

A close-up portrait of Stephen King, an older man with short, graying hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a black t-shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

**STEPHEN KING**  
**BOOK BY BOOK**

By Patrick Smith

**T**HE DETAILS OF THE LIFE and career of multigenre megaseller Stephen King are so well known that a brief summary should suffice. King, the undisputed master of horror—before turning his attention just as successfully to several other flavors of fiction—was born in Portland, Maine, in 1947. His father left the family when Stephen was two. Introduced to horror fiction in an ironic twist when he discovered an H. P. Lovecraft volume in a box of his father’s abandoned belongings, the hook was set. “That book, courtesy of my departed father, was my first taste of a world that went deeper than the B-pictures which played at the movies on Saturday afternoon,” King writes in *Danse Macabre*, his 1981 Hugo Award–winning collection of essays and autobiographical musings.

A voracious reader and filmgoer, King absorbed 1950s and 1960s pop culture and immersed himself in the horror stories that profoundly influenced his fiction. Writing, it seems, was never far from the young Stephen’s mind. Aside from a brief stint teaching English at a local private school, writing was the only profession he seriously considered.

After some credits in small magazines, King found a modicum of success when Doubleday published his first novel, *Carrie*, in 1974, to positive acclaim. “That this is a first novel is amazing,” the *New York Times* noted in a brief, prophetic review of the novel. “King writes with the kind of surety normally associated with veteran writers. This mixture of science fiction, the occult, [and] secondary-school sociology ... turns out to be an extraordinary mixture” (5/26/74). King gave up teaching to write full-time when the book proved commercially successful.

In the four decades since, King has published more than 50 novels, 9 collections of short fiction, and reams of nonfiction. He’s also become a highly visible Boston Red Sox fan. (The title of his 1999 psychological horror novel *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* refers to a Red Sox pitcher from the late 1990s who possessed a wicked curve ball; King later published *Faithful*, along with fellow Sox fan and author Stewart O’Nan: which is an account of the Red Sox’s unlikely, curse-busting run to a World Series title in 2004.)

Although he has been largely ignored by the literary establishment, King is a raconteur of the first rank, a genre-mash-up genius with an uncanny sense of what audiences embrace in popular fiction. He takes the role of storyteller quite seriously, even if few critics would place King alongside Faulkner, Hemingway, or Flannery O’Connor as great American literary writers. He has also influenced readers’ tastes as much as any writer in the last few decades. He has received the biggest accolades, including nine Bram Stoker Awards and five British Fantasy Awards for his novels and short stories (a slew of which have been adapted to screen and television), as well as a National Book Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

It’s easy—but intellectually lazy—to compare King’s books to the many films based on his fiction, even if some of those efforts are quite good on their own: *The Shawshank Redemption* leads the pack, followed by such films as *Misery*, *The Running Man*, and *The Green Mile*. But to equate King’s

work with even the best of those films—which generally take liberties with the source texts and could never match the intricacy of the books’ plots—is unfair to the author.

The reading world, it seems, can’t get enough of King, despite his prolific output. *The Wind Through the Keyhole*, King’s eighth *Dark Tower* book, sat at #1 on the *New York Times* best seller list shortly after its publication in May 2012, topping work by heavyweights David Baldacci, John Grisham, and Nora Roberts.

Want to bet against next year’s *Doctor Sleep*, a sequel to *The Shining*, doing the same?

Read the books. Enjoy them. Three hundred and fifty million Stephen King fans can’t be wrong.

## THE EARLY WORK

Written with barely constrained nervous energy through the lens of postadolescent angst, the first handful of King’s novels, with the hindsight of 40 years, predict a publishing juggernaut in the making. Few authors writing genre fiction at the time (or, arguably, since) crafted more intense, memorable psychological character sketches. King’s work filled the vacuum left after the publication of best-selling horror novels *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967) and *The Exorcist* (1971) a few years before. By the time he redefined the modern epic in *The Stand* just four years into his career, King’s voice had become unmistakably his own.

### Carrie (1974)



In the context of the supernatural, King’s debut novel takes on the shibboleths that became his stock-in-trade, including religious extremism, the “outsider” mentality, and an awkward (to put it mildly) coming of age. Carrie White, the shy, teenaged daughter of a Christian fundamentalist mother, is ostracized by her classmates. Invited to the prom under false pretense and bathed in pigs’ blood (a scene made famous in Sissy Spacek’s screen portrayal of the telekinetic teenager), she wreaks havoc on the inhabitants of her insular, small-minded hometown. (Really, who knew Maine was so weird?)

Told through a patchwork of reports and firsthand accounts, King’s shortest novel—readers who come late to the author’s work are incredulous that he ever wrote *anything* under 200 pages—already contains narrative elements and stylistic quirks easily identifiable in his later work. The 27-year-old King was an old-school writer who paid his dues with extravagant doses of asceticism and lacerating self-doubt. After breaking through with *Carrie*, he penned nearly 20 books—novels, story collections, and nonfiction—in the following decade.

## 'Salem's Lot (1975)

- ♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD FOR BEST NOVEL NOMINEE
- ♦ LOCUS AWARD ALL-TIME BEST FANTASY NOVEL NOMINEE



*Carrie* seems like throat-clearing when compared with King's follow-up, *'Salem's Lot*, a clever, contemporary update of the vampire mythos. After a 25-year-long absence, the young widower Ben Mears returns to his hometown of Jerusalem's Lot, Maine, to write. While researching a book on the Marsten House, a mansion with a shady past and an even shadier

present, Ben uncovers the secrets of the current owner, an Austrian named Barlow, and his henchman, Straker. After hell is unleashed on the unsuspecting town, Ben retreats to Mexico, planning an eventual return to the decimated place to take care of unfinished business.

Lost in the noise of the recent vampire revolution in fiction, *'Salem's Lot* was influential in its time, a heady mix of King's fascination with traditional horror fiction—he hit on the idea for the novel while teaching a course in genre literature—and pop culture cool. The book remains one of King's own favorites.

## The Shining (1977)



Out-of-work teacher and aspiring writer Jack Torrance, a recovering alcoholic with a violent temper but genuine love for his family, is hired as caretaker of Colorado's Overlook Hotel, a venerable old place with a violent past. Inaccessible for months during the brutal Rocky Mountain winters, the hotel brings out the worst in Torrance and places his wife and young son (who possesses the powerful gift of "the shine") in harm's way.

In his third published novel (and first hardback best seller), King hones his psychological chops with a tormented character whose gradual descent into madness as the hotel's ghostly spirits arise and exploit Jack's weaknesses forms the story's backbone. A cult classic since getting film director Stanley Kubrick's treatment in 1980, *The Shining* remains one of King's best known—and least read—books. (King thought so little of Kubrick's rendering of Jack Torrance as played by Jack Nicholson that he adapted the novel as a television miniseries in 1997. Few remember it.)

## The Stand (1978)

- ♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD FOR BEST NOVEL NOMINEE



Within a year of the appearance of *The Shining*, King published a novel, *Rage* (1977), under the pseudonym Richard Bachman, and a short fiction collection, *Night Shift*. But fans got the book they were waiting for when *The Stand*, a postapocalyptic and horror novel in three parts, hit the shelves in 1978. Weighing in at more than 800 pages, the novel

became King's de facto masterwork. (In 1990, he reissued the novel, adding more than 250 pages to the original and updating the story.)

Most of the world's human population has died from a manmade strain of flu dubbed "Captain Trips." Some of the few survivors are drawn to Boulder, Colorado, by the shared vision of the improbably old, benevolent Abigail Freemantle ("Mother Abigail") and work to reestablish society and to regain some sense of normalcy. Others, however, respond to the evil machinations of Randall Flagg (the "Dark Man") in Las Vegas (where else?). When the two groups representing good and evil confront each other, the fate of the human race rests in the balance.

An epic of the highest order and King's most popular book, *The Stand* was a driving force for the "bigger is better" trend in publishing. Many of King's fans point to *The Stand* as the surest sign of the author's twisted genius.

## Pet Sematary (1983)

- ♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD FOR BEST NOVEL NOMINEE



Based on the "three wishes" stories common in horror fiction, most famously in W. W. Jacobs's classic short story "The Monkey's Paw," *Pet Sematary* might be King's bleakest book. Published the same year as *Christine* and following the success of *The Dead Zone* (1979), *Firestarter* (1980), *Cujo* (1981), and the short story collection *Different Seasons* (1982), King's reputation as one of the most prolific writers since Charles Dickens was certainly bolstered by the publication of two accomplished novels in a matter of months. The truth was more prosaic. King had finished the manuscript several years before, and, so the story goes, he held the book from publication because even he found the horror of the doctor's dilemma beyond the pale.

In the story, Dr. Louis Creed and his family move from Chicago to Ludlow, Maine, where Louis takes over at the local university's health services. Through the death of his daughter's cat and its mysterious resurrection, Louis begins to understand a dark secret about a Micmac Indian burial ground, the site of the town's "pet sematary." When his young son is tragically killed, Creed will do anything to keep his family together. But that could be a fatal mistake.

## THE BACHMAN NOVELS

(1977–2007)

In the early 1960s, before the ink on his driver's license was dry, King penned much of the fiction that would be published later under his pseudonym, Richard Bachman. The novels, 7 in all, didn't begin to appear until 15 years later, when legions of fans—who may have suspected but couldn't know for certain that King and Bachman were one

and the same—made Pavlovian pilgrimages to bookstores every time one of the novels was published.

Precocious and prolific, King wrote an unpublished draft of *Rage* (1977), a psychological thriller centered on a homicidal high school student, shortly after graduating from high school himself; as a freshman at the University of Maine, Orono, he wrote *The Long Walk* (1979), an adolescent battle to the death that predated Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* series by three decades.

*The Running Man* (1982), later adapted to the screen with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the lead and featuring the late Richard Dawson in a spot-on role as emcee, portrayed a dark dystopian vision that anticipated the popularity of reality television and warned of the rise of a corporo-fascist state. *Thinner* (1984), about a gypsy curse disguised as a radical weight-loss regimen, followed.

King's cover was blown for good in 1985, though *The Regulators* (1996) and *Blaze* (2007) appeared, each time with a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Bachman/King connection, long after readers had been let in on the ruse. The author claimed that he published under the pseudonym to keep from inundating the book market—always a concern for a writer who works as quickly as King—and to test the notion that talent will always prevail over brand. The jury is still out on the latter. Without question, the Bachman books sold well enough on their own, but they became best sellers after the revelation.

As tightly as the Bachman novels are woven into the King lore—and, for the most part, the original five books exhibit a remarkably consistent vision and the work of a gifted genre writer—the author doesn't get nearly enough credit for pointed social criticism and his ability, even early in his career, to extrapolate future events from present realities. Most serious readers of King's work accept the Bachman books as part of the King canon—and with good reason.

## THE DARK TOWER NOVELS

(1982–PRESENT)

**THE FANTASY WORLD OF THE DARK TOWER** belongs to King's most enthusiastic fans and often escapes casual readers. Beginning with *The Gunslinger* in 1982, King mixes J. R. R. Tolkien and Sergio Leone to tell the tale of Roland of Gilead (Roland Deschain), a descendant of King Arthur and the world's last gunslinger, who pursues the Man in Black to learn the secrets of the Dark Tower.

Subsequent volumes chronicle Deschain's progress toward his goal, and in *The Dark Tower VII* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2005), the gunslinger completes his quest. Deschain and



his ka-tet, a sacred fellowship, as well as characters from other King stories, travel great distances, fight bloody battles, and suffer personal losses as the forces of evil grow stronger. Deschain's ultimate goal, to reach the tower itself and to save the nexus of time and space from destruction, entails one last battle. Then, he enters the tower and awaits an unknown fate.

"I've told my tale all the way to the end," King writes in the coda to *The Dark Tower VII*, "and am satisfied." Fans were delighted when King recently published another volume in the series, *The Wind Through the Keyhole* (★★★★ July/Aug 2012), which takes place between the fourth volume in the series, *Wizard and Glass* (1997), and the fifth, *The Wolves of the Calla* (2003). But after 22 years, nearly 4,000 pages, and 7 installments, King's archetypal fantasy-quest series ended. Throughout the series, King pens stunning set pieces, invents cataclysmic battles, and touches on the familiar themes of good versus evil. His writing is as powerful as ever—just imagine a demonic Mordred devouring his mother.

"In the end, King holds it all together through sheer narrative muscle and his absolute commitment to his slowly unfolding—and deeply personal—vision," reported the *Washington Post* (9/19/04). "*The Dark Tower* is a humane, visionary epic and a true magnum opus." King fans and novices alike will find the Dark Tower novels a "fitting capstone to a uniquely American epic." Just don't start in the middle.



## THE MATURE WORK

**THE NOVELS OF KING'S MIDDLE PERIOD**, running roughly between 1985 and the turn of the century, tend to be longer, more in-depth explorations (most of the novels of this period are 500 pages or more, with *It* the longest of the bunch) of the themes that King introduced in his early novels: vaguely or overtly supernatural experiences accentuated by the reality that, when pitted against one another, people are quite capable of bad behavior.

**It** (1986)

◆ BRITISH FANTASY AWARD



Rivaling *The Stand* in length and ambition, *It* spans the lives of seven outcasts (first as children, and then as adults) and explores themes familiar to readers. The Losers Club, seven adolescents in Derry, Maine, band together to avoid abuse from the town's bullies. Through a series of bizarre events, the kids come to understand the nature of It, an evil entity

that appears to each in the form of his or her worst nightmare, including Pennywise the Clown. Using the Ritual of Chüd to defeat It, the friends resolve to return to Derry should It ever reappear. When Mike Hanlon, the only one of the Losers to stay in Derry, sees It's handiwork nearly 30 years later, he calls his friends to take care of unfinished business.

Relative to most of King's novels, *It* concludes on an up note. It's probably not the best place to start reading King, but it's well-suited for the reader who hates to see a good book end.

## Misery (1987)

♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD FOR BEST NOVEL NOMINEE



Originally conceived as a Bachman book, an idea later dismissed by King, *Misery* stands as one of the author's best psychological thrillers.

Paul Sheldon is the successful writer of the Victorian-era *Misery* Chastain romance series. His tradition has been to finish each of his books in the same room at the Hotel Boulderado in Colorado. On his way to Los Angeles to celebrate the completion of a new novel, Sheldon wrecks his car in a snowstorm and is rescued by Annie Wilkes, the deeply disturbed “number one fan” of his work. When she discovers that Sheldon

has killed off *Misery* so that he can pursue a crime series, the axe falls—literally.

As successful as the film adaptation was—casting James Caan as the world-weary writer and Kathy Bates (who won an Oscar for her effort) as the devoted, insane superfan didn't hurt King's reputation, nor did the “hobbling” scene that replaced some of the novel's more graphic violence. Both the novel and the film showcased King's strengths as a writer. The pacing and tone of the novel are nearly pitch-perfect, the fever-dream of a storyteller at the height of his powers and in complete control of two very different characters. In short, classic King.

## Needful Things (1991)



With overtones of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *Needful Things* lampoons the pettiness of small-town America. When the charming, elderly newcomer, Leland Gaunt, opens the eponymous antique shop in Castle Rock, Maine (the venue as well for *The Dead Zone* and *Cujo*), townspeople are pleasantly surprised by the variety of the selection—items that everybody wants and needs—and their affordability. There's a catch, of course. Despite having just arrived, Gaunt knows the town well; along with his assistant, the misfit John “Ace” Merrill, the demonic old man goads the buyers of his goods into fueling the petty

## WHERE TO START

Finding a point of entry for a writer as prolific as Stephen King can be a little intimidating. Let the following suggestions get you started.

### IF YOU LIKE PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS ...

*The Shining* (1977), *Misery* (1987), *Dolores Claiborne* (1992).

**IF YOU LIKE SCIENCE FICTION ...**  
*The Running Man* (1982), *The Tommyknockers* (1987).

**IF YOU LIKE TIME TRAVEL ...**  
*11/22/63* (2011).

**IF YOU LIKE FANTASY ...**  
*The Dark Tower* (1982–present), *The Eyes of the Dragon* (1987), *Rose Mad-der* (1995).

**IF YOU LIKE TO BE REALLY SCARED ...**  
*'Salem's Lot* (1975), *Pet Sematary* (1983), *Cell* (2006).

### IF YOU LIKE YOUR THRILLS WITH A TWIST ...

*Cujo* (1981), *Christine* (1983), *Gerald's Game* (1992).

**IF YOU LIKE BOOKS YOU CAN REALLY SINK YOUR TEETH INTO (EACH OF THESE BOOKS WEIGHS IN AT OVER 1,000 PAGES) ...**

*The Stand* (1978/1990), *It* (1986), *Under the Dome* (2009).

**IF YOU LIKE SHORT FICTION ...**  
*Night Shift* (1978), *Different Seasons* (1982), *Skeleton Crew* (1985), *Full Dark, No Stars* (2010).

**IF YOU LIKE NONFICTION ...**  
*Danse Macabre* (1981), *On Writing* (2000), *Faithful* (with Stewart O'Nan) (2004).

### IF YOU LIKE ORDINARY PEOPLE WITH EXTRAORDINARY ABILITIES ...

*Carrie* (1974), *The Dead Zone* (1979), *The Green Mile* (1996).

**IF YOU LIKE QUALITY FILMS THAT STARTED OUT AS EVEN BETTER STORIES (AND SOMETIMES DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY FROM THE SOURCE) ...**

*The Shining* (1977), *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* (novella in *Different Seasons*, 1982), *The Dark Half* (1989).

**IF YOU LIKE AWARD-WINNING FICTION ...**  
*Bag of Bones* (1998; British Fantasy Award), *Lisey's Story* (2006; Bram Stoker Award), *Duma Key* (2008; Bram Stoker Award).

jealousies and hidden secrets that fester beneath the façade of a dignified New England town.

Not all reviewers were impressed with King's social commentary. "A mean message from America's most popular novelist," Walter Kendrick wrote in a *Washington Post* screed. "But King has spat in his readers' faces before, and they have lapped it up. I can only suppose that King's millions of fans agree with him on the amoral, vicious, brain-dead disgustingness of their fellow Americans. Now that's a scary thought." Kendrick was correct on one count: King's mean-spiritedness seems not to have adversely affected sales.

## THE LAST DECADE'S WORK

**KING MADE NATIONAL NEWS IN JUNE 1999** when he was struck by a minivan and seriously injured while walking along a Maine highway. After a long convalescence to heal multiple bone fractures and a collapsed lung, King briefly considered giving up writing. What did he have left to prove?

But the turn of the millennium saw King publish short fiction at his usual rapid clip. *Hearts in Atlantis* (1999), a how-to book; *On Writing* (2000); *From a Buick 8* (2002); and *Everything's Eventual* (2002) placated readers until the last three volumes of *The Dark Tower* (before the recent *The Wind Through the Keyhole*) were published in 2003 and 2004.

Mixing high-concept stories, a healthy dose of skepticism about advancing technology, and good, old-fashioned genre fiction, King experiments in his most recent books with whatever material he sees fit. After selling nearly half a billion (the "b" there is correct) books, that's his prerogative. The work from the last decade has continued to delight his millions of dedicated readers and has collected quite a few others along the way.

### Duma Key (2007)



The prosperous life of Edgar Freemantle, a Minnesota construction mogul, changes in an instant when he becomes involved in a horrific work accident. Brain-damaged and now missing his right hand, Freemantle spirals into depression and loses everything dear to him. He moves to Duma Key, Florida, in an attempt to take stock of what's left. While there, he discovers a remarkable, latent artistic ability, as well as a host of eccentric characters intent on nursing him back to health. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2008)

With *Duma Key*, King returns to his bread and butter after the standard technology-run-amok fare in *Cell* (★★★ May/June 2006) and a moderately successful departure in the character study *Lisey's Story* (★★★ Jan/Feb 2007). *Duma Key*

is clearly autobiographical, and the lingering physical and psychological effects of King's accident figure prominently here. "At its core it's a horror story," notes the *Boston Globe*, "but with enough emotional complications to keep you turning the pages."

### Under the Dome (2009)



No one in Chester's Mill, Maine, knows the reason for the appearance of an impenetrable dome over the town. But some enterprising residents don't waste any time wreaking havoc in their brave, new, hermetically sealed world. A militia of miscreants led by Big Jim Rennie, a born-again used-car salesman, takes control of the town's police department

and threatens to establish its own banana republic. The only people standing in Rennie's way are a ragtag group of geeks (they're all here: a journalist, a librarian, an English professor, a few computer nerds) who look to Dale Barbara, an Iraq War veteran working as a fry cook, for salvation as they seek the truth of the dome's origin. (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2010)

Sure, *Under the Dome* is a soupçon of social commentary and satire thinly disguised as a bloodbath. In Chester's Mill, the only thing higher than the price of propane is the body count. But that's the fun, and King keeps the throttle wide open. "This book will remind many King readers of *The Stand*, long acknowledged as [King's] masterpiece," according to the *Dallas Morning News*. "You'll definitely want to read this one, but trust me and do so in a well-ventilated room with plenty of sunlight and a source of fresh water nearby."

### 11/22/63 (2011)



High school English teacher Jake Epping travels into the past—September 9, 1958, to be exact—landing there under the assumed identity of George T. Amberson. He's got one goal in mind: to prevent the assassination of President John F. Kennedy five years in the future. But what Epping/Amberson discovers in Dallas is a world of misdirection and

coincidence (and, in an unusual twist for Stephen King, romance) that forces him to dig hard to get to the truth—before he kills Lee Harvey Oswald and changes the course of history. Easier said than done. "The past," Jake learns, "is obdurate." (★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2012)

Following *Full Dark, No Stars* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2011), a well-reviewed collection of novellas, King returned with this tale, "richly layered with the pleasures we've come to expect" (*Washington Post*). Riffing on time travel without running into the scientific weeds, the novel recalls Jack Finney's *Time and Again* or Ken Grimwood's *Replay*. ■