

# An Interview



Photo by James Leonard, courtesy of Doubleday & Co.

## With Stephen King

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### Writer, Storyteller, Thriller

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by CHP Officer Phil Konstantin, I.D. 11643

**S**Stephen King is the unabashed king of the terror tale. For the last 10 years, his stories have consistently appeared on every best seller list. On many occasions, he has even had two books simultaneously on the prestigious *New York Times* best seller list. His stories range from the ghastly and the unworldly, to the realm of near truth and the terrifyingly possible.

He has scared the wits out of millions and has firmly established himself in modern American literature. Some of his writings include: *Carrie*, *Salem's Lot*, *Night Shift* (a collection of short stories), *The Stand*, *The Shining*, *Firestarter*, *Cujo*, *Dead Zone*, *Creep Show*, *Christine* and *Pet Sematary*. Many of his novels have become major motion pictures with *Dead Zone*,

*Christine* and *Carrie* being three of his more popular cinematic offerings.

King lives in Maine with his wife and children. He enjoys the "life of the back woods," as he calls it. King writes about what he knows, consequently, many of his stories are set in his "own neck of the woods."

King is very frank and open, and

displays a corny sense of humor. He enjoys his work and takes a great deal of pride in it. When asked if he was also a storyteller, he said he didn't think he could keep an audience spellbound just by telling them a story. But, in his description of the facts behind one of his short stories, *The Mangler*, as told below, you will see how well endowed he is with the ability to raise the hackles on your neck with only a brief narration.

*I understand you don't like to be asked why you write the kind of stories you do. Is this correct?*

I have always felt a little bit uncomfortable with that question. It's not a question that you ask a guy that writes detective stories or the guy that writes mystery stories or westerns, or whatever. But it is asked of the writer of horror stories because it seems that there is something nasty about our love for horror stories, or boogies, ghosts and goblins, demons and devils.

*When did you start writing?*

I started writing seriously when I was about 12.

*Do you have to be in a special mood to start writing?*

I am always in the mood.

*Do you have a certain method that you use when you write?*

It usually is a set schedule. I write in the mornings, in the bright daylight. But I get most of my good ideas after the sun has gone down and the dark is on the land.

*Do you consider what you write "horror stories"?*

There are times when I like to think of it as mainstream fiction or literature. But in the back of my mind, in the closet where I keep the truth, I think of them as horror stories. A lot of them I think of as creep shows.

*I once read that Salem's Lot is your favorite book. Why?*

In a way it is my favorite story, mostly because of what it says about small towns. They are kind of a dying organism right now.



*King enjoys scaring the bejesus out of his readers. His latest book, Misery, was released on June 8, 1987. Photo by Thomas Victor, courtesy of Viking Penguin Inc.*

The story seems sort of down home to me. I have a special cold spot in my heart for it!

*Is the town Jerusalem's Lot (Salem's Lot) a real town?*

Yes and no. It is based on a town in upstate Vermont that I heard about as an undergraduate in college called Jeremiah's Lot. I was going through Vermont with a friend and he pointed out the town, just in passing, as we went by in the car. He said, "You know, they say that everybody in that town just simply disappeared in 1908." I said, "Aw, come on. What are you talking about?" He said, "That's the story. Haven't you heard of the Marie Celeste where everybody supposedly disappeared? This is the same thing. One day they were there and then one day a relative came over to look for someone that they hadn't heard from in awhile, and all the houses were empty. Some of the houses had dinner set on the table. Some of the stores still had money in them. It was covered in mold from the summer damp and it was starting to rot, but nobody had stolen it.

The town was completely emptied out."

*Is that how you get your inspiration for your stories, or does it also come from day-to-day events, a phrase you may hear, or even from suggestions you get from fans?*

I get inspiration, a lot of times, from very commonplace things that just strike a cord and develop themselves in the subconscious. Sometimes it's something a little bit more sensational than that. As an example, there is a story in the book, *Night Shift*, called *The Mangler*, about a laundry machine that takes on a sort of malignant life. I worked in a laundry for about a year and a half after I got out of college. It was the only job that I could find to support my wife and our first child. There was a fellow there that had no hands or forearms. He simply had hooks. This is one of the things that they don't tell you about when you become management: You have to wear a tie. It was this fellow's tie that did him in.

It was just after World War II and he was working around the machines. The steam ironer and folder is the machine that the workers call the Mangler, because that is what it will do to you if you get too close to it or get caught in it. This fellow bent down to pick something up and his tie went into the machine. He reached down with his left hand to pull his tie out and his hand went into the machine. Then he put his right hand around his left wrist to try to pull it out and his right hand got caught. As a result, he lost both hands and both forearms and was lucky not to have died. His hands were replaced by hooks.

Thirty years later, when I worked there, he would go into the men's room, during the summer and turn on the hot and cold water and run it over his hooks. He would then come up behind you and lay the hooks on the back of your neck. That's what gave me the inspiration for that particular story. I always think of the machine at the end of the story, which sort of becomes possessed by a demon

and escapes from the laundry and goes through the streets, as sort of having escaped because it had "pressing" business.

*Since you mentioned Night Shift, how was it that John D. MacDonald came to do the introduction? His field is so far from your own.*

When we were putting the book together at Doubleday, my editor asked me who I would like to do the introduction if I could have anyone in the world. I said that it was off the wall, but if I could have anybody I would like to have John D. MacDonald because I had cut my teeth on his stories. I still think that of all the people doing top fiction today, he is the best. He was my model as a kid. If there are people out there that want to write, all you need to do is read 20 of his stories to get an idea what it takes to make a story kick over.

*Would you ever participate in a seance?*

I would NOT participate in one under any circumstances. Not even if my wife died and a medium said she had a message from my wife. I cannot conceive of circumstances

under which I would participate in that sort of thing or stay overnight in a house that was reputed to be haunted or any of those things. We are too close as it is to a world that is incomprehensible. And the time comes when you and I and everyone who walks the face of this earth has to enter that world. We will know then, and I can wait.

*Are you interested in psychics, ESP and similar areas?*

I am interested in it and I think now in the latter half of the twentieth century we have enough documentation so that anyone that doubts the psychic experience is an actual empiric reality is on the level with a person who continues to smoke two or three packs of cigarettes a day and denies that there is a link between smoking and lung cancer. The documentation is there. It can barely be questioned any further. We have as much proof, furthermore, barring some technological development that does not exist now, as we are ever going to have. It is simply the preponderance of evidence; it precludes the doubt almost entirely.

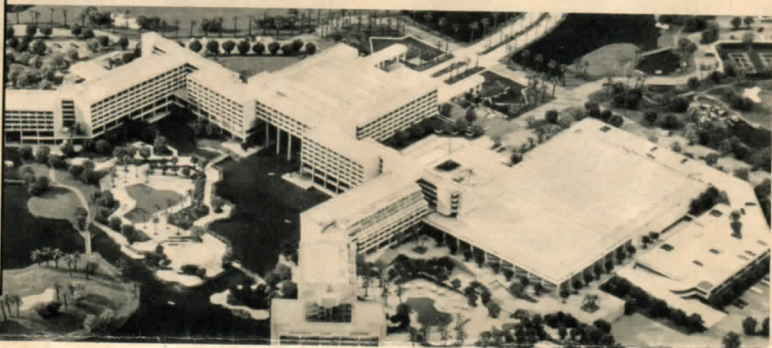
*What is your personal feeling about reincarnation?*

I don't believe in it. I don't like the idea that I am going to come back as an ant or a sparrow if I don't get along in the great karma of life. As far as where I go when I die, the concept that I am simply going to flick out, like a light bulb, to me is not only spiritually impossible to believe, but logically it is laughable — the idea that we simply die and nothing happens. Now, as to what does go on, that is something else. I am religious in the sense that I believe in God and I believe that there is an abiding logical spirit that controls what goes on to a certain extent. Now, there is the Watchmaker Theory that God wound up the universe and let it tick. That may be. Or it may be that he takes a hand in things from time to time. But, whatever it is, I am sure that there is something out there.

*In your own experience have you ever come across any ghosts, ghoulies or anything that goes bump in the night?*

No.

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*Do you get letters from people that say that they have actually experienced things like what you write about?*

Yes, I've got letters from people that have had peculiar psychic experiences, experiences with the dead — sometimes fairly tranquil experiences and sometimes very terrifying experiences. I do believe that a lot of them are sincere. I do believe, also, that some of them may be misguided. But, I think the majority of them have experienced something. This is something that you and I may stumble over like a stone in our paths at any time in our lives. I think everybody has experiences from time to time they can't explain. They are peculiarities. Usually we just dismiss them because they are uncomfortable to think about.

*As a child, did you read horror stories and go to see horror movies?*

Sometimes. Semi-facetiously, when people ask me why I write these kinds of stories, I simply say that I was warped as a child. And, there is some truth to that. The first movie I can remember seeing

was *"The Creature From The Black Lagoon."* And, I can remember hearing a radio play of Ray Bradbury's *"Mars Is Heaven."* And when I cut my teeth on comic books, they were not the easy ones of today, like *Spiderman*, *Superman* and *The Hulk*; they were *Tales Of The Crypt*, *The Vaultkeeper*, and that sort of thing.

The place was full of kids, mostly from five to eleven. I have never in my life, from the time that I was a kid until now, been in an audience where children were so quiet. They were sitting gape-mouthed; they were simply stunned. Total silence. It was the best argument for the rating system that I have ever seen. I don't have anything against either

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***"I believe the stories when I'm writing them, otherwise I couldn't write with any kind of conviction."***

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*What do you think of the new wave in horror films such as Night of the Living Dead and Dawn Of The Dead which deal with a great deal of violence?*

*The Night Of The Living Dead* is an interesting case because it was an unrated movie when it came out. At that time there were only two ratings: GP, which is the same as PG is now, and the unrated movies. I was still in college when *Night Of The Living Dead* came out, and when I went to see it the first time, I went in the afternoon.

of the "Dead" movies, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, none of those movies. If it scares somebody, I think that it is serving a valid purpose. It is doing what the filmmaker intended. But, it is not something that you hand to kids. You just don't do it. You have to be old enough to take it. Kids are just not prepared for it. I think most of us can remember from our own childhood, just in the Disney cartoons, things that frightened us profoundly. For me, it was *Bambi*, the scene when the forest was on

fire. That was something that I had nightmares about. I can't imagine being a little kid of eight and seeing *Night Of The Living Dead* with living corpses eating the flesh of living people.

*How faithfully have your stories been transferred to the screen?*

Well, let's take *Carrie* for example. Brian De Palma, who directed the film, did an excellent job on a fairly low budget. It was made for about \$2.3 million, which is peanuts for the movie industry. But, for instance, when Stanley Kubrick made *The Shining*, they wound up spending about \$14 million, which IS big money. In the book *Carrie*, Carrie ends up destroying her entire town on the way home from her senior prom. She blows up gas stations, and the entire town goes up in flames. That wasn't in the movie, and that was mainly because the cost for the special effects was too high for their budget.

*Do you have much control of your material when it comes to supervising movies?*

No. And I wouldn't want it be-

cause I'm a person that writes books. I don't make movies. I don't feel that I have to have artistic control. Part of this comes from the fact that the book lives on no matter what Hollywood does to your novel in terms of a film. Now, you try to be careful who you allow to do your film because nobody wants their novel to become a turkey movie. But, on the other hand, it is a crapshoot anyway, because even the best people can make a bad film.

*difficulties, and, in essence, you are dealing with human nature. Are you trying to be philosophical?*

I don't really get philosophical, but I believe that nice people are strong and usually in my horror stories, I don't like to write about the old standard where some rotten guy gets chased by a mean spirit that gets him in the end. I'd rather write about nice people that are menaced from outside by some sort of evil power and who sort of slug it out like Joe Frazier and

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***"I write about nice people who are menaced from outside by some sort of will power ..."***

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*Do you actually believe in the things you write about?*

I believe them when I write them. Whether or not I believe them when I am not writing them is something else. I think that a good part of me must or I couldn't do it with any kind of conviction.

*Quite a few of your stories deal with average people beset by great*

Muhammad Ali. And I like to think that good people win. But even good people have other sides. Most people will slow down to get a good look at an accident, even though they won't admit it. I think most of us are fascinated by the macabre and by the weird and even by the nastiness that comes along.

*Do you really end your stories or*

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*do you just stop them at some point in time?*

I've never been asked that before. Well, sometimes there is a place where you can tie the story up with a neat twist. And then there are other stories, like a story of mine called *Truck*. You come to a place where you can end the story, but in the back of your mind, you're convinced that there are other things to tell but the time is not right to tie things off.

*Do you think it is important to keep your readers guessing?*

Yes. This is a form that has become probably less critically popular as time has gone by. I like to end stories where the readers have a little room to run. They can resolve things as they like in their own mind.

*Which do you like better, short stories or novels?*

I like to write short stories more because I never met a writer who wasn't lazy. And a short story is, by its very definition, short. It is something that generally you can turn out in a week to two weeks depending on how well it goes for

you. But, at the same time, it gives same satisfaction of creating a complete world.

*Since many of your stories deal with the supernatural, have you ever felt in any actual physical or spiritual peril from such beings?*

To my soul, I'm not so sure about. As far as my physical being is concerned, so far so good. I simply think that there are things in this world that are relics. We have unsettling remnants of Atlantis. They have found things off Bermuda, great walls and things of that sort. This seems to indicate that there were races and cultures that went before us. And to me, that's an unsettling idea.

*Some people say that horror stories are just cheap shots. All you have to do is write a very simple story, put in a lot of blood and guts, and have somebody do something nasty to someone else, and that's it. What do you think?*

It doesn't work like that. Scaring people, especially in our day and time, is one of the hardest things on earth, as far as I'm concerned. You and I and everyone else in

this world live in what is probably the most difficult times that have ever been. We are facing total thermonuclear destruction; and, if you can make someone believe in a ghost or a demon or a vampire in the face of that, you are doing well. From my own personal point of view, I don't think just blood and guts is enough. At least, it isn't for me. Maybe it will turn someone's stomach; but, I'm not sure that is literature or even entertainment.

*A friend once told me that she actually had to put one of your stories down because the imagery that she had built up in her mind "grossed her out." Would you consider that a compliment?*

Yeah, I would. I'm not a purist in this field. My feeling of the whole genre, of the terror tale, is this: The best thing that you can do for readers in this field is to terrify them. That's a head reaction. It is something that is intellectual, it happens in your mind. It is the sort of effect that Edgar Allen Poe gets in the story, *The Telltale Heart*, when he starts talking about a quick beating sound, like a watch.

There is something about that that appeals to the mind more than anything else. The fact that this fellow is hearing the heart, the dismembered heart under the floor-board beating and beating, and the police are there and nobody can hear it but him. It goes on and on and it gets louder and louder. That's terror!

And then there is horror, that's the next step on the ladder. It is a physical sort of reaction. It is the reaction you have to the idea that a machine could literally, physically come alive and want to suck people in and grind them up. That is a horrible thought.

And then you finally get down to the literal, physical "gross out," which is probably the basest human emotion that we know. But still, it is valid and we have a need for it. If I can't get terror, and I can't get horror, I'll be happy with a "gross out."

*Do you enjoy reading other people's horror stories?*

Oh, yes. There are a lot of people in the field that I do read. There is a lot of stuff that is written in this field, though, that is not very good. You just have to look for the good stuff.

*Which is harder to write, a story*

*that appeals to the intellect or one that hits you at the gut level?*

I think it is harder to write a story that appeals to the intellect. But, when you tie onto one, you can do it quite deeply. It really depends on the type of idea you have to begin with.

*You have written several stories about rats. Do you have a certain fascination with them?*


I write about things that scare me. I've never written a snake story in my life. I read a good one called *Mountain King* awhile back; but, I myself have never written a story about snakes because they don't scare me. I write about rats because they scare the hell out of me. I think we tend to write out our phobias.

*Have you had a subject that you have wanted to write about but have never been able to do it?*

Spiders! I want to write about spiders. To me, that is the one theme that cuts right across and scares just about everybody. Spiders, to me, are just about the most horrible, awful things that I can think about. I think everyone is afraid of spiders. I have also wanted to write a really good elevator story about the fear of heights. A stuck-in-the-elevator story can combine

a fear of heights and also claustrophobia.

*With the tremendous explosion of technological advances, do you see a time when fact will far surpass any kind of fiction you could conceive?*

Yes. I think we are getting into that situation now. One of the examples I use is abortion on demand. The Supreme Court has said that abortion on demand is legal up until the third month of term. Which means for the first twelve or fourteen weeks of a woman's pregnancy, she can abort her fetus. That is her determination. The Supreme Court has said that that is not a human being with its own right to life. The problem is this, we're approaching a point where a fetus of three months, two months or even one month can be kept alive. Which is to say that you have to question the mother's ability to say, "It's my property; it's a part of me. It isn't a living thing on its own." Science is beginning to encroach on every level of our volition. And to me, that is a frightening social concept. It doesn't have anything to do with the right to have an abortion verses the right to life. It has to do with the ability of science to keep things alive and the ability of science to really control our lives. 

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