I’m supposed to be or what it is I’m supposed to do. And I really like that.

Okay; stick it on the shelf and take care of yourself until we meet again. Read a few good books, and if one of your brothers or sisters falls down and you see it happen, pick him or her up. After all, next time you might be the one who needs a hand … or a little help getting that pesky finger out of the drain, for that matter.

Bangor, Maine

September 16, 1992

ON ALCOHOLISM AND RETURNING TO THE SHINING

Stephen King

From an article in The Guardian, September 21, 2013

Stephen King has written a lot of books at 56 novels, he's closing in on Agatha Christie some of which have been great, some of which less so. Still, he says, when people say, "Steve, your books are uneven", he's confident "there's good stuff in all of 'em". Now and then, a story lingers in his mind long after it's published. When fans ask what happened to Charlie McGee in Firestarter, for example, King isn't interested. But when they ask what happened to Danny Torrance, the boy from The Shining, he always found himself wondering. Specifically: what the story would have looked like if Danny's father mad "white-knuckle alcoholic" Jack Torrance had "found AA. And I thought, well, let's find out."

At 65, King is a big, shaggy presence, towering despite his slightly stooped shoulders and with an air of affable amusement at the vastness of his success and all that comes with it. We are at a house in Maine that his assistant, opening the door, drily refers to as "spare"; it's one of several King properties in the area, on a lake, and designated vaguely as a summer house. It is at the end of a long, deserted road, surrounded by woodland and in a GPS dead zone; this, after a week of rereading King novels, is unrelaxing. Rather than spend the night in a remote B&B near his house, as his publisher suggests, I stay in Portland, 100 miles away, in a hotel where there are lights and cars going by, and people to hear you scream. "Really?" King says when I mention my unease, and grins. "Good."

Doctor Sleep, his 56th novel, revisits Danny in adulthood, when he has become an alcoholic drifter haunted by the memory of his raging father. The Shining had such resonance in part because of Kubrick's film, which King disliked that one returns to the characters with a sense of deep familiarity. In the sequel, Wendy, the mother, is dead from lung cancer and Danny is alone, working in a hospice in a small town, where his paranormal talents help people towards a peaceful death. When Abra, a telepathic child, pushes into his consciousness asking for help, Danny gets sucked back into the terrain of his

childhood, battling a bunch of centuries-old serial killers disguised as RV-driving pensioners (it is sometimes easy to overlook how slyly funny King is) who literally feed off the pain of others. “When the disaster was big enough,” King writes, “agony and violent death had an enriching quality.” They get a big kick out of 9/11.

It is scary, of course: a woman with a tusk instead of teeth pops up periodically to hang at second-floor window level and startle the bejesus out of you. And without labouring the point, it has good allegorical bones: the sick buzz one gets from consuming the grisliest news stories. It also captures the reality of a recovering alcoholic, a state with which King is intimately familiar. “The hungover eye,” he writes, “had a weird ability to find the ugliest things in any given landscape.” Danny turns his life around and starts going to AA meetings, where, King writes, he discovers that memories are the “real ghosts”. It is a book as extravagantly inventive as any in King’s pantheon, and a careful study of self-haunting: “You take yourself with you, wherever you go.”

King has been sober for decades, ever since his family staged an intervention in the late 1980s. If he hesitated to write in this much depth about AA, it was only because he wanted to get it right. “The only thing is to write the truth. To write what you know about any particular situation. And I never say to anybody, ‘This is all from my experience in AA,’ because you don’t say that.” It was King’s 36-year-old son, Owen, who, after reading the first draft of Doctor Sleep, told him there was something missing. “He said that the scene he remembered best from The Shining was the one where Jack Torrance and his friend are out drunk one night and they hit a bicycle and think they’ve killed a kid. And they say, ‘That’s the end; we’re not going to drink any more.’ And Owen said, ‘There’s no scene that’s comparable to that in Doctor Sleep. You ought to see Dan at his worst.’ And, as usual, Owen was right.”

The scene King put in, would, in subsequent drafts, go on to drive the whole story: Danny waking up next to a one-night stand, stealing her money and leaving her infant son wandering about with a full

nappy, reaching for drugs on the coffee table. “And I think every alcoholic has a story comparable to that. Something where you actually hit rock bottom.”

In his case?

“I don’t have anything as dramatic. Of course, in a novel, you’re looking for something that’s really harsh. Harshly lit. For me, when I look back, the thing that I remember is being at one of my son’s Little League games with a can of beer in a paper bag, and the coach coming over to me and saying, ‘If that’s an alcoholic beverage, you’re going to have to leave.’ That was where I said to myself, ‘That’s something I’ll never be able to tell anybody else. I’ll keep that one to myself.’ I drew on that memory.”

In Doctor Sleep, Danny fights his past with a more profound sense of terror than anything the woman with the tusk can bring on. The tentacle reach of history has always interested King “What’s inside your head grows. And you don’t have any sense of proportion until you see how other people react to it” as has the futility of trying to escape it. “Take Dan Torrance, who is the child of an alcoholic, child of a dysfunctional family, abusive father, and he says, as people do, ‘I’m never going to be like my father; I’m never going to be like my mother.’ And then you grow up and find yourself with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, and maybe you’re walking the kiddies around. And I wanted to see what would happen with that.”

For a while, King would write sober during the day and edit what he had set down, while drinking, at night. “As time went on, I started to fumble a lot of the balls. I had a busy public life and a lot of those things got a bit ragged by the end.” Did he, like Danny, go to bars and get in fights?

“No. I didn’t go out and drink in bars, because they were full of assholes like me.”

Stephen King has been at the top of his game for a very long time, but his quirks still give him a quiver of outsidership. Before he

became fashionable, he was deeply unfashionable a nerdy guy writing in a nerdy genre, married with three kids when everyone else in his generation was raging through the 1960s. For a while, he and his wife, Tabitha, lived in a trailer in Herman, Maine (as King once put it, “If not the asshole of the universe, then at least within farting distance of it”). In literary circles, it is a more outlandish background than the most lurid of King’s horror stories: Tabitha worked in a Dunkin’ Donuts and King supplemented his high school teaching income at a laundry and a filling station. He felt under such tremendous pressure during those years, he says, that it was as if “battery cables were hooked up to your head. Like your brain was a battery.”

He was a good teacher the kids enjoyed his classes but he felt trapped in the wrong life. “I would teach, and I would come home tired, like I’d been on stage. And then I had to correct papers more of the same. And there was very little time left for my own work. I can remember thinking, ‘Two or three more years of this and I won’t be able to write at all.’ Because they wanted to give me the debating club, and the play, and stuff like that. There was no discussion of me quitting. We would have had nothing to live on. We were barely making ends meet, living in crappy apartments.”

His wife encouraged him to keep at it, and in those early days, King says, he was highly motivated by “this gush of image and story and words. It was like somebody yelled, ‘Fire!’ in a crowded theatre and everybody’s trying to crowd through the door at the same time that was ideas and work.” By their mid-20s, they had two children and were very stretched.

Most of his friends weren’t even married. Why have kids so young?

He bursts out laughing. “Because they came! Naomi was about nine months old when we got married. Tabby was 21. And then it seemed like a great idea to give Naomi a brother or sister. I can remember being home one day and there was a knock at the door a guy selling something and he said, ‘Hon, is your mommy home?’ And Tab said, ‘I’m the mommy.’ We had two kids by then.”

Every scrap of free time had to be put to good use. During one particularly frenzied period, King bashed out The Running Man in a week. A week! “February vacation week. I was white hot, I was burning. That was quite a week, because Tabby was trying to get back and forth to Dunkin’ Donuts and I had the kids. I wrote when they napped or I would stick them in front of the TV. Joe was in a playpen. It seemed like it snowed the whole week, and I wrote the book. Couldn’t sell it.”

In King’s 1986 novel It, the character Stuttering Bill stands in for the author as a highly successful horror writer, who corrects journalists when they ask where he gets his ideas from. The better question, Bill says, is why do they come in that particular form? Why horror? King has always recoiled from glib readings of a childhood rift in his psyche: a father who left when King was an infant, never to return. But it was through his father that he discovered writing: a book he found in the attic, which his father left behind. It was a collection of short stories by HP Lovecraft called The Lurker In The Shadows and had a demon on the cover. King read it as a boy and something pinged in his brain.

Everything changed with Carrie, the story of a telekinetic teenager and her sublime rage at her fundamentalist mother and bullying schoolmates. It was picked up in 1973 by Doubleday, for an advance of $2,500. That was enough for the Kings to buy a new car. A year later, when the paperback rights went out for auction, King expected to make something in the region of $60,000, half of which would go to his publisher. Since $30,000 was more than he earned in a year as a teacher, he planned to take a sabbatical and write two more books. “But the advance turned out to be $500,000.”

King notes with some amusement that he has been around so long that kids who read and loved him in the 1970s now run publishing houses and newspapers; he is revered, these days, as a grand old man of American letters. The experience of reading King young “Under the covers with a flashlight at summer camp,” as he puts it doesn’t leave one, and although he says, casually, that “it’s pretty

easy to scare a 14-year-old", the pleasures of his books endure. There is a lightfootedness to King's prose, a quickness of thought and expression that over the course of decades has somehow always seemed modern. It's partly a function of speed: his books err on the long side a casualty of quick turnaround but the action rattles along at a pace that is mimicked in the snap and verve of his language. In Dr Sleep, the serial killers appear with "faces like old apples and the moon shone right through". Danny, in the hospice, observes of a dead patient, "inside was all the clockless silence of death". It's what King does best, matching dim fears with indelible images, and it is recognised these days as a rare talent.

For a long time this wasn't the case. Condescension and a certain amount of hostility used to mark the critical reaction, and because of that, perhaps, he is belligerently against what he sees as rarefied writing types. Stuttering Bill Denbrough in It storms out of a college writing class when the instructor sneers at his horror story. "Why does a story have to be socio-anything?" Bill asks. "Politics… culture… history… aren't those natural ingredients in any story, if it's told well? I mean… can't you guys just let a story be a story?"

The biggest beef King has with mainstream literary culture is one of productivity. He was recently asked by the New York Times to review Donna Tartt's new novel, The Goldfinch. "And Donna Tartt is an amazingly good writer. She's dense, she's allusive. She's a gorgeous storyteller. But three books in 30 years? That makes me want to go to that person and grab her by the shoulders and look into her face and say, 'Do you realise how little time you have in the scheme of things?'?"

It is 11 years since Tartt's last book, and King says, "I looked at it and thought, 'God help you, Donna, this better be interesting.'?" And was it? He smiles. "It's very good." When people ask why he is so prolific, he smiles and tells them: "I'll stop soon enough."

Almost all his books have been turned into movies, the bulk of which have been successful, although King doesn't bite his tongue when something isn't to his liking. He enjoyed Brian De Palma's 1976

adaptation of Carrie, starring Sissy Spacek. But he “hated” what Stanley Kubrick did to The Shining in 1980: the film turned his novel into “a domestic tragedy with only vaguely supernatural overtones”, he said at the time. He also thought Jack Nicholson hammed it up appallingly, and Shelley Duvall as Wendy was “insulting to women. She’s basically a scream machine.”

It has been frustrating, he says, when he has tried to bust out of his genre and been largely dismissed or misunderstood primarily with his novel Needful Things, a satire of Reagan-era materialism that baffled the critics. “They read it and said, ‘This is just peculiar.’?” He has a lot of sympathy for JK Rowling, who was spectacularly mauled for her first non-Harry Potter novel, The Casual Vacancy, which King is reading at the moment.

“Man, this book is like… Do you remember Tom Sharpe? It’s a bit like that. And it’s a bit like Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? It’s fucking nasty. And I love it. The centre of the book is a dinner party from hell and you say to yourself, ‘These little people in the town of Pagford are a microcosm not just of British society, but western society as a whole, of a certain class.’ The fact that she set it around this little election that nobody cares about in a shit little town is fabulous. She’s a wonderful storyteller and the writing is better than in any of the Harry Potter books, because it’s sharper.”

King is not so successful as to be above the fray, and he is sceptical about some of his more direct rivals in the mega-selling horror and fantasy categories. Contrary to popular opinion, he says, this is not a golden age of horror. What about the Twilight franchise? “I agree with Abra’s teacher friend [in Doctor Sleep] who calls Twilight and books like it tweenager porn. They’re really not about vampires and werewolves. They’re about how the love of a girl can turn a bad boy good.”

Sweet Valley High with teeth?

“Yeah. Pretend I said that.”

Does he read them out of professional interest?

“I read Twilight and didn’t feel any urge to go on with her. I read The Hunger Games and didn’t feel an urge to go on. It’s not unlike The Running Man, which is about a game where people are actually killed and people are watching: a satire on reality TV. I read Fifty Shades Of Grey and felt no urge to go on. They call it mommy porn, but it’s not really mommy porn. It is highly charged, sexually driven fiction for women who are, say, between 18 and 25. But a golden age of horror? I wouldn’t say it is. I can’t think of any books right now that would be comparable to The Exorcist.”

When his children were little, King didn’t stop them from reading his own books, or watching the film versions. (In fact, when his oldest son Joe was 12, he overheard him explaining to a friend that his seven-year-old brother Owen was allowed to read and watch these things. “Joe said very seriously, ‘You have to understand, my father writes scary stories. Owen has lived with horror his whole life.’?” King laughs uproariously.)

In 1982, during an air traffic control strike, King was making a film called Creepshow and, unable to fly, drove 600 miles every week back and forth to Pittsburgh from Maine. To pass the time, he asked his daughter Naomi to record audio books for him of titles that didn’t exist in that format - Wilbur Smith novels, for example; he would pay her $5 per cassette. “She was all over that like white on rice. She did it and then Joe got on board, and finally Owen, too.”

They are a close family. Both boys are now writers and Naomi, who also writes, is a Unitarian minister. They have come a long way since the bad old days when Tabitha threatened to leave him if he didn’t stop boozing and taking cocaine. Owen, his youngest, was 10 then and Naomi 17. It is better to be frank about these things, King believes, since people always find out about them anyway. But memories of the intervention are still painful.

“There’s a thing in AA, something they read in a lot of meetings, The Promises. Most of those promises have come true in my life: we’ll

come to know a new freedom and new happiness, that's true. But it also says in there: we will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. And I have no wish to shut the door on the past. I have been pretty upfront about my past. But do I regret? I do. I do. I regret the necessity."

Still, he feels pretty lucky, not least after a near-death experience in 1999. King was walking down a road near his house when he was hit by a truck and thrown 14ft in the air. There were no white lights, but it did get him thinking seriously about death. "Our body knows things, and our brain knows things that don't have anything to do with conscious thought. And I think that it's possible, when you die, that there is a final exit programme that goes into effect. And that's what people are seeing when they see their relatives or a white light or whatever it is. In that sense, there may really be a heaven if you believe there's a heaven, and a hell if you believe there is one. But there's some kind of transitional moment. That idea that your whole life flashes before your eyes." He smiles. "Of course, they say about co-dependents people who grow up around alcoholics that somebody else's life does."

It is this moment of transition that Doctor Sleep deals with and the idea, like so many of King's, came from an incidental story in a newspaper. This one was about "a cat in a hospice that knows when people are going to die. He would go into that patient's room and curl up next to them. And I thought, that's a good advertisement for death, for the emissary of death. I thought, 'I can make Dan the human equivalent of that cat, and call him Doctor Sleep.' There was the book."

When King wakes in the night, he is not preoccupied with thoughts of death. He worries about his grandchildren, or turns over new ideas. His writing habits have changed over the years. "As you get older, you lose some of the velocity off your fast ball. Then you resort more to craft: to the curve, to the slider, to the change-up. To things other than that raw force."

He is as successful as ever, with a hit TV show, Under The Dome, about a town cut off from the world by the sudden descent of a large, overturned fish bowl, a clever twist on the locked room scenario. He has also just had the earliest peckings of a new book idea. It came from a news story that was big in the US last year, about a Brooklyn woman who drove the wrong way down a motorway with a car full of children, killing them all. It wasn't the horror of the incident that interested King, but the unanswered questions. "I have stories that ask to be written. And the thing that interested me about that crash on I-95 was that her husband swears up and down that she wasn't a big drinker, and that she wasn't drunk when she left with them. But there was a bottle of vodka in the car. She was high as a kite. So I'm saying to myself, there's a real mystery here." A pause. "It's the kind of mystery that only fiction can unravel." And so it begins.

ON IMPACT

Stephen King

When my wife and I are at our summer house in western Maine, I walk four miles every day unless it's pouring down rain. Three miles of this walk are on dirt roads that wind through the woods; a mile of it is on Route 5, a two-lane blacktop highway that runs between Bethel and Fryeburg.

The third week in June of 1999 was an extraordinarily happy one for my wife and for me; our three kids, now grown and scattered across the country, were visiting, and it was the first time in nearly six months that we'd all been under the same roof. As an extra bonus, our first grandchild was in the house, three months old and happily jerking at a helium balloon tied to his foot.

On June 19th, I took our younger son to the Portland Jetport, where he caught a flight back to New York. I drove home, had a brief nap, and then set out on my usual walk. We were planning to go en famille to see a movie in nearby North Conway that evening, and I had just enough time to go for my walk before packing everybody up for the trip.

I set out around four o'clock in the afternoon, as well as I can remember. Just before reaching the main road (in western Maine, any road with a white line running down the middle of it is a main road), I stepped into the woods and urinated. Two months would pass before I was able to take another leak standing up.

When I reached the highway, I turned north, walking on the gravel shoulder, against traffic. One car passed me, also headed north. About three-quarters of a mile farther along, I was told later, the woman driving that car noticed a light-blue Dodge van heading south. The van was looping from one side of the road to the other, barely under the driver's control. When she was safely past the wandering van, the woman turned to her passenger and said, "That was Stephen King walking back there. I sure hope that van doesn't hit him."

Most of the sight lines along the mile-long stretch of Route 5 that I walk are good, but there is one place, a short steep hill, where a pedestrian heading north can see very little of what might be coming his way. I was three-quarters of the way up this hill when the van came over the crest. It wasn't on the road; it was on the shoulder. My shoulder. I had perhaps three-quarters of a second to register this. It was just time enough to think, My God, I'm going to be hit by a school bus, and to start to turn to my left. Then there is a break in my memory. On the other side of it, I'm on the ground, looking at the back of the van, which is now pulled off the road and tilted to one side. This image is clear and sharp, more like a snapshot than like a memory. There is dust around the van's taillights. The license plate and the back windows are dirty. I register these things with no thought of myself or of my condition. I'm simply not thinking.

There's another short break in my memory here, and then I am very carefully wiping palmfuls of blood out of my eyes with my left hand. When I can see clearly, I look around and notice a man sitting on a nearby rock. He has a cane resting in his lap. This is Bryan Smith, the forty-two-year-old man who hit me. Smith has got quite the driving record; he has racked up nearly a dozen vehicle-related offenses. He wasn't watching the road at the moment that our lives collided because his Rottweiler had jumped from the very rear of his van onto the back seat, where there was an Igloo cooler with some meat stored in it. The Rottweiler's name was Bullet. (Smith had another Rottweiler at home; that one was named Pistol.) Bullet started to nose at the lid of the cooler. Smith turned around and tried to push him away. He was still looking at Bullet and pushing his head away from the cooler when he came over the top of the knoll, still looking and pushing when he struck me. Smith told friends later that he thought he'd hit "a small deer" until he noticed my bloody spectacles lying on the front seat of his van. They were knocked from my face when I tried to get out of Smith's way. The frames were bent and twisted, but the lenses were unbroken. They are the lenses I'm wearing now, as I write.

Smith sees that I'm awake and tells me that help is on the way. He speaks calmly, even cheerily. His look, as he sits on the rock with his cane across his lap, is one of pleasant commiseration: Ain't the two of us just had the shittiest luck? it says. He and Bullet had left the campground where they were staying, he later tells an investigator, because he wanted "some of those Marzes bars they have up to the store." When I hear this detail some weeks later, it occurs to me that I have nearly been killed by a character out of one of my own novels. It's almost funny.

Help is on the way, I think, and that's probably good, because I've been in a hell of an accident. I'm lying in the ditch and there's blood all over my face and my right leg hurts. I look down and see something I don't like: my lap appears to be on sideways, as if my whole lower body had been wrenched half a turn to the right. I look back up at the man with the cane and say, "Please tell me it's just dislocated."

"Nah," he says. Like his face, his voice is cheery, only mildly interested. He could be watching all this on TV while he noshes on one of those Marzes bars. "It's broken in five, I'd say, maybe six places."

"I'm sorry," I tell him—God knows why—and then I'm gone again for a little while. It isn't like blacking out; it's more as if the film of memory had been spliced here and there.

When I come back this time, an orange-and-white van is idling at the side of the road with its flashers going. An emergency medical technician—Paul Fillebrown is his name—is kneeling beside me. He's doing something. Cutting off my jeans, I think, although that might have come later.

I ask him if I can have a cigarette. He laughs and says, "Not hardly." I ask him if I'm going to die. He tells me no, I'm not going to die, but I need to go to the hospital, and fast. Which one would I prefer, the one in Norway-South Paris or the one in Bridgton? I tell him I want to go to Bridgton, to Northern Cumberland Memorial Hospital, because

my youngest child—the one I just took to the airport—was born there twenty-two years ago. I ask again if I'm going to die, and he tells me again that I'm not. Then he asks me whether I can wiggle the toes of my right foot. I wiggle them, thinking of an old rhyme my mother used to recite: "This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home." I should have stayed home, I think; going for a walk today was a bad idea. Then I remember that sometimes when people are paralyzed they think they're moving but really aren't.

"My toes, did they move?" I ask Paul Fillebrown. He says that they did, a good, healthy wiggle. "Do you swear to God?" I ask him, and I think he does. I'm starting to pass out again. Fillebrown asks me, very slowly and loudly, leaning down over my face, if my wife is at the big house on the lake. I can't remember. I can't remember where any of my family is, but I'm able to give him the telephone numbers both of our big house and of the cottage on the far side of the lake, where my daughter sometimes stays. Hell, I could give him my Social Security number if he asked. I've got all my numbers. It's everything else that's gone.

Other people are arriving now. Somewhere, a radio is crackling out police calls. I'm lifted onto a stretcher. It hurts, and I scream. Then I'm put into the back of the E.M.T. truck, and the police calls are closer. The doors shut and someone up front says, "You want to really hammer it."

Paul Fillebrown sits down beside me. He has a pair of clippers, and he tells me that he's going to have to cut the ring off the third finger of my right hand—it's a wedding ring my wife gave me in 1983, twelve years after we were actually married. I try to tell Fillebrown that I wear it on my right hand because the real wedding ring is still on the ring finger of my left—the original two-ring set cost me fifteen dollars and ninety-five cents at Day's Jewelers in Bangor, and I bought it a year and a half after I'd first met my wife, in the summer of 1969. I was working at the University of Maine library at the time. I had a great set of muttonchop sideburns, and I was staying just off campus, at Ed Price's Rooms (seven bucks a week, one change of

sheets included). Men had landed on the moon, and I had landed on the dean's list. Miracles and wonders abounded. One afternoon, a bunch of us library guys had lunch on the grass behind the university bookstore. Sitting between Paolo Silva and Eddie Marsh was a trim girl with a raucous laugh, red-tinted hair, and the prettiest legs I had ever seen. She was carrying a copy of "Soul on Ice." I hadn't run across her in the library, and I didn't believe that a college student could produce such a wonderful, unafraid laugh. Also, heavy reading or no heavy reading, she swore like a millworker. Her name was Tabitha Spruce. We were married in 1971. We're still married, and she has never let me forget that the first time I met her I thought she was Eddie Marsh's townie girlfriend. In fact, we came from similar working-class backgrounds; we both ate meat; we were both political Democrats with typical Yankee suspicions of life outside New England. And the combination has worked. Our marriage has outlasted all of the world's leaders except Castro.

Some garbled version of the ring story comes out, probably nothing that Paul Fillebrown can actually understand, but he keeps nodding and smiling as he cuts that second, more expensive wedding ring off my swollen right hand. By the time I call Fillebrown to thank him, some two months later, I know that he probably saved my life by administering the correct on-scene medical aid and then getting me to a hospital, at a speed of roughly ninety miles an hour, over patched and bumpy back roads.

Fillebrown suggests that perhaps someone else was watching out for me. "I've been doing this for twenty years," he tells me over the phone, "and when I saw the way you were lying in the ditch, plus the extent of the impact injuries, I didn't think you'd make it to the hospital. You're a lucky camper to still be with the program."

The extent of the impact injuries is such that the doctors at Northern Cumberland Hospital decide they cannot treat me there. Someone summons a LifeFlight helicopter to take me to Central Maine Medical Center, in Lewiston. At this point, Tabby, my older son, and my daughter arrive. The kids are allowed a brief visit; Tabby is allowed to

stay longer. The doctors have assured her that I'm banged up but I'll make it. The lower half of my body has been covered. She isn't allowed to see the interesting way that my lap has shifted around to the right, but she is allowed to wash the blood off my face and pick some of the glass out of my hair.

There's a long gash in my scalp, the result of my collision with Bryan Smith's windshield. This impact came at a point less than two inches from the steel driver's-side support post. Had I struck that, I would have been killed or rendered permanently comatose. Instead, I was thrown over the van and fourteen feet into the air. If I had landed on the rocks jutting out of the ground beyond the shoulder of Route 5, I would also likely have been killed or permanently paralyzed, but I landed just shy of them. "You must have pivoted to the left just a little at the last second," I am told later, by the doctor who takes over my case. "If you hadn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

The LifeFlight helicopter arrives in the parking lot, and I am wheeled out to it. The clatter of the helicopter's rotors is loud. Someone shouts into my ear, "Ever been in a helicopter before, Stephen?" The speaker sounds jolly, excited for me. I try to say yes, I've been in a helicopter before—twice, in fact—but I can't. It's suddenly very tough to breathe. They load me into the helicopter. I can see one brilliant wedge of blue sky as we lift off, not a cloud in it. There are more radio voices. This is my afternoon for hearing voices, it seems. Meanwhile, it's getting even harder to breathe. I gesture at someone, or try to, and a face bends upside down into my field of vision.

"Feel like I'm drowning," I whisper.

Somebody checks something, and someone else says, "His lung has collapsed."

There's a rattle of paper as something is unwrapped, and then the second person speaks into my ear, loudly so as to be heard over the rotors: "We're going to put a chest tube in you, Stephen. You'll feel some pain, a little pinch. Hold on."

It's been my experience that if a medical person tells you that you're going to feel a little pinch he's really going to hurt you. This time, it isn't as bad as I expected, perhaps because I'm full of painkillers, perhaps because I'm on the verge of passing out again. It's like being thumped on the right side of my chest by someone holding a short sharp object. Then there's an alarming whistle, as if I'd sprung a leak. In fact, I suppose I have. A moment later, the soft in-out of normal respiration, which I've listened to my whole life (mostly without being aware of it, thank God), has been replaced by an unpleasant shloop-shloop-shloop sound. The air I'm taking in is very cold, but it's air, at least, and I keep breathing it. I don't want to die, and, as I lie in the helicopter looking out at the bright summer sky, I realize that I am actually lying in death's doorway. Someone is going to pull me one way or the other pretty soon; it's mostly out of my hands. All I can do is lie there and listen to my thin, leaky breathing: shloop-shloop-shloop.

Ten minutes later, we set down on the concrete landing pad of the Central Maine Medical Center. To me, it feels as if we're at the bottom of a concrete well. The blue sky is blotted out, and the whap-whap-whap of the helicopter rotors becomes magnified and echoey, like the clapping of giant hands.

Still breathing in great leaky gulps, I am lifted out of the helicopter. Someone bumps the stretcher, and I scream. "Sorry, sorry, you're O.K., Stephen," someone says—when you're badly hurt, everyone calls you by your first name.

"Tell Tabby I love her very much," I say as I am first lifted and then wheeled very fast down some sort of descending walkway. I suddenly feel like crying.

"You can tell her that yourself," the someone says. We go through a door. There is air-conditioning, and lights flow past overhead. Doctors are paged over loudspeakers. It occurs to me, in a muddled sort of way, that just an hour ago I was taking a walk and planning to pick some berries in a field that overlooks Lake Kezar. I wasn't going to pick for long, though; I'd have to be home by five-thirty because

we were going to see “The General’s Daughter,” starring John Travolta. Travolta played the bad guy in the movie version of “Carrie,” my first novel, a long time ago.

“When?” I ask. “When can I tell her?”

“Soon,” the voice says, and then I pass out again. This time, it’s no splice but a great big whack taken out of the memory film; there are a few flashes, confused glimpses of faces and operating rooms and looming X-ray machinery; there are delusions and hallucinations, fed by the morphine and Dilaudid dripping into me; there are echoing voices and hands that reach down to paint my dry lips with swabs that taste of peppermint. Mostly, though, there is darkness.

Bryan Smith’s estimate of my injuries turned out to be conservative. My lower leg was broken in at least nine places. The orthopedic surgeon who put me together again, the formidable David Brown, said that the region below my right knee had been reduced to “so many marbles in a sock.” The extent of those lower-leg injuries necessitated two deep incisions—they’re called medial and lateral fasciotomies—to release the pressure caused by my exploded tibia and also to allow blood to flow back into my lower leg. If I hadn’t had the fasciotomies (or if they had been delayed), it probably would have been necessary to amputate my leg. My right knee was split almost directly down the middle, and I suffered an acetabular fracture of the right hip—a serious derailment, in other words—and an open femoral intertrochanteric fracture in the same area. My spine was chipped in eight places. Four ribs were broken. My right collarbone held, but the flesh above it had been stripped raw. The laceration in my scalp took almost thirty stitches.

Yeah, on the whole I’d say Bryan Smith was a tad conservative.

Mr. Smith’s driving behavior in this case was eventually examined by a grand jury, which indicted him on two counts: driving to endanger (pretty serious) and aggravated assault (very serious, the kind of thing that means jail time). After due consideration, the district attorney responsible for prosecuting such cases in my corner of the

world allowed Smith to plead out to the lesser charge of driving to endanger. He received six months of county jail time (sentence suspended) and a year's suspension of his right to drive. He was also placed on probation for a year, with restrictions on other motor vehicles, such as snowmobiles and A.T.V.s. Bryan Smith could conceivably be back on the road in the fall or winter of 2001.

David Brown put my leg back together in five marathon surgical procedures that left me thin, weak, and nearly at the end of my endurance. They also left me with at least a fighting chance to walk again. A large steel and carbon-fibre apparatus called an external fixator was clamped to my leg. Eight large steel pegs called Schanz pins ran through the fixator and into the bones above and below my knee. Five smaller steel rods radiated out from the knee. These looked sort of like a child's drawing of sunrays. The knee itself was locked in place. Three times a day, nurses unwrapped the smaller pins and the much larger Schanz pins and swabbed the holes with hydrogen peroxide. I've never had my leg dipped in kerosene and then lit on fire, but if that ever happens I'm sure it will feel quite a bit like daily pin care.

I entered the hospital on June 19th. Around the thirtieth, I got up for the first time, staggering three steps to a commode, where I sat with my hospital johnny in my lap and my head down, trying not to weep and failing. I told myself that I had been lucky, incredibly lucky, and usually that worked, because it was true. Sometimes it didn't work, that's all—and then I cried.

A day or two after those initial steps, I started physical therapy. During my first session, I managed ten steps in a downstairs corridor, lurching along with the help of a walker. One other patient was learning to walk again at the same time as me, a wispy eighty-year-old woman named Alice, who was recovering from a stroke. We cheered each other on when we had enough breath to do so. On our third day in the hall, I told Alice that her slip was showing.

"Your ass is showing, sonny boy," she wheezed, and kept going.

By July 4th, I was able to sit up in a wheelchair long enough to go out to the loading dock behind the hospital and watch the fireworks. It was a fiercely hot night, the streets filled with people eating snacks, drinking beer and soda, watching the sky. Tabby stood next to me, holding my hand, as the sky lit up red and green, blue and yellow. She was staying in a condo apartment across the street from the hospital, and each morning she brought me poached eggs and tea. I could use the nourishment, it seemed. In 1997, I weighed two hundred and sixteen pounds. On the day that I was released from Central Maine Medical Center, I weighed a hundred and sixty-five.

I came home to Bangor on July 9th, after a hospital stay of three weeks, and began a daily-rehabilitation program that included stretching, bending, and crutch-walking. I tried to keep my courage and my spirits up. On August 4th, I went back to C.M.M.C. for another operation. When I woke up this time, the Schanz pins in my upper thigh were gone. Dr. Brown pronounced my recovery “on course” and sent me home for more rehab and physical therapy. (Those of us undergoing P.T. know that the letters actually stand for Pain and Torture.) And in the midst of all this something else happened.

On July 24th, five weeks after Bryan Smith hit me with his Dodge van, I began to write again.

I didn’t want to go back to work. I was in a lot of pain, unable to bend my right knee. I couldn’t imagine sitting behind a desk for long, even in a wheelchair. Because of my cataclysmically smashed hip, sitting was torture after forty minutes or so, impossible after an hour and a quarter. How was I supposed to write when the most pressing thing in my world was how long until the next dose of Percocet?

Yet, at the same time, I felt that I was all out of choices. I had been in terrible situations before, and writing had helped me get over them—had helped me to forget myself, at least for a little while. Perhaps it would help me again. It seemed ridiculous to think it might be so, given the level of my pain and physical incapacitation, but there was that voice in the back of my mind, patient and implacable, telling me

that, in the words of the Chambers Brothers, the “time has come today.” It was possible for me to disobey that voice but very difficult not to believe it.

In the end, it was Tabby who cast the deciding vote, as she so often has at crucial moments. The former Tabitha Spruce is the person in my life who’s most likely to say that I’m working too hard, that it’s time to slow down, but she also knows that sometimes it’s the work that bails me out. For me, there have been times when the act of writing has been an act of faith, a spit in the eye of despair. Writing is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life. When I told Tabby on that July morning that I thought I’d better go back to work, I expected a lecture. Instead, she asked me where I wanted to set up. I told her I didn’t know, hadn’t even thought about it.

For years after we were married, I had dreamed of having the sort of massive oak-slab desk that would dominate a room—no more child’s desk in a trailer closet, no more cramped kneehole in a rented house. In 1981, I had found that desk and placed it in a spacious, skylighted study in a converted stable loft at the rear of our new house. For six years, I had sat behind that desk either drunk or wrecked out of my mind, like a ship’s captain in charge of a voyage to nowhere. Then, a year or two after I sobered up, I got rid of it and put in a living-room suite where it had been. In the early nineties, before my kids had moved on to their own lives, they sometimes came up there in the evening to watch a basketball game or a movie and eat a pizza. They usually left a boxful of crusts behind, but I didn’t care. I got another desk—handmade, beautiful, and half the size of my original T. rex—and I put it at the far-west end of the office, in a corner under the eave. Now, in my wheelchair, I had no way to get to it.

Tabby thought about it for a moment and then said, “I can rig a table for you in the back hall, outside the pantry. There are plenty of outlets—you can have your Mac, the little printer, and a fan.” The fan was a must—it had been a terrifically hot summer, and on the day I

went back to work the temperature outside was ninety-five. It wasn't much cooler in the back hall.

Tabby spent a couple of hours putting things together, and that afternoon she rolled me out through the kitchen and down the newly installed wheelchair ramp into the back hall. She had made me a wonderful little nest there: laptop and printer connected side by side, table lamp, manuscript (with my notes from the month before placed neatly on top), pens, and reference materials. On the corner of the desk was a framed picture of our younger son, which she had taken earlier that summer.

"Is it all right?" she asked.

"It's gorgeous," I said.

She got me positioned at the table, kissed me on the temple, and then left me there to find out if I had anything left to say. It turned out I did, a little. That first session lasted an hour and forty minutes, by far the longest period I'd spent upright since being struck by Smith's van. When it was over, I was dripping with sweat and almost too exhausted to sit up straight in my wheelchair. The pain in my hip was just short of apocalyptic. And the first five hundred words were uniquely terrifying—it was as if I'd never written anything before in my life. I stepped from one word to the next like a very old man finding his way across a stream on a zigzag line of wet stones.

Tabby brought me a Pepsi—cold and sweet and good—and as I drank it I looked around and had to laugh despite the pain. I'd written "Carrie" and "Salem's Lot" in the laundry room of a rented trailer. The back hall of our house resembled it enough to make me feel as if I'd come full circle.

There was no miraculous breakthrough that afternoon, unless it was the ordinary miracle that comes with any attempt to create something. All I know is that the words started coming a little faster after a while, then a little faster still. My hip still hurt, my back still hurt, my leg, too, but those hurts began to seem a little farther away.

I’d got going; there was that much. After that, things could only get better.

Things have continued to get better. I’ve had two more operations on my leg since that first sweltering afternoon in the back hall. I’ve also had a fairly serious bout of infection, and I still take roughly a hundred pills a day, but the external fixator is now gone and I continue to write. On some days, that writing is a pretty grim slog. On others—more and more of them, as my mind reaccustoms itself to its old routine—I feel that buzz of happiness, that sense of having found the right words and put them in a line. It’s like lifting off in an airplane: you’re on the ground, on the ground, on the ground … and then you’re up, riding on a cushion of air and the prince of all you survey. I still don’t have much strength—I can do a little less than half of what I used to be able to do in a day—but I have enough. Writing did not save my life, but it is doing what it has always done: it makes my life a brighter and more pleasant place.

STRAIGHT UP MIDNIGHT

Stephen King

Well, look at this - we're all here. We made it back again. I hope you're half as happy to be here as I am just saying that reminds me of a story, and since telling stories is what I do for a living (and to keep myself sane), I'll pass this one along.

Earlier this year - I'm writing this in late July of 1989 - I was crashed out in front of the TV, watching the Boston Red Sox play the Milwaukee Brewers. Robin Yount of the Brewers stepped to the plate, and the Boston commentators began marvelling at the fact that Yount was still in his early thirties. 'Sometimes it seems that Robin helped Abner Doubleday lay down the first set of foul lines,' Ned Martin said as Yount stepped into the box to face Roger Clemens.

'Yep,' Joe Castiglione agreed. 'He came to the Brewers right out of high school, I think - he's been playing for them since 1974.'

I sat up so fast I nearly spilled a can of Pepsi-Cola all over myself. Wait a minute! I was thinking. Wait just a goddam minute! I published my first book in 1974! That wasn't so long ago! What's this shit about helping Abner Doubleday Put down the first set of foul lines?

Then it occurred to me that the perception of how time passes - a subject which comes up again and again in the stories which follow - is a highly individual thing. It's true that the publication of Carrie in the spring of 1974 (it was published, in fact, just two days before the baseball season began and a teenager named Robin Yount played his first game for the Milwaukee Brewers) doesn't seem like a long time ago to me subjectively - just a quick glance back over the shoulder, in fact - but there are other ways to count the years, and some of them suggest that fifteen years can be a long time, indeed.

In 1974 Gerald Ford was President and the Shah was still running the show in Iran. John Lennon was alive, and so was Elvis Presley. Donny Osmond was singing with his brothers and sisters in a high, piping voice. Home video cassette recorders had been invented but could be purchased in only a few test markets. Insiders predicted

that when they became widely available, Sony's Beta-format machines would quickly stomp the rival format, known as VHS, into the ground. The idea that people might soon be renting popular movies as they had once rented popular novels at lending libraries was still over the horizon. Gasoline prices had risen to unthinkable highs: forty-eight cents a gallon for regular, fifty-five cents for unleaded.

The first white hairs had yet to make their appearance on my head and in my beard. My daughter, now a college sophomore, was four. My oldest son, who is now taller than I am, plays the blues harp, and sports luxuriant shoulder-length Sammy Hagar locks, had just been promoted to training pants. And my youngest son, who now pitches and plays first base for a championship Little League team, would not be born for another three years.

Time has this funny, plastic quality, and everything that goes around comes around. When you get on the bus, you think it won't be taking you far - across town, maybe, no further than that - and all at once, holy shit! You're

halfway across the next continent. Do you find the metaphor a trifle naive? So do I, and the hell of it is just this: it doesn't matter. The essential conundrum of time is so perfect that even such jejune observations as the one I have just made retain an odd, plangent resonance.

One thing hasn't changed during those years - the major reason, I suppose, why it sometimes seems to me (and probably to Robin Yount as well) that no time has passed at all. I'm still doing the same thing: writing stories.

And it is still a great deal more than what I know; it is still what I love. Oh, don't get me wrong - I love my wife and I love my children, but it's still a pleasure to find these peculiar side roads, to go down them, to see who lives there, to see what they're doing and who they're doing it to and maybe even why. I still love the strangeness of it, and those gorgeous moments when the pictures come clear and the

events begin to make a pattern. There is always a tail to the tale. The beast is quick and I sometimes miss my grip, but when I do get it, I hang on tight …

and it feels fine.

When this book is published, in 1990, I will have been sixteen years in the business of make-believe. Halfway through those years, long after I had become, by some process I still do not fully understand, America's literary boogeyman, I published a book called Different Seasons. It was a collection of four previously unpublished novellas, three of which were not horror stories. The publisher accepted this book in good heart but, I think, with some mental reservations as well. I know I had some. As it turned out, neither of us had to worry. Sometimes a writer will publish a book which is just naturally lucky, and Different Seasons was that way for me.

One of the stories, 'The Body,' became a movie (Stand By Me) which enjoyed a successful run … the first really successful film to be made from a work of mine since Carrie (a movie which came out back when Abner Doubleday and you-know-who were laying down those foul lines). Rob Reiner, who made Stand By Me, is one of the bravest, smartest filmmakers I have ever met, and I'm proud of my association with him. I am also amused to note that the company Mr Reiner formed following the success of Stand By Me is Castle Rock Productions … a name with which many of my long-time readers will be familiar.

The critics, by and large, also liked Different Seasons. Almost all of them would napalm one particular novella, but since each of them picked a different story to scorch, I felt I could disregard them all with impunity … and I did. Such behavior is not always possible; when most of the reviews of Christine suggested it was a really dreadful piece of work, I came to the reluctant decision that it probably wasn't as good as I had hoped (that, however, did not stop me from cashing the royalty checks). I know writers who claim not to read their notices, or not to be hurt by the bad ones if they do, and I actually believe two of these individuals. I'm one of the other kind

- I obsess over the possibility of bad reviews and brood over them when they come. But they don't get me down for long; I just kill a few children and old ladies, and then I'm right as a trivet again.

Most important, the readers liked Different Seasons. I don't remember a single correspondent from that time who scolded me for writing something that wasn't horror. Most readers, in fact, wanted to tell me that one of the stories roused their emotions in some way, made them think, made them feel, and those letters are the real payback for the days (and there are a lot of them) when the words come hard and inspiration seems thin or even nonexistent. God bless and keep Constant Reader; the mouth can speak, but there is no tale unless there is a sympathetic ear to listen.

1982, that was. The year the Milwaukee Brewers won their only American League pennant, led by - yes, you got it - Robin Yount. Yount hit .3 3 1 that year, bashed twenty-nine home runs, and was named the American

League's Most Valuable Player.

It was a good year for both of us old geezers.

Different Seasons was not a planned book; it just happened. The four long stories in it came out at odd intervals over a period of five years, stories which were too long to be published as short stories and just a little too short to be books on their own. Like pitching a no-hitter or batting for the cycle (getting a single, double, triple, and home run all in the same ball game), it was not so much a feat as a kind of statistical oddity. I took great pleasure in its success and acceptance, but I also felt a clear sense of regret when the manuscript was finally turned in to The Viking Press. I knew it was good; I also knew that I'd probably never publish another book exactly like it in my life.

If you're expecting me to say Well, I was wrong, I must disappoint you.

The book you are holding is quite different from the earlier book. Different Seasons consisted of three

'mainstream' stories and one tale of the supernatural; all four of the tales in this book are tales of horror. They are, by and large, a little longer than the stories in Different Seasons, and they were written for the most part during the two years when I was supposedly retired. Perhaps they are different because they came from a mind which found itself turning, at least temporarily, to darker subjects.

Time, for instance, and the corrosive effects it can have on the human heart. The past, and the shadows it throws upon the present - shadows where unpleasant things sometimes grow and even more unpleasant things hide …

and grow fat.

Yet not all of my concerns have changed, and most of my convictions have only grown stronger. I still believe in the resilience of the human heart and the essential validity of love; I still believe that connections between people can be made and that the spirits which inhabit us sometimes touch. I still believe that the cost of those connections is horribly, outrageously high … and I still believe that the value received far outweighs the price which must be paid. I still believe, I suppose, in the coming of the White and in finding a place to make a stand …

and defending that place to the death. They are old-fashioned concerns and beliefs, but I would be a liar if I did not admit I still own them. And that they still own me.

I still love a good story, too. I love hearing one, and I love telling one. You may or may not know (or care) that I was paid a great deal of money to publish this book and the two which will follow it, but if you do know or care, you should also know that I wasn't paid a cent for writing the stories in the book. Like anything else that happens on its own, the act of writing is beyond currency. Money is great stuff to

have, but when it comes to the act of creation, the best thing is not to think of money too much. It constipates the whole process.

The way I tell my stories has also changed a little, I suppose (I hope I've gotten better at it, but of course that is something each reader should and will judge for himself), but that is only to be expected. When the Brewers won the pennant in 1982, Robin Yount was playing shortstop. Now he's in center field. I suppose that means he's slowed down a little … but he still catches almost everything that's hit in his direction.

That will do for me. That will do just fine.

Because a great many readers seem curious about where stories come from, or wonder if they fit into a wider scheme the writer may be pursuing, I have prefaced each of these with a little note about how it came to be written. You may be amused by these notes, but you needn't read them if you don't want to; this is not a school assignment, thank God, and there will be no pop quiz later.

Let me close by saying again how good it is to be here, alive and well and talking to you once more … and how good it is to know that you are still there, alive and well and waiting to go to some other place - a place where, perhaps, the walls have eyes and the trees have ears and something really unpleasant is trying to find its way out of the attic and downstairs, to where the people are. That thing still interests me … but I think these days that the people who may or may not be listening for it interest me more.

Before I go, I ought to tell you how that baseball game turned out. The Brewers ended up beating the Red Sox.

Clemens struck Robin Yount out on Yount's first at-bat … but the second time up, Yount (who helped Abner Doubleday lay out the first foul lines, according to Ned Martin) banged a double high off the Green Monster in left field and drove home two runs.

Robin isn't done playing the game just yet, I guess.

Me, either.

Bangor, Maine July, 1989

TOP 20 RULES FOR WRITERS

Stephen King

In one of my favorite Stephen King interviews, for The Atlantic, he talks at length about the vital importance of a good opening line. “There are all sorts of theories,” he says, “it’s a tricky thing.” “But there’s one thing” he’s sure about: “An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this.” King’s discussion of opening lines is compelling because of his dual focus as an avid reader and a prodigious writer of fiction—he doesn’t lose sight of either perspective:

We’ve talked so much about the reader, but you can’t forget that the opening line is important to the writer, too. To the person who’s actually boots-on-the-ground. Because it’s not just the reader’s way in, it’s the writer’s way in also, and you’ve got to find a doorway that fits us both.

This is excellent advice. As you orient your reader, so you orient yourself, pointing your work in the direction it needs to go. Now King admits that he doesn’t think much about the opening line as he writes, in a first draft, at least. That perfectly crafted and inviting opening sentence is something that emerges in revision, which can be where the bulk of a writer’s work happens.

Revision in the second draft, “one of them, anyway,” may “necessitate some big changes” says King in his 2000 memoir slash writing guide On Writing. And yet, it is an essential process, and one that “hardly ever fails.” Below, we bring you King’s top twenty rules from On Writing. About half of these relate directly to revision. The other half cover the intangibles—attitude, discipline, work habits. A number of these suggestions reliably pop up in every writer’s guide. But quite a few of them were born of Stephen King’s many decades of trial and error and—writes the Barnes & Noble book blog—“over 350 million copies” sold, “like them or loathe them.”

1. First write for yourself, and then worry about the audience. “When you write a story, you’re telling yourself the story. When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story.”

2. Don’t use passive voice. “Timid writers like passive verbs for the same reason that timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe.”

3. Avoid adverbs. “The adverb is not your friend.”

4. Avoid adverbs, especially after “he said” and “she said.”

5. But don’t obsess over perfect grammar. “The object of fiction isn’t grammatical correctness but to make the reader welcome and then tell a story.”

6. The magic is in you. “I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing.”

7. Read, read, read. “If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write.”

8. Don’t worry about making other people happy. “If you intend to write as truthfully as you can, your days as a member of polite society are numbered, anyway.”

9. Turn off the TV. “TV—while working out or anywhere else—really is about the last thing an aspiring writer needs.”

10. You have three months. “The first draft of a book—even a long one—should take no more than three months, the length of a season.”

11. There are two secrets to success. “I stayed physical healthy, and I stayed married.”

12. Write one word at a time. “Whether it’s a vignette of a single page or an epic trilogy like ‘The Lord of the Rings,’ the work is always accomplished one word at a time.”

13. Eliminate distraction. “There’s should be no telephone in your writing room, certainly no TV or videogames for you to fool around with.”

14. Stick to your own style. “One cannot imitate a writer’s approach to a particular genre, no matter how simple what that writer is doing may seem.”

15. Dig. “Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible.”

16. Take a break. “You’ll find reading your book over after a six-week layoff to be a strange, often exhilarating experience.”

17. Leave out the boring parts and kill your darlings. “(kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart, kill your darlings.)”

18. The research shouldn’t overshadow the story. “Remember that word back. That’s where the research belongs: as far in the background and the back story as you can get it.”

19. You become a writer simply by reading and writing. “You learn best by reading a lot and writing a lot, and the most valuable lessons of all are the ones you teach yourself.”

20. Writing is about getting happy. “Writing isn’t about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid or making friends. Writing is magic, as much as the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink.”

WHY I WAS BACHMAN

Stephen King

1

Between 1977 and 1984, I published five novels under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. These were *Rage* (1977), *The Long Walk* (1979), *Roadwork* (1981), *The Running Man* (1982), and *Thinner* (1984). There were two reasons I was finally linked with Bachman: first, because the first four books, all paperback originals, were dedicated to people associated with my life, and second, because my name appeared on the copyright forms of one book. Now people are asking me why I did it, and I don't seem to have any very satisfactory answers. Good thing I didn't murder anyone, isn't it?

2

I can make a few suggestions, but that's all. The only important thing I ever did in my life for a conscious reason was to ask Tabitha Spruce, the college co ed I was seeing, if she would marry me. The reason was that I was deeply in love with her. The joke is that love itself is an irrational and indefinable emotion.

Sometimes something just says *Do this* or *Don't do that. I* almost always obey that voice, and when I disobey it I usually rue the day. All I'm saying is that I've got a hunch player's approach to life. My wife accuses me of being an impossibly picky Virgo and I guess I am in some ways I usually know at any given time how many pieces of a 500 piece puzzle I've put in, for instance but I never really planned anything big that I ever did, and that includes the books I've written. I never sat down and wrote page one with anything but the vaguest idea of how things would come out.

One day it occurred to me that I ought to publish *Getting It On,* a novel which Doubleday *almost* published two years before they published *Carrie,* under a pseudonym. It seemed like a good idea so I did it.

Like I say, good thing I didn't kill anybody, huh?

3

In 1968 or 1969, Paul McCartney said a wistful and startling thing in an interview. He said the Beatles had discussed the idea of going out on the road as a bar band named Randy and the Rockets. They would wear hokey capes and masks a la Count Five, he said, so no one would recognize them, and they would just have a raveup like in the old days.

When the interviewer suggested they would be recognized by their voices, Paul seemed at first startled . . . and then a bit appalled.

4

Cub Koda, possibly America's greatest houserocker, once told me this story about Elvis Presley, and like the man said, if it ain't true, it oughtta be. Cub said Elvis told an interviewer something that went like this: I was like a cow in a pen with a whole bunch of other cows, only I got out somehow. Well, they came and got me and put me in another pen, only this one was bigger and I had it all to myself. I looked around and seen the fences was so high I'd never get out. So I said, "All right, I'll graze. "

5

I wrote five novels before *Carrie.* Two of them were bad, one was indifferent, and I thought two of them were pretty good. The two good ones were *Getting It On* (which became *Rage* when it was finally published) and *The Long Walk. Getting It On* was begun in 1966, when I was a senior in high school. I later found it moldering away in an old box in the cellar of the house where I'd grown up this rediscovery was in 1970, and I finished the novel in 1971. *The Long Walk* was written in the fall of 1966 and the spring of 1967, when I was a freshman at college.

I submitted *Walk* to the Bennett Cerf/Random House first novel competition (which has, I think, long since gone the way of the blue suede shoe) in the fall of 1967 and it was promptly rejected with a form note . . . no comment of any kind. Hurt and depressed, sure that the book must really be terrible, I stuck it into the fabled TRUNK, which all novelists, both published and aspiring, carry around. I never submitted it again until Elaine Geiger at New American Library asked if "Dicky" (as we called him) was going to follow up *Rage. The Long Walk* went in the TRUNK, but as Bob Dylan says in "Tangled Up in Blue," it never escaped my mind.

None of them has ever escaped my mind not even the really bad ones.

6

The numbers have gotten very big. That's part of it. I have times when I feel as if I planted a modest packet of words and grew some kind of magic beanstalk . . .or a runaway garden of books (OVER 40

MILLION KING BOOKS IN PRINT!!!, as my publisher likes to trumpet). Or, put it another way sometimes I feel like Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia.* I knew enough to get the brooms started, but once they start to march, things are never the same.

Am I bitching? No. At least they're very gentle bitches if I am. I have tried my best to follow that other Dylan's advice and sing in my chains like the sea. I mean, I could get down there in the amen corner and crybaby about how tough it is to be Stephen King, but somehow I don't think all those people out there who are a) unemployed or b) busting heavies every week just to keep even with the house payments and the MasterCharge bill would feel a lot of sympathy for me. Nor would I expect it. I'm still married to the same woman, my kids are healthy and bright, and I'm being well paid for doing something I love. So what's to bitch about?

Nothing.

Almost.

7

Memo to Paul McCartney, if he's there: the interviewer was right. They would have recognized your voices, but before you even opened your mouths, they would have recognized George's guitar licks. I did five books as Randy and the Rockets and I've been getting letters asking me if I was Richard Bachman from the very beginning.

My response to this was simplicity itself: I lied.

8

I think I did it to turn the heat down a little bit; to do something as someone other than Stephen King. I think that all novelists are inveterate role players and it was fun to be someone else for a while in this case, Richard Bachman. And he *did* develop a personality and a history to go along with the bogus author photo on the back of *Thinner* and the bogus wife (Claudia Inez Bachman) to whom the book is dedicated. Bachman was a fairly unpleasant fellow who was born in New York and spent about ten years in the merchant marine after four years in the Coast Guard. He ultimately settled in rural central New Hampshire, where he wrote at night and tended to his medium sized dairy farm during the day. The Bachmans had one child, a boy, who died in an unfortunate accident at the age of six (he fell through a well cover and drowned). Three years ago a brain tumor was discovered near the base of Bachman's brain; tricky surgery removed it. And he died suddenly in February of 1985 when the *Bangor Daily News,* my hometown paper, published the story that I was Bachman a story which I confirmed. Sometimes it was fun to be Bachman, a curmudgeonly recluse a la J. D. Salinger, who never gave interviews and who, on the author questionnaire from New English Library in London, wrote down "rooster worship" in the blank provided for religion.

I've been asked several times if I did it because I thought I was overpublishing the market as Stephen King. The answer is no. I didn't think I was overpublishing the market . . . but my publishers did. Bachman provided a compromise for both of us. My "Stephen King publishers" were like a frigid wifey who only wants to put out once or twice a year, encouraging her endlessly horny hubby to find a call girl. Bachman was where I went when I had to have relief. This does nothing, however, to explain why I've felt this restless need to *publish* what I write when I don't need the dough.

I repeat, good thing I didn't kill someone, huh?

10

I've been asked several times if I did it because I feel typecast as a horror writer. The answer is no. I don't give a shit what people call me as long as I can go to sleep at night.

Nevertheless, only the last of the Bachman books is an out and out horror story, and the fact hasn't escaped me. Writing something that was not horror as Stephen King would be perfectly easy, but answering the questions about why I did it would be a pain in the ass. When I wrote straight fiction as Richard Bachman, no one asked the questions. In fact, ha ha, hardly anyone read the books.

Which leads us to what might be well, not the reason why that voice spoke up in the first place, but the closest thing to it.

11

You try to make sense of your life. Everybody tries to do that, I think, and part of making sense of things is trying to find reasons . . . or constants . . . things that don't fluctuate.

Everyone does it, but perhaps people who have extraordinarily lucky or unlucky lives do it a little more. Part of you wants to think or must as least speculatethat you got whopped with the cancer stick because you were one of the bad guys (or one of the good ones, if you believe Durocher's Law). Part of you wants to think that you must have been one hardworking S.O.B. or a real prince or maybe even one of the Sainted Multitude if you end up riding high in a world where people are starving, shooting each other, burning out, bumming out, getting loaded, getting 'Luded.

But there's another part that suggests it's all a lottery, a real life game show not much different from "Wheel of Fortune" or "The New Price Is Right" (two of the Bachman books, incidentally, are about game show type competitions). It is for some reason depressing to think it was all or even mostly an accident. So maybe you try to find out if you could do it again.

Or in my case, if *Bachman* could do it again.

12

The question remains unanswered. Richard Bachman's first four books did not sell well at all, perhaps partly because they were issued without fanfare.

Each month paperback houses issue three types of books: "leaders," which are heavily advertised, stocked in dump bins (the trade term for those showy cardboard displays you see at the front of your local chain bookstore), and which usually feature fancy covers that have been either die cut or stamped with foil;" subleaders, " which are less heavily advertised, less apt to be awarded dump bins, and less expected to sell millions of copies (two hundred thousand copies sold would be one hell of a good showing for a sub leader); and just plain books. This third category is the paperback book publishing world's equivalent of trench warfare or … cannon fodder. "Just plain books" (the only other term I can think of is sub sub leaders, but that is *really* depressing) are rarely hardcover reprints; they are generally backlist books with new covers, genre novels (gothics, Regency romances, westerns, and so on), or series books such as The Survivalist, The Mercenaries, The Sexual Adventures of a Horny Pumpkin . . . you get the idea. And, every now and then, you find genuine *novels* buried in this deep substratum, and the Bachman novels are not the only time such novels have been the work of well-known writers sending out dispatches from deep cover. Donald Westlake published paperback originals under the names Tucker Coe and Richard Stark; Evan Hunter under the name Ed McBain; Gore Vidal under the name Edgar Box. More recently Gordon Lish published an excellent, eerie paperback original called *The Stone Boy* under a pseudonym.

The Bachman novels were "just plain books," paperbacks to fill the drugstore and bus station racks of America. This was at my

request; I wanted Bachman to keep a low profile. So, in that sense, the poor guy had the dice loaded against him from the start.

And yet, little by little, Bachman gained a dim cult following. His final book, *Thinner,* had sold about 28,000 copies in hardcover before a Washington bookstore clerk and writer named Steve Brown got suspicious, went to the Library of Congress, and uncovered my name on one of the Bachman copyright forms. Twenty eight thousand copies isn't a lot it's certainly not in best seller territory but it's 4,000 copies more than my book *Night Shift* sold in 1978. I had intended Bachman to follow *Thinner* with a rather gruesome suspense novel called *Misery,* and I think that one might have taken "Dicky" onto the best seller lists. Of course we'll never know now, will we? Richard Bachman, who survived the brain tumor, finally died of a much rarer disease cancer of the pseudonym. He died with that question is it work that takes you to the top or is it all just a lottery? still unanswered.

But the fact that *Thinner* did 28,000 copies when Bachman was the author and 280,000 copies when *Steve King* became the author, might tell you something, huh?

13

There is a stigma attached to the idea of the pen name. This was not so in the past; there was a time when the writing of novels was believed to be a rather low occupation, perhaps more vice than profession, and a pen name thus seemed a perfectly natural and respectable way of protecting one's self (and one's relatives) from embarrassment. As respect for the art of the novel rose, things changed. Both critics and general readers became suspicious of work done by men and women who elected to hide their identities. *If it was good,* the unspoken opinion seems to run, *the guy would have put his real name on it. If he lied about his name, the book must suck like an Electrolux.*

So I want to close by saying just a few words about the worth of these books. Are they good novels? I don't know. Are they honest novels? Yes, I think so. They were honestly meant, anyway, and written with an energy I can only dream about these days *(The Running Man,* for instance, was written during a period of seventy two hours and published with virtually no changes). Do they suck like an Electrolux? Overall, no. In places . . . wellll . . .

I was not quite young enough when these stories were written to be able to dismiss them as juvenilia. On the other hand, I was still callow enough to believe in oversimple motivations (many of them painfully Freudian) and unhappy endings. The most recent of the Bachman books offered here, *Roadwork,* was written between *'Salem's Lot* and *The Shining,* and was an effort to write a "straight" novel. (I was also young enough in those days to worry about that casual cocktail party question, "Yes, but when are you going to do something *serious? ")* I think it was also an effort to make some sense of my mother's painful death the year before -- a lingering cancer had taken her off inch by painful inch. Following this death I was left both grieving and shaken by the apparent senselessness of it all. I suspect *Roadwork is* probably the worst of the lot simply because it tries so hard to be good and to find some answers to the conundrum of human pain.

The reverse of this is *The Running Man,* which may be the best of them because it's nothing but story it moves with the goofy speed of a silent movie, and anything which is *not* story is cheerfully thrown over the side.

Both *The Long Walk* and *Rage* are full of windy psychological preachments (both textual and subtextual), but there's still a lot of story in those novels ultimately the reader will be better equipped than the writer to decide if the story is enough to surmount all the failures of perception and motivation.

I'd only add that two of these novels, perhaps even all four, might have been published under my own name if I had been a little more savvy about the publishing business or if I hadn't been preoccupied in the years they were written with first trying to get myself through

school and then to support my family. And that I only published them (and am allowing them to be republished now) because they are still my friends; they are undoubtedly maimed in some ways, but they still seem very much alive to me.

14

And a few words of thanks: to Elaine Koster, NAL's publisher (who was Elaine Geiger when these books were first published), who kept "Dicky's" secret so long and successfully to Carolyn Stromberg, "Dicky's" first editor, who did the same; to Kirby McCauley, who sold the rights and also kept the secret faithfully and well; to my wife, who encouraged me with these just as she did with the others that fumed out to be such big and glittery money makers; and, as always, to you, reader, for your patience and kindness.

Stephen King
Bangor, Maine

The End

WILL WE CLOSE THE BOOK ON BOOKS?

Stephen King

From: Visions of the 21st Century Time Magazine, June 2000

Book lovers are the Luddites of the intellectual world. I can no more imagine their giving up the printed page than I can imagine a picture in the New York Post showing the Pope technoboogieing the night away in a disco. My adventure in cyberspace (“Riding the Bullet”, available on any computer near you) has confirmed this idea dramatically. My mail and the comments on my website (www.stephenking.com) reflect two things: first, readers enjoyed the story; second, most didn’t like getting it on a screen, where it appeared and then disappeared like Aladdin’s genie.

Books have weight and texture; they make a pleasant presence in the hand. Nothing smells as good as a new book, especially if you get your nose right down in the binding, where you can still catch an acrid tang of the glue. The only thing close is the peppery smell of an old one. The odor of an old book is the odor of history, and for me, the look of a new one is still the look of the future.

I suspect that the growth of the Internet has actually been something of a boon when it comes to reading: people with more Beanie Babies than books on their shelves spend more time reading than they used to as they surf from site to site. But it’s not a book, dammit, that perfect object that speaks without speaking, needs no batteries and never crashes unless you throw it in the corner. So, yes, there’ll be books. Speaking personally, you can have my gun, but you’ll take my book when you pry my cold, dead fingers off the binding.

*

Everything You Need to Know About Writing Successfully: in Ten Minutes

Stephen King

I. The First Introduction

THAT'S RIGHT. I know it sounds like an ad for some sleazy writers' school, but I really am going to tell you everything you need to pursue a successful and financially rewarding career writing fiction, and I really am going to do it in ten minutes, which is exactly how long it took me to learn. It will actually take you twenty minutes or so to read this essay, however, because I have to tell you a story, and then I have to write a second introduction. But these, I argue, should not count in the ten minutes.

II. The Story, or, How Stephen King Learned to Write

When I was a sophomore in high school, I did a sophomoric thing which got me in a pot of fairly hot water, as sophomoric didoes often do. I wrote and published a small satiric newspaper called The Village Vomit. In this little paper I lampooned a number of teachers at Lisbon (Maine) High School, where I was under instruction. These were not very gentle lampoons; they ranged from the scatological to the downright cruel.

Eventually, a copy of this little newspaper found its way into the hands of a faculty member, and since I had been unwise enough to put my name on it (a fault, some critics argue, of which I have still not been entirely cured), I was brought into the office. The sophisticated satirist had by that time reverted to what he really was: a fourteen-year-old kid who was shaking in his boots and wondering if he was going to get a suspension … what we called "a three-day vacation" in those dim days of 1964.

I wasn't suspended. I was forced to make a number of apologies - they were warranted, but they still tasted like dog-dirt in my mouth - and spent a week in detention hall. And the guidance counselor arranged what he no doubt thought of as a more constructive channel for my talents. This was a job - contingent upon the editor's

approval - writing sports for the Lisbon Enterprise, a twelve-page weekly of the sort with which any small-town resident will be familiar. This editor was the man who taught me everything I know about writing in ten minutes. His name was John Gould - not the famed New England humorist or the novelist who wrote The Greenleaf Fires, but a relative of both, I believe.

He told me he needed a sports writer and we could “try each other out” if I wanted.

I told him I knew more about advanced algebra than I did sports.

Gould nodded and said, “You’ll learn.”

I said I would at least try to learn. Gould gave me a huge roll of yellow paper and promised me a wage of 1/2Â˘ per word. The first two pieces I wrote had to do with a high school basketball game in which a member of my school team broke the Lisbon High scoring record. One of these pieces was straight reportage. The second was a feature article.

I brought them to Gould the day after the game, so he’d have them for the paper, which came out Fridays. He read the straight piece, made two minor corrections, and spiked it. Then he started in on the feature piece with a large black pen and taught me all I ever needed to know about my craft. I wish I still had the piece - it deserves to be framed, editorial corrections and all - but I can remember pretty well how it looked when he had finished with it. Here’s an example:

(note: this is before the edit marks indicated on King’s original copy)

Last night, in the well-loved gymnasium of Lisbon High School, partisans and Jay Hills fans alike were stunned by an athletic performance unequaled in school history: Bob Ransom, known as “Bullet” Bob for both his size and accuracy, scored thirty-seven points. He did it with grace and speed … and he did it with an odd courtesy as well, committing only two personal fouls in his knight-like quest for a record which has eluded Lisbon thinclads since 1953….

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When Gould finished marking up my copy in the manner I have indicated above, he looked up and must have seen something on my face. I think he must have thought it was horror, but it was not: it was revelation.

"I only took out the bad parts, you know," he said. "Most of it's pretty good."

"I know," I said, meaning both things: yes, most of it was good, and yes, he had only taken out the bad parts. "I won't do it again."

"If that's true," he said, "you'll never have to work again. You can do this for a living." Then he threw back his head and laughed.

And he was right; I am doing this for a living, and as long as I can keep on, I don't expect ever to have to work again.

III. The Second Introduction

All of what follows has been said before. If you are interested enough in writing to be a purchaser of this magazine, you will have either heard or read all (or almost all) of it before. Thousands of writing courses are taught across the United States each year; seminars are convened; guest lecturers talk, then answer questions, then drink as many gin and tonics as their expense-fees will allow, and it all boils down to what follows.

I am going to tell you these things again because often people will only listen - really listen - to someone who makes a lot of money

doing the thing he's talking about. This is sad but true. And I told you the story above not to make myself sound like a character out of a Horatio Alger novel but to make a point: I saw, I listened, and I learned. Until that day in John Gould's little office, I had been writing first drafts of stories which might run 2,500 words. The second drafts were apt to run 3,300 words. Following that day, my 2,500-word first drafts became 2,200-word second drafts. And two years after that, I sold the first one.

So here it is, with all the bark stripped off. It'll take ten minutes to read, and you can apply it right away … if you listen.

IV. Everything You Need to Know About Writing Successfully

1. Be talented

This, of course, is the killer. What is talent? I can hear someone shouting, and here we are, ready to get into a discussion right up there with “what is the meaning of life?” for weighty pronouncements and total uselessness. For the purposes of the beginning writer, talent may as well be defined as eventual success - publication and money. If you wrote something for which someone sent you a check, if you cashed the check and it didn’t bounce, and if you then paid the light bill with the money, I consider you talented.

Now some of you are really hollering. Some of you are calling me one crass money-fixated creep. And some of you are calling me bad names. Are you calling Harold Robbins talented? someone in one of the Great English Departments of America is screeching. V.C. Andrews? Theodore Dreiser? Or what about you, you dyslexic moron?

Nonsense. Worse than nonsense, off the subject. We’re not talking about good or bad here. I’m interested in telling you how to get your stuff published, not in critical judgments of who’s good or bad. As a rule the critical judgments come after the check’s been spent, anyway. I have my own opinions, but most times I keep them to myself. People who are published steadily and are paid for what they are writing may be either saints or trollops, but they are clearly reaching a great many someones who want what they have. Ergo, they are communicating. Ergo, they are talented. The biggest part of writing successfully is being talented, and in the context of marketing, the only bad writer is one who doesn’t get paid. If you’re not talented, you won’t succeed. And if you’re not succeeding, you should know when to quit.

When is that? I don’t know. It’s different for each writer. Not after six rejection slips, certainly, nor after sixty. But after six hundred? Maybe. After six thousand? My friend, after six thousand pinks, it’s time you tried painting or computer programming.

Further, almost every aspiring writer knows when he is getting warmer - you start getting little jotted notes on your rejection slips, or personal letters … maybe a commiserating phone call. It's lonely out there in the cold, but there are encouraging voices … unless there is nothing in your words which warrants encouragement. I think you owe it to yourself to skip as much of the self-illusion as possible. If your eyes are open, you'll know which way to go … or when to turn back.

2. Be neat

Type. Double-space. Use a nice heavy white paper, never that erasable onion-skin stuff. If you've marked up your manuscript a lot, do another draft.

3. Be self-critical

If you haven’t marked up your manuscript a lot, you did a lazy job. Only God gets things right the first time. Don’t be a slob.

4. Remove every extraneous word

You want to get up on a soapbox and preach? Fine. Get one and try your local park. You want to write for money? Get to the point. And if you remove all the excess garbage and discover you can't find the point, tear up what you wrote and start all over again … or try something new.

5. Never look at a reference book while doing a first draft

You want to write a story? Fine. Put away your dictionary, your encyclopedias, your World Almanac, and your thesaurus. Better yet, throw your thesaurus into the wastebasket. The only things creepier than a thesaurus are those little paperbacks college students too lazy to read the assigned novels buy around exam time. Any word you have to hunt for in a thesaurus is the wrong word. There are no exceptions to this rule. You think you might have misspelled a word? O.K., so here is your choice: either look it up in the dictionary, thereby making sure you have it right - and breaking your train of thought and the writer's trance in the bargain - or just spell it phonetically and correct it later. Why not? Did you think it was going to go somewhere? And if you need to know the largest city in Brazil and you find you don't have it in your head, why not write in Miami, or Cleveland? You can check it … but later. When you sit down to write, write. Don't do anything else except go to the bathroom, and only do that if it absolutely cannot be put off.

6. Know the markets

Only a dimwit would send a story about giant vampire bats surrounding a high school to McCall's. Only a dimwit would send a tender story about a mother and daughter making up their differences on Christmas Eve to Playboy … but people do it all the time. I'm not exaggerating; I have seen such stories in the slush piles of the actual magazines. If you write a good story, why send it out in an ignorant fashion? Would you send your kid out in a snowstorm dressed in Bermuda shorts and a tank top? If you like science fiction, read the magazines. If you want to write confession stories, read the magazines. And so on. It isn't just a matter of knowing what's right for the present story; you can begin to catch on, after awhile, to overall rhythms, editorial likes and dislikes, a magazine's entire slant. Sometimes your reading can influence the next story, and create a sale.

7. Write to entertain

Does this mean you can't write "serious fiction"? It does not. Somewhere along the line pernicious critics have invested the American reading and writing public with the idea that entertaining fiction and serious ideas do not overlap. This would have surprised Charles Dickens, not to mention Jane Austen, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Bernard Malamud, and hundreds of others. But your serious ideas must always serve your story, not the other way around. I repeat: if you want to preach, get a soapbox.

8. Ask yourself frequently, "Am I having fun?"

The answer needn't always be yes. But if it's always no, it's time for a new project or a new career.

9. How to evaluate criticism

Show your piece to a number of people - ten, let us say. Listen carefully to what they tell you. Smile and nod a lot. Then review what was said very carefully. If your critics are all telling you the same thing about some facet of your story - a plot twist that doesn't work, a character who rings false, stilted narrative, or half a dozen other possibles - change that facet. It doesn't matter if you really liked that twist of that character; if a lot of people are telling you something is wrong with you piece, it is. If seven or eight of them are hitting on that same thing, I'd still suggest changing it. But if everyone - or even most everyone - is criticizing something different, you can safely disregard what all of them say.

10. Observe all rules for proper submission

Return postage, self-addressed envelope, all of that.

11. An agent? Forget it. For now

Agents get 10% of monies earned by their clients. 10% of nothing is nothing. Agents also have to pay the rent. Beginning writers do not contribute to that or any other necessity of life. Flog your stories around yourself. If you've done a novel, send around query letters to publishers, one by one, and follow up with sample chapters and/or the manuscript complete. And remember Stephen King's First Rule of Writers and Agents, learned by bitter personal experience: You don't need one until you're making enough for someone to steal … and if you're making that much, you'll be able to take your pick of good agents.

12. If it’s bad, kill it

When it comes to people, mercy killing is against the law. When it comes to fiction, it is the law.

That’s everything you need to know. And if you listened, you can write everything and anything you want. Now I believe I will wish you a pleasant day and sign off.

My ten minutes are up.

http://www.icestormcity.com/rumble/king.html