

“We Walk Your Dog at Night!”: An Interview with Stephen King
by John C. Tibbetts

Stephen King is a phenomenon. He is without question the most popular writer of horror fiction of all time. In 1973 he was living with his family in a trailer in Hampden, Maine, struggling to make a living as a high school teacher, when he published his first novel, *Carrie*, a tale of a girl with telekinetic powers. Its sales in hardcover were modest (13,000) but enough to inspire a paperback reprint and a popular film adaptation by Brian De Palma in 1976. His “breakthrough” book, *Salem's Lot*, came out that year and quickly sold 3,000,000 copies. Within the next four years *The Shining*, *The Stand*, *Night Shift*, and *The Dead Zone*—all best-selling horror fiction—established King as the reigning Master of the Macabre. When he co-authored *The Talisman* in 1984 with Peter Straub [See the Straub interview elsewhere in these pages], it was a publishing event unparalleled in modern times. Today over 100 million copies of his books are in print.

King's work is frankly derivative of the traditions of 19th century gothic horror. *Carrie* is written in the style of the "epistolary" novel of the late 18th century. *Salem's Lot* is an update on Bram Stoker's vampire novel, *Dracula*. *Christine* is a variant on Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. *Pet Sematary* is a retelling of W. W. Jacobs' "The Monkey's Paw." And *The Dark Half* draws from the rich vein of "doppelganger" stories by Poe, Hoffmann, and Stevenson. Their surface and tone, however, are peppered with references to contemporary rock music and today's plastic, consumer culture. King's diction is vulgarly realistic and his imagery is bluntly visceral, extending traditional grand guignol to what he calls, simply, the modern "gross-out." In his extended essay on horror writing, *Danse Macabre* (1981), King described his technique as a kind of "dance" in which he searches out the private "phobic pressure points" of his readers.

King is 43 years old and lives with his wife, Tabitha, and three children (Naomi Rachel, Joe Hill, and Owen Phillip) in a Victorian mansion in Bangor, Maine. His 6' 4" frame is solid, thickening a bit these days, and the familiar shock of hair curving across his forehead is still thick and dark. His elvish smile is quite disarming. He writes every day, except his birthday, Christmas, and the Fourth of July. "I have a marketable obsession," he has observed. Although he hates being away from the word processor, he finds himself occasionally on the road promoting his new works. We spoke in New York City in 1987. His latest novel, *It*, was on the way to publication, and his movie, *Maximum Overdrive*, was in release.

JCT: What is it like, touring and doing publicity? It must be a welcome change from the grind of writing.

KING: By the time you meet everybody and talk to everybody you feel at the end of the day like a figment of your own imagination! My son Owen used to say, "Daddy's going out to be Stephen King again!"

JCT: You're such a target now of the media--how do you handle the constant barrage of questions you get?

KING: You get on this revolving cassette thing--you just pick out one cassette and plug it in. It can get automatic. But if you do that, then you're not listening to what people ask you. But thank heavens, every now and then I'll find myself saying something new and sometimes somebody will throw me something that I didn't expect at all. The time that you really know that you're going to hear a question you've heard a thousand times before is when the interviewer says, "Now I'm going to ask you something I'll bet you've never been asked before!"

JCT: So you won't be surprised if I wonder if it's good for a writer to get away from the typewriter sometimes. . . ?

KING: No. It's not good for any reason at all. I mean, home is where you're supposed to be. I miss the morning hours from about 8:30 to noon when I usually work. Sure, I can work when I'm away and I take the stuff along and I do what I have to do. But I'm not comfortable with it and I'm not comfortable with the tour circuit or being a "celebrity" (whatever that means).

JCT: I've seen you absolutely mobbed at fantasy and horror conventions, for example. Must be a new definition of "writer's cramp," signing all those copies of your books.

KING: Someday, somebody's going to auction off for a billion dollars a rare, unsigned Stephen King book!

JCT: What's the latest word on King collectibles. It's quite an industry, isn't it? What's the rarest First Edition these days?

KING: I suppose it's The Dark Tower. Funny it should be considered a rare book, since there's about 40,000 copies of it in print--which is more than a lot of novels ever generate in hard cover. Typical sales may range around 12,000 copies. It sold originally for \$20, but some collectors may now want upwards of a \$1,000 for a first, or as low as \$75 for a second edition. Which are thieves' rates. But maybe someday if it gets out of hand, we'll just do a mass marketing of it and put an end to it.

JCT: You've gone on record as deploring that sort of thing, haven't you? Do you think this celebrity business can be a threat to you as a writer?

KING: What you're supposed to be as a writer is an observer, and you can't be an observer when you're the one being observed. In Different Seasons I have this motto that's been adopted by a group of storytellers: "It is the tale, not he who tells it. . . ." That's what's crazy about all this. It's like one of those things we had when we were kids: "Find what's wrong with this picture." The clock's upside down or the teacher has three eyes. (Come to think of it, some of them did!) Writers themselves are not supposed to be the object of all this. What they write is supposed to be the point! It's this game where we're more interested in people than in what they do. Before I sold my first book I'd lie awake at night wondering what it would be like to be a celebrity author. Now I know. I think it was when I got a call some time ago from some TV show or other, like the "Ten Thousand Dollar Pyramid" wanting to know if I'd be on. That's when you know you've finally made it!

JCT: You know, I just noticed--it's late summer right now, August, and you've shaved off your beard. What. . . ?

KING: I'll get the beard back this winter. When the baseball season's over I'll put the razor away [King is a devoted fan of the Boston Red Sox]. That's always sad. I'm not a real shaving fanatic, you know. You hear about women complaining about THAT time of the month--what about a man's time of the day?! If you're like me and you shave early in the morning and then have to do TV or anything like that at 5:00 in the afternoon--you're looking already like Richard Nixon! "I'm not a crook. . . I'm not a crook!"

JCT: Let's switch gears a minute because I want to talk about your experiences as a movie director. Your directoral debut, Maximum Overdrive, is based on your short story, "Trucks." Regardless of how well the film does at the boxoffice, are you encouraged to want to try directing again?

KING: No, it'll be several years before I try that again. Unless I can have the chance to remake The Shining! (Seriously!) You know, as you asked me that, I just flashed back to those mornings at 6:30 on the set in North Carolina when I was surrounded by circling camera people, lighting people, grips and everybody else--and they're all looking at you wanting to know what in the world is going on? And you'd better have some kind of answer!

JCT: I see. It doesn't sound like a pleasant experience.

KING: I tried to be ready for the job I had to do and I made the decision going in that I was either going to do it or I was going to get out and nobody was going to do it for me. In other words, nobody was going to "ghost write" my movie any more than anybody ghost writes my books. Like the books, hate the books--they're my books and

you have a right to your opinion on that basis. The same thing with Maximum Overdrive. It was a kind of "earn while you learn" proposition; but I was there and I stood up and I tried to walk that line between making the movie that I had in mind and listening to somebody else's sort of voice of authority masked as, "Hey, this is in your best interest--this is good advice."

JCT: That's the way masters like John Ford and Orson Welles started--

KING: --Sure, I think so. People have asked me a couple of times why in the world I wanted to make such a technical movie. And the answer is, I didn't know any better! And I will say this, that I think one of the reasons that the producer asked me if I would do this is he sensed I must have something visual going on in my mind. And yes, I never had any doubt about what I wanted to see, ever in that movie. That made things a lot easier, I think, for everybody. No ambiguity in my mind about where the cameras should go, what I should be seeing. Now, there were times when somebody would tell me, "We can't do that"; and there were times when there were technical things which I would have understood better had I gone to film school. Well, I went to film school down in North Carolina!

JCT: Any help from some of your buddies like George Romero [who collaborated with King on the movie, Creep Show]?

KING: George was down about three weeks before we started shooting. And I took him out and showed him the set for my Truck Stop. That was the center of the action, you'll recall, where these people have been surrounded by runaway trucks like people in a fort surrounded by circling Indians.

JCT: Let's back up a minute and talk about this story, because it's the sort of thing you're always writing about--a world gone mad where machines kind of take over--

KING: --But that's not the real horror, is it? I mean, you've got this truck stop with people who work more or less in involuntary servitude to the owner, a guy named Bubba. He runs the truck stop by day and a sort of "Do you need a gun service?" at night. In the basement are weapons ripped off from the National Guard, rocket launchers and stuff. I don't know how many places you'll find with basements like that, but if they exist, they're in North Carolina! They like their guns! That's what's scary!

JCT: We can't ever see a truck stop anymore without wondering. . . . Or a big resort hotel, like in The Shining. . . or a shopping mall in "The Mist" . . . or even a '57 Plymouth Fury in Christine. Thanks a lot! You really do enjoy doing this to us, don't you?

KING: I told a friend of mine once it's like I'm a dentist--only when I uncover the nerve, I don't fix it, but drill on it. I'll stand by that.

JCT: Anyway--Maximum Overdrive does something you do better than anybody, I think. There are all kinds of details in the movie that are typical of your fascination with our consumer culture. You take the things we use around the house and--well--show how dangerous they really are.

KING: I just want to make commonplace things as unsettling as possible. I just look around and find the things that seem nice at first, on the surface, then show what they really can do if they were to--well, to go mad. Did you see the lawnmower in some of the scenes? If you looked closely, you noticed its wheels were spattered with blood. Think about it. What's more commonplace than a vending machine? We had this homicidal soda machine that burps out cans at a great rate--it becomes a deadly machine gun. If you look closely in one shot you'll see a guy who's been nearly decapitated by his own McCulloch Chain Saw. We took care to remove all brand names from the machines, by the way. There are very few companies who want their products to be associated with killing people! Curiously, we didn't have that problem with the truck manufacturers. They didn't care if we ran down men, women, or children--as long as we were sure to show the logo so that the truckers of America would see what sort of "power by the hour" they had.

JCT: Now that's as scary as anything in your stories. I like what your friend Douglas Winter said about you in one of his essays, that you conjure up fears we can't laugh away--fears that won't ever meet Abbott and Costello!

KING: The sorts of thing I have to write about. Especially if nobody else does. Like those machines in Maximum Overdrive--we can't trust them, or the food we eat, the neighbor's dog, like in Cujo. Yeah. You know, people write books because they can't find them in their library. I write stories I don't find anywhere else and that I'll know I'll like to read.

JCT: But your knowing your readers, your audience--that's really tricky, isn't it? To get your effects, to scare them, you have to stay one step ahead of them, don't you?

KING: I think that with the film medium there are a lot of technical aspects that people become familiar with. There was a time when King Kong opened--the original--when people were just flabbergasted. It was the Star Wars of its time. People had no idea how such things could have been done. Well, Willis O'Brien [the special effects designer] knew. He used a technique called "stop-motion" photography. And Ray Harryhausen learned from him and made pictures like Twenty Million Miles to Earth and Earth Vs the Flying Saucers and Jason and the Argonauts. But people got "wise" to it. They saw a certain jerkiness of motion. Then Star Wars came along and [George]

Lucas invented a whole bunch of new techniques in place of that. I think Star Wars was a hit from the minute that big, huge spaceship came in at the very beginning. But people know those effects now, I think.

JCT: You've said you're a product of those movies, especially the ones of the 1950s--

KING: --and what happened while watching those movies. I remember watching Earth Vs the Flying Saucers in 1957, and in the middle of the thing the house lights came on and the manager came in and told us the Russians had launched Sputnik. Suddenly the real world was more frightening than the movie! There's always something there. . . waiting. . . something even worse than what you've imagined.

JCT: Something even worse than you can imagine?

KING: I like to remember what the famous scientist, J. B. S. Haldane said: "The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but it's queerer than we can suppose!"

JCT: Wow! But getting back to my original question, do you sometimes think you have to keep ahead of your readers, keep a step ahead of them as they grow more sophisticated at the techniques and effects of today's rather graphic horror?

KING: If you do that sort of thing, you're hurting yourself. If you don't write for an audience of one, if you start writing directly for an audience--it's like a baseball pitcher who starts to aim the ball. It's no good. Does that make sense? So, I don't really think about the audience.

JCT: So much of your work seems to come out of your own family life. Behind all the horrors are really rather simple things--fathers and sons--especially in The Shining, children and their nightmares, for example. Is the world of childhood something particularly important to your work?

KING: Yes, and in my book It I think I have the final word about that. It dealt with children and monsters, but it's really about me as a father to my children, the sort of thing I also wrote about in Cujo with little Tad Trenton and the "Monster Words" game he played in the dark. I've been a father for almost half of my life now, since I was 23. Back in those days I was broke and working through ambivalent feelings about my kids--resentment, even anger. But now, well, my kids are growing up. I have a different relationship with them now and perceive them in a different way. I see myself in a different way. I think having kids is part of the process that finishes off our own childhood and allows us to be adults with more serenity. And maybe that will change some of the things I need to write about. So maybe something's ended with that book.

JCT: You've talked a lot about the art of writing horror fiction. You certainly have a vivid way of describing the process. You've called it "keeping the gators fed." And you wrote somewhere: "Think of us horror writers as the people who walk your dog at night." What on earth did you mean by that?

KING: I tell you, I think we have emotional musculature the same way we have physical musculature. That is to say, you have emotions you need to exercise the same way you need to exercise your body. And society gives you brownie points for exercising the good emotions--you take old ladies across the street and demonstrate all those boy scout virtues by being friendly, brave, courteous, and all the rest of it. But we have another set of emotional muscles, too--where we're aggressive, we're fearful, sometimes we're even hateful. And those emotions need to be exercised too--except that society has no awards for those. You can't just say, all right, I'll just exercise my arms, but I won't ever do any leg lifts. You have to exercise your whole body. But you can't exercise those bad emotions, can you? You can't bash people over the head; or if some guy cuts you off in traffic, you can't actually haul him out of his car and put a .45 in his mouth and pull the trigger. Somebody has to take your darker emotions for a walk and exercise them. And I guess I'm one of the guys who does that.

JCT: And undeniably you've brought the horror story to a new level of prestige and popularity.

KING: Popularity I'll agree with. Prestige and the rest of it, I don't know. I just have this childish urge to go "boogah-boogah!" at people, it's kind of fun!

John C. Tibbetts