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INTERVIEW #1

10 QUESTIONS FOR STEPHEN KING

Stephen King

Monday, Apr. 01, 2002

Stephen King gave his fans a fright in January when he told the Los Angeles Times he was going to retire. In 1999 he had a scare of another kind: he was struck by a minivan and nearly died. This month King, master of the horror novel, is publishing a collection of short stories, *Everything's Eventual: 14 Dark Tales* (Scribner). Is this really the final chapter? TIME's Andrea Sachs finds out.

How are you feeling?

I can do all of the things I used to do, except that I do them slower.

Why do such awful things happen in your new book?

I think that any kind of story where something really terrible happens makes your own life look better by comparison. They give us a scale, if you will, to measure our own problems by.

Are you really going to retire?

It will be interesting to see what you say about this, because there's almost a willful misunderstanding among the press or among people about what that means. I can't imagine retiring from writing. What I can imagine doing is retiring from publishing.

You mean writing but not publishing?

If I wrote something that I thought was worth publishing, I would publish it. But in terms of publishing stuff on a yearly basis the way I have been, I think those days are pretty much over.

Well, you seem awfully productive at the moment.

A year from now, people will say the idea that this guy was going to retire is a laugh. I've got three novels to finish up [in] this Dark Towers cycle that I've been publishing since 1982. There's a book coming out this fall, *From a Buick 8*, and so far as I know, that's the

last Stephen King novel, per se, in terms of it just being a novel-novel.

Don't some writers have great late periods?

I'd like to think that I have gotten better, that the writer you're talking to now is a better craftsman than the one who wrote *Carrie* when he was 22 or 23 years old. But I don't detect in my own work any particular late blossoming [laughs].

How have you stayed so productive for so long?

The answer is, Stay healthy and stay married. And other than having a guy come over the top of a hill and hit me with a van, I've been able to do both.

So how much money have you made in your career?

I have no idea.

Are we talking hundreds of millions?

No. But we're probably talking maybe \$100 million, \$120 million. I couldn't tell you exactly. A lot.

Won't your fans be crushed if you really retire?

They might be crushed, but think of all the other people in the publishing business, in the writing business, who will breathe a sigh of relief and say, "At last—he shut up!"

INTERVIEW #2

Stephen King

Stephen King sat down with himself on the evening of June 3, 2002, to discuss his progress on the last three Dark Tower novels, and to talk a little bit about what readers can expect. And when.

The interview ended with the Red Sox game still in progress, but it can be noted here that they went on to lose. But then, so did the Yankees.

Steve: Thanks very much for making this time to talk about The Dark Tower for visitors to your website.

S.K. Well, it's your website, too, you know.

Steve: That's true.

S.K. And this'll have to be a real shortie, because the Red Sox are playing tonight. I checked, though, and Pedro just gave up a home run to the Tigers' lead-off hitter, so maybe that's not a priority.

Steve: We'll keep it brief, just the same. As a matter of personal curiosity, do you find interviewing yourself difficult?

S.K. No. All writers talk to themselves, I think. This is just another version of that.

Steve: What are you listening to these days?

S.K. Well, the new Eminem record kicks major ass. The guy is funny, smart, and sometimes shocking. Those are all things I look for in rock and roll.

Steve: Eminem's a rapper.

S.K. It's all rock and roll to me, although Eminem might not go along with that. In fact, he'd probably get his buddy Slim Shady to call me on the phone and tell me to go fuck myself.

Steve: Seen anything good at the movies?

S.K. Unfaithful. Good suspense and beautifully photographed. Everyone's talking about Diane Lane, but I was startled by what a wonderfully understated performance Richard Gere turned in.

Steve: Seen Clones?

S.K. (laughs) You sound like that ad: "Got milk?" No. Next week, I think. I've been waiting for the crowds to thin. I'll probably enjoy it. People have gotten into the habit of expecting far too much from those movies, you know-from the first one on, they've been loving recreations of the movie serials that George Lucas must have been hooked on as a kid-the Flash Gordon/Buck Rogers stuff. Nothing expresses that so clearly as titles like "A New Hope" and "The Attack of the Clones," or whatever it is. And then the critics act pissed because they're getting popcorn movies instead of Truffaut.

Steve: So let's get down to business.

S.K. Let's. You've only got ten minutes left.

Steve: Then why'd you waste my time, gassing about George Lucas and Eminem?

S.K. It was my time, too. If you see what I mean.

Steve (sighs): All right, where are you vis a vis The Dark Tower?

S.K. Well, Book 5, Wolves of the Calla, and Book 6, Song of Susannah, are both done-down on paper, anyway. I'd say the last book, which is simply called The Dark Tower, is about a third of the way. That's a total of 1900 manuscript pages since last July. It's easily the biggest project I've ever taken on, and I'm throwing in everything I have. Including a little craft, actually. But I'm tired, so-
Steve: Time off, right?

S.K. Yeah. Need to shut everything down for a little while and recharge.

Steve: How long?

S.K. If the computer screens stay dark and I can keep from picking up a legal pad, a month should do it. I'll be crazy by July 4th, but I should be rested and ready to rock.

Steve: Happy with everything so far?

S.K. I don't know how I feel. Weird, I guess. You have to remember that this project spans over thirty years of my life, and a lot of other books I've written have this as their basis. I feel a little like Cal Ripken, making his farewell tour of all the stadiums in the American League. But in the quiet room where I work, no one's cheering. I just hope some of them will when they read the pages. You have to remember that, for most Steve King readers, Roland the gunslinger's never been a priority. The Dark Tower books are...well, they're different.

Steve: Father Callahan from 'Salem's Lot turns up in these books, doesn't he?

S.K. Yeah. Also Ted Brautigan from Hearts in Atlantis, Sheemie the tavern-boy from Wizard and Glass...even Dinky Earnshawe from the short story "Everything's Eventual."

Steve: Who's doing the art for the Donald Grant editions?

S.K. Some good people. Great people, actually. Berni Wrightson's gonna do the illustrations for Wolves. I've already seen some roughs, and they are so fucking terrific. Darrel Anderson is going to do Song of Susannah, and I'm hoping that Michael Whelan will sign up to do the paintings for the final volume, The Dark Tower.

Steve: Wow, he did the first one, right?

S.K. Yeah, and it's his version of Roland I always see in my mind's eye when I write. I really hope this happens. He'd be the only one to do pictures for two of the books, but since he was there at the

beginning, it'd be great if he was there at the end. Alpha and omega, baby.

Steve: Big question. When will they be published?

S.K. That's an impossible question to answer while the books are still not finished. Let me put it this way. If everything went perfectly-the way they do in your daydreams, where you pitch no-hitters and win Academy Awards-Wolves would be published by Donald Grant Publishers sometime late in 2003. Song and Tower would follow in short order.

Steve: You mean they'd come out like three months apart?

S.K. Roughly, yeah.

Steve: If we're talking about long books, those will be expensive items-Grant does beautiful work, and then there's the illustrations.

S.K. They'll be expensive, all right. The Grant editions have always been pricey, right from Book One, The Gunslinger.

Steve: Will the fans think you're ripping them off?

S.K. I don't know. I hope not, because I ain't. You know that saying about how you can't please all the people all of the time? Back in the old Dark Tower days [1982, 1987, 1992] I used to get letters from fans howling that they couldn't get the books at any price, because they were limited editions. The assumption that anyone with the money should be entitled to anything makes me crazy, but let's not go there tonight. In this case, there'll be books for anyone who wants them, so at least there shouldn't be complaints on that score. Unless something goes wrong, which I suppose is always a possibility. But for me, it's a personal decision. Grant wanted Roland of Gilead when nobody else, including my own mainstream publisher, wanted anything from me but horror stories. I started with Grant, and although Don himself is now retired-living the good life in Florida, I believe, with his lovely wife-I intend to finish with Grant. Robert

Wiener's now at the helm, and he's a damned good guy. I'd salute and call him captain any day, tell you that.

Steve: What about the paperbacks? They should be more affordable.

S.K. Yeah. I really don't want to skin anybody for these books. If things go as I hope they will, the trade paperbacks will follow hot on the heels of the hardcovers. Much more affordable.

Steve: A six-month lag-time, would you say?

S.K. Sounds about right, but that's not worked out yet. The trade paperback editions will come from Scribner's, they'll have all the illustrations and grace-notes, and they'll sell for a lot less scratch.

Steve: How much is a lot less scratch?

S.K. All I could do is guess.

Steve: Guess.

S.K. Why are you being such a bastard to me tonight?

Steve: I am you. Guess.

S.K. Shit, I don't know. Say twenty bucks each, but don't hold me to it.

Steve: And then the mass market paperbacks from Pocket Books?

S.K. I'd presume.

Steve: A year later.

S.K. That's usually the deal, yeah.

Steve: And for people who want to catch up, what about the first four volumes? Are they still available in New American Library editions?

S.K. Yeah. Signet's putting new covers on the mass market paperbacks.

Steve: Will Plume re-issue their trade paperbacks, do you think? There were some great illustrations in those.

S.K. Hope so, but I really couldn't tell you. I haven't had a lot of contact with those folks since the Penguin Putnam Era began over at Viking and NAL.

Steve: And now Phyllis Grann has moved on.

S.K. Yep. So she has.

Steve: Any comments on that?

S.K. Nope. Are we about through here?

Steve: Two more questions, maybe. The first one: There were these nifty little synopsis things at the beginning of Books 2, 3, and 4. Will we see those in the last three?

S.K. No. The Dark Tower is really a single novel. Those who've followed the story up to this point can pick up right where they left off, with no problem. For those who've never read The Dark Tower series at all...well, Wolves of the Calla is not the place to start. Those people would do better to go back to the beginning. A synopsis would be as long as a novella, and confusing at that. What's your last question? The Red Sox have tied it, 4-4 in the fourth.

Steve: Will these books really get finished?

S.K. Until you write THE END at the bottom of the last page, you can never be sure; a storm can always come up and sink your little boat. I know about storms, because I've had a few in my life. All I can say is that I'm trying as hard as I can, and so far the work seems good to

me. On a day by day basis, I'm having a great time, and that's usually a good sign.

Steve: Will Roland and his friends make it to the Dark Tower? And if they do, what will they find there?

S.K. It's time for me to go and watch some baseball.

PLAYBOY'S 1983 INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN KING

In the early winter of 1972, a Maine housewife dusting her husband's makeshift study fished a discarded manuscript out of the wastebasket and sat down to read it. When Stephen King returned from teaching high school English that evening, his wife, Tabitha, persuaded him to resume work on the abandoned novel, despite his conviction "that I had written the world's all-time loser." Several months later, he submitted the revised version to Doubleday & Company in New York. "Carrie," a twisted fairy tale about an ugly-duckling adolescent transformed into a merciless engine of psychic destruction, was purchased by Doubleday in March 1973 for a \$2500 advance and subsequently sold a modest 13,000 copies in hardcover. Reviews were both sparse and mixed; some dismissed the novel as a potboiler, but New York Times critic Newgate Callendar hailed it as "brilliant ... A first novel guaranteed to give you a chill." Screen rights were purchased by United Artists, and Brian De Palma's 1976 film version, starring Sissy Spacek and John Travolta, was a critical and commercial success, while New American Library paid \$400,000 for paperback rights and subsequently sold more than 2,500,000 copies. King, dubbed "the modern master of horror" by The New York Times, had exploded onto the publishing scene and had begun his meteoric rise on the bestseller lists.

His second novel, "Salem's Lot" (originally titled "The Second Coming"), was published in 1975 and dealt with a plague of vampires that terrorized and ultimately overwhelmed a small Maine community.

The paperback edition sold 3,000,000 copies and swept King to the number-one spot on the New York Times paperback bestseller list. Film rights were sold to Warner Bros., which released it in 1979 as a two-part, four-hour made-for-television movie starring David Soul. Of all his books, "Salem's Lot" remains King's personal favorite, and he is planning a sequel.

In rapid succession, King published "The Shining" (1977), "The Stand" (1978) and "Night Shift" (1978), a Grand Guignol - style collection of short stories. "The Shining" sold more than 50,000 copies and was his first hardback best seller. A harrowing account of a family's destruction by an old hotel that has become a repository of supernatural evil, the novel was greeted favorably by critics who had previously either ignored King or dismissed him as another shockmeister. In 1980, Stanley Kubrick's lavish \$18,000,000 film production of the book, starring Jack Nicholson, was roundly panned by critics, though it was a solid box-office hit and ranks among the 20 most profitable films ever released by Warner Bros.

"The Stand," an 800-page futuristic disaster novel with mystical overtones, was also a best seller and received mixed reviews. Some praised it as King's most ambitious work; others felt it was wordy and pretentious.

With the publication of "The Dead Zone" in 1979, King might have been disturbed by the divided critical reaction to his work, but he could also afford to cry all the way to the bank. He had left Doubleday and had signed a three-novel, \$3,000,000 contract with New American Library. Working at the prolific clip of a book a year, King followed "The Dead Zone" with

"Firestarter" in 1980, "Cujo" in 1981 and, in 1982, a collection of four novellas, "Different Seasons," that sold to the Book-of-the-Month Club for \$500,000 and was among the top-selling hardcover novels in the country in 1982. "Danse Macabre," a nonfiction survey of horror in literature, film and the mass media, was published by Everest House in 1981 and was hailed by the Philadelphia Inquirer as "one of the best books on American popular culture in the late 20th Century."

By the early Eighties, King had become the only author in history to have three books simultaneously on the New York Times hard-and softcover bestseller lists. With the publication in April 1983 of "Christine," the saga of a boy and his haunted 1958 Plymouth Fury, an estimated 40,000,000 copies of King's books were in print around

the world. He also branched out and wrote the screenplay and starred in one of the five segments of George ("Night of the

Living Dead") Romero's seriocomic film "Creepshow." According to Douglas Winter, author of a recent critical study, "The Reader's Guide to Stephen King," "In less than ten years, King has become the most popular writer of horror fiction of all time, a publishing phenomenon whose success, a conjoining of talent and timing, was seemingly inevitable."

To examine the work and probe the psyche of this master of the macabre, PLAYBOY sent novelist Eric Norden to Bangor, Maine, where King lives with his wife and three children. Norden reports:

"It was a foggy, drizzling morning in late November when I showed up at King's sprawling 24-room Victorian mansion, replete with brooding twin turrets and black-wrought-iron fence. The grillwork on the imposing front gate was fashioned into an intricate spider web surmounted by two perching metal bats as big and about as inviting as vultures. It was a fittingly sinister lair for the writer one hostile critic had called the 'Wizard of Ooze.' But the gate didn't creak, and when King shambled out into the rain to greet me, his appearance was disarming.

"He is a strapping 6'4" and weighs in at 200 pounds, a genial bear of a man with an infectious grin and disconcertingly gentle blue eyes behind thick horn-rimmed glasses. His jet-black hair combs over one eyebrow and curls at the nape of his neck, and his beard is thick but neatly trimmed. (A dedicated baseball fan, he grows it every year at the end of the world series and shaves when the spring season begins.) He was dressed casually in a faded-blue Levis work shirt, jeans, black-leather motorcycle jacket and scuffed-suede chukka boots - his everyday uniform in Bangor, which he describes affectionately as 'a hard town, a hard-drinking workingman's town.'

“The interior of the house quickly dispels the Charles Addams facade; it is a series of large, airy rooms tastefully decorated in traditional New England style and presided over by a full-time housekeeper. Two secretaries staff King’s office, where he hammers out 1500 words between 8:30 and 11:30 every morning of the year except Christmas, the Fourth of July and his birthday. The preserved head of a rattlesnake encased in a glass globe has a place of honor on his desk, and he’s fond of telling interviewers that he writes as he does because he has the heart of a small boy: ‘In fact, I keep it at home in a jar on my desk, as Robert Bloch, the author of “Psycho,” was fond of saying.’

“King works on a Wang word processor, which is currently linked by telephone hookup to an IBM model belonging to writer Peter (‘Ghost Story’) Straub, with whom he is collaborating on a forthcoming horror novel titled ‘The Talisman,’ scheduled for publication in 1984. (Other work in progress includes a novel about burial customs, ‘Pet Sematary’ - no typos in the title, it’s derived from a child’s spelling - ‘Night Moves,’ an anthology, and ‘IT,’ a horror magnum opus about a monster in the sewers that may top 2000 pages on completion.) King is compulsive about his output and suffers from headaches and insomnia if he falls behind schedule. But he’s not finicky about working conditions - his children wander freely in and out of his study when he’s composing, and he often writes to the blare of hard rock.

“King is a loving and protective parent and enjoys a close relationship with his three kids, 12-year-old Naomi, ten-year-old Joe and five-year-old Owen. They often watch horror films together on King’s 4’x3’ Panasonic Cinemavision video-beam console, which dominates a corner of the toy-strewn den. (One memorable lunchtime midway through our interview, King sent out for Big Macs while he screened ‘Blood Feast,’ a particularly gory Sixties cut-and-slasher, and kept telling me, ‘Go ahead and have another burger’ while a starlet was being disemboweled and her blood-dripping liver was being devoured in living color.)

“King’s relationship with Tabitha is equally close. They met when both were students at the University of Maine and were married in 1971. An attractive brunette in her early 30s, Tabitha is a talented author in her own right, and her blackly humorous fantasy novel, ‘Small World,’ was published in 1981. Warm and supportive, Tabby is also a no-nonsense woman, a fact King welcomes and credits for helping him avoid the pitfalls of celebrity. His children are no more overwhelmed by their father’s fame than their mother is: ‘When I’m about to go out on a publicity tour for one of the books,’ King observes ruefully, ‘Owen just says, “Oh, Daddy’s going out to be Stephen King again.”’”

“King seems sincerely unimpressed about being a multimillionaire; all his money is handled by a New York accountant, who doles out \$200 to him for walking-around money every week. ‘The rest is all on paper,’ he explains, ‘and I don’t even know how much I’m worth.’ His lifestyle is simple and unpretentious - he loves his weekly bowling night out with the boys and an

occasional bout of cross-country skiing - with the exception of a few extravagances, such as the family’s two Mercedes. One notable luxury is a modern 11-room summer house on a hilltop overlooking lonely Lake Kezar in the foothills of the White Mountains. That was the scene where much of our interview was conducted to avoid the ubiquitous long-distance telephone calls from publishers, agents, editors and Hollywood producers that plague King in Bangor.

“As banks of autumnal mist rolled in across the lake on the first day of the two weeks I would spend interviewing King, I began by asking him how it felt to see a fantasy fulfilled.”

PLAYBOY: The protagonist of ‘Salem’s Lot, a struggling young author with a resemblance to his creator, confesses at one point, “Sometimes when I’m lying in bed at night, I make up a Playboy Interview about me. Waste of time. They only do authors if their books are big on campus.” Ten novels and several million dollars in

the bank later, your books are big on campus and everywhere else. How does it feel?

KING: It feels great. I love it! And, sure, it's an ego boost to think that I'll be the subject of one of your Interviews, with my name in black bold print and those three mug shots crawling along the bottom of the page on top of the quotes where I really fucked up and put my foot in my mouth. It's an honor to be in the stellar company of George Lincoln Rockwell and Albert Speer and James Earl Ray. What happened, couldn't you get Charles Manson?

PLAYBOY: We picked you as our scary guy for this year. The vote wasn't even close.

KING: OK, truce. Actually, I am pleased, because when I was trying, without much apparent success, to make it as a writer, I'd read your Interviews and they always represented a visible symbol of achievement as well as celebrity. Like most writers, I dredge my memory for material, but I'm seldom really explicitly autobiographical. That passage you quote from 'Salem's Lot is an exception, and it reflects my state of mind in those days before I sold my first book, when nothing seemed to be going right. When I couldn't sleep, in that black hole of the night when all your doubts and fears and insecurities surge in at you, snarling, from the dark - what the Scandinavians call the wolf hour - I used to lie in bed alternately wondering if I shouldn't throw in the creative towel and spinning out masturbatory wish fulfillment fantasies in which I was a successful and respected author. And that's where my imaginary Playboy Interview came in. I'd picture myself calm and composed, magisterial, responding with lucidly reasoned answers to the toughest questions, bouncing brilliant aperçus off the walls like

tennis balls. Now that you're here, I'll probably do nothing but spew out incoherencies! But I suppose it was good therapy. It got me through the night.

PLAYBOY: How you got through your nights is going to be a major topic of this interview. Were you intrigued by ghost stories as a child?

KING: Ghoulies and ghosties and things that go bump in the night - you name 'em, I loved 'em! Some of the best yarns in those days were spun by my uncle Clayton, a great old character who had never lost his childlike sense of wonder. Uncle Clayton would cock his hunting cap back on his mane of white hair, roll a Bugler cigarette with one liver-spotted hand, light up with a Diamond match he'd scratch on the sole of his boot and launch into great stories, not only about ghosts but about local legends and scandals, family goings on, the exploits of Paul Bunyan, everything under the sun. I'd listen spellbound to that slow down-East drawl of his on the porch of a summer night, and I'd be in another world. A better world, maybe.

PLAYBOY: Did such stories trigger your initial interest in the supernatural?

KING: No, that goes back as far as I can remember. But Uncle Clayton was a great spinner of tales. He was an original, Clayton. He could "line" bees, you know. That's a quirky rural talent that enables you to trail a honeybee all the way from a flower back to its hive - for miles, sometimes, through woods and brambles and bogs, but he never lost one. I sometimes wonder if more than good eyesight was involved. Uncle Clayton had another talent, too: He was a dowser.

He could find water with an old piece of forked wood. How and why I'm not sure, but he did it.

PLAYBOY: Do you really believe that old wives' tale?

KING: Well, wrapping an infected wound in a poultice of moldy bread was an old wives' tale, too, and it antedated penicillin by the odd thousand years. But, yeah, I was skeptical about dowsing at first, until I actually saw it and experienced it - when Uncle Clayton defied all the experts and found a well in our own front yard.

PLAYBOY: Are you sure you just didn't succumb to the power of suggestion?

KING: Sure, that's one explanation, or maybe rationalization, but I tend to doubt it. I was bone-skeptical. I think it's far more likely that there's a perfectly logical and nonsupernatural explanation for dowsing - merely one science doesn't understand yet.

It's easy to scoff at such things, but don't forget Haldane's law, a maxim coined by the famous British scientist J.B.S. Haldane: "The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but it is queerer than we can suppose."

PLAYBOY: Did you have any other psychic experiences as a child?

KING: Well, once again, I'm not even sure that the dowsing was psychic at all - at least, not in the way that term is bandied around today. Was it a psychic experience when people in the early 18th Century saw stones falling from the sky? It certainly took the scientific establishment another 50 years to admit the existence of meteorites. But to answer your question, no, I never experienced anything else as a kid that smacks of the paranormal.

PLAYBOY: Didn't we read somewhere that your house - where this interview is taking place, incidentally - is haunted?

KING: Oh, sure, by the shade of an old man named Conquest, who shuffled off this mortal coil about four generations back. I've never seen the old duffer, but sometimes when I'm working late at night, I get a distinctly uneasy feeling that I'm not alone. I wish he'd show himself; maybe we could get in some cribbage. Nobody in my generation will play with me. By the way, he died in the parlor, the room we're in right now.

PLAYBOY: Thanks. Can we take it from your experiences with dowsing and such that you're a believer in extrasensory perception and in psychic phenomena in general?

KING: I wouldn't say I believe in them. The scientific verdict's still out on most of those things, and they're certainly nothing to accept as an article of faith. But I don't think we should dismiss them out of hand just because we can't as yet understand how and why they operate and according to what rules. There's a big and vital difference between the unexplained and the

inexplicable, and we should keep that in mind when discussing so-called psychic phenomena. Actually, I prefer the term wild talents, which was coined by the science-fiction writer Jack Vance.

But it's too bad that the orthodox scientific establishment isn't more open-minded on those questions, because they should be subjected to rigorous research and evaluation - if for no other reason than to prevent them from becoming the exclusive property of the kooks and cultists on the occult lunatic fringe.

There's a lot of evidence that both the American and the Soviet governments take the subject a damn sight more seriously than they let on in public and are conducting top-priority studies to understand and isolate a whole range of esoteric phenomena, from levitation and Kirlian photography - a film process that reveals the human aura-to telepathy and teleportation and psychokinesis.

Sadly, and maybe ominously, neither side is pursuing the subject out of some objective search for scientific truth. What they're really interested in is its espionage and military potential, as in scrambling the brains of missile-silo operators or influencing the decisions of national leaders in a crisis. It's a shame, because what you're talking about here is unlocking the secrets of the human mind and exploring the inner frontier. That's the last thing that should be left in the hands of the CIA or the K.G.B.

PLAYBOY: Both *Carrie* and *Firestarter* deal with the wild talents of young girls on the threshold of adolescence. Were they fictional reworkings of the poltergeist theme, as popularized by Steven Spielberg's recent film *Poltergeist*?

KING: Not directly, though I suppose there's a similarity. Poltergeist activity is supposed to be a sudden manifestation of semihysterical psychic power in kids, generally girls who are just entering puberty.

So in that sense, Carrie, in particular, could be said to be a kind of super-poltergeist. Again, I'm not saying there's anything objectively valid to the so-called poltergeist

phenomenon, just that that's one of the explanations advanced for it. But I've never seriously researched the whole subject, and those cases I've read about seem surrounded by so much National Enquirer-style hype and sensationalism that I tend to suspend judgment. Charlie McGee, the girl in Firestarter, actually has a specific gift, if that's the word, that goes beyond the poltergeist phenomenon, though it's occasionally reported in conjunction with it. Charlie can start fires - she can burn up buildings or, if her back's against the wall, people.

On this whole subject of wild talents, it was fascinating to discover when researching Firestarter that there is a well-documented if totally baffling phenomenon called pyrokinesis, or spontaneous human combustion, in which a man or a woman burns to a crisp in a fire that generates almost inconceivable temperatures - a fire that seems to come from inside the victim. There have been medically documented cases from all over the world in which a corpse has been

found burned beyond recognition while the chair or the bed on which it was found wasn't even charred. Sometimes, the victims are actually reduced to ash, and I know from researching burial customs for a forthcoming book that the heat required to do that is tremendous. You can't even manage it in a crematorium, you know; which is why, after your body comes out of the blast furnace on the conveyor belt, there's a guy at the other end with a rake to pound up your bones before they pour you into the little urn that goes on the mantelpiece.

I remember a case reported in the press in the mid-Sixties in which a kid was just lying on a beach when suddenly he burst into flames. His father dragged him into the water and dunked him, but he continued to burn underwater, as if he'd been hit by a white-

phosphorus bomb. The kid died and the father had to go into the hospital with third-degree burns on his arms.

There's a lot of mystery in the world, a lot of dark, shadowy corners we haven't explored yet. We shouldn't be too smug about dismissing out of hand everything we can't understand. The dark can have teeth, man!

PLAYBOY: The dark has also been very lucrative for you. Aside from the phenomenal sales of the books themselves, 'Salem's Lot' was sold to television as a miniseries, and Carrie and The Shining have been made into feature films. Were you pleased with the results?

KING: Well, considering the limitations of TV, 'Salem's Lot could have turned out a lot worse than it did. The two-part TV special was directed by Tobe Hooper of Texas Chain-Saw Massacre fame, and outside of a few boners - such as making my vampire Barlow look exactly like the cadaverously inhuman night stalker in the famous German silent film Nosferatu-he did a pretty good job. I breathed a hearty sigh of relief, however, when some plans to turn it into a network series fell apart, because today's television is just too institutionally fainthearted and unimaginative to handle real horror.

Brian De Palma's Carrie was terrific. He handled the material deftly and artistically and got a fine performance out of Sissy Spacek. In many ways, the film is far more stylish than my book, which I still think is a gripping read but is impeded by a certain heaviness, a Sturm und Drang quality that's absent from the film. Stanley Kubrick's version of The Shining is a lot tougher for me to evaluate, because I'm still profoundly ambivalent about the whole thing. I'd admired Kubrick for a long time and had great expectations for the project, but I was deeply disappointed in the end result. Parts of the film are chilling, charged with a relentlessly claustrophobic terror, but others fall flat.

I think there are two basic problems with the movie. First, Kubrick is a very cold man - pragmatic and rational - and he had great difficulty conceiving, even academically, of a supernatural world. He used to make transatlantic calls to me from England at odd hours of the day and night, and I remember once he rang up at seven in the morning and asked, "Do you believe in God?" I wiped the shaving cream away from my mouth, thought a minute and said, "Yeah, I think so." Kubrick replied, "No, I don't think there is a God," and hung up. Not that religion has to be involved in horror, but a visceral skeptic such as Kubrick just couldn't grasp the sheer inhuman evil of the Overlook Hotel. So he looked, instead, for evil in the characters and made the film into a domestic tragedy with only vaguely supernatural overtones. That was the basic flaw: Because he couldn't believe, he couldn't make the film believable to others.

The second problem was in characterization and casting. Jack Nicholson, though a fine actor, was all wrong for the part. His last big role had been in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and between that and his manic grin, the audience automatically identified him as a loony from the first scene. But the book is about Jack Torrance's gradual descent into madness through the malign influence of the Overlook, which is like a huge storage battery charged with an evil

powerful enough to corrupt all those who come into contact with it. If the guy is nuts to begin with, then the entire tragedy of his downfall is wasted. For that reason, the film has no center and no heart, despite its brilliantly unnerving camera angles and dazzling use of the Steadicam. What's basically wrong with Kubrick's version of *The Shining* is that it's a film by a man who

thinks too much and feels too little; and that's why, for all its virtuoso effects, it never gets you by the throat and hangs on the way real horror should.

I'd like to remake *The Shining* someday, maybe even direct it myself if anybody will give me enough rope to hang myself with.

PLAYBOY: In *The Stand*, which has become something of a cult object to many of your fans, a rapidly mutating flu virus accidentally released by the U.S. military wipes out nine tenths of the world's population and sets the stage for an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil. That ultimate genocide was presaged, on a more modest scale by *Carrie* and *Firestarter*, both of which conclude with the beleaguered heroines raining fiery death and destruction on their tormentors and innocent bystanders alike; by *'Salem's Lot*, in which you burn down the town at the end; and by the explosion and burning of the Overlook Hotel at the conclusion of *The Shining*. Is there a pyromaniac or a mad bomber inside you screaming to get out?

KING: There sure is, and that destructive side of me has a great outlet in my books. Jesus, I love to burn things up - on paper, at least. I don't think arson would be half as much fun in real life as it is in fiction. One of my favorite moments in all my work comes in the middle of *The Stand*, when one of my villains, the Trashcan Man, sets all these oil-refinery holding tanks on fire and they go off like bombs. It's as if the night sky had been set ablaze. God, that was a gas! It's the werewolf in me, I guess, but I love fire, I love destruction. It's great and it's black and it's exciting. When I write scenes like that, I feel like Samson pulling down the temple on top of everybody's head.

The Stand was particularly fulfilling, because there I got a chance to scrub the whole human race and, man, it was fun! Sitting at the typewriter, I felt just like Alexander lifting his sword over the Gordian knot and snarling, "Fuck unraveling it; I'll do it my way!" Much of the compulsive, driven feeling I had while I worked on *The Stand* came from the vicarious thrill of imagining an entire entrenched social order destroyed in one stroke. That's the mad-bomber side of my character, I suppose.

But the ending of the book reflects what I hope is another, more constructive aspect. After all the annihilation and suffering and

despair, *The Stand* is inherently optimistic in that it depicts a gradual reassertion of humane values as mankind picks itself out of the ashes and ultimately restores the moral and ecological balance. Despite all the grisly scenes, the book is also a testament to the enduring human values of courage, kindness, friendship and love, and at the end it echoes Camus' remark "Happiness, too, is inevitable."

PLAYBOY: There must have been a time, before all this wealth and fame, when happiness didn't seem inevitable to you. How rough were the early days?

KING: Well, let's just say that, like most overnight successes, I've had to pay my dues. When I got out of college in the early Seventies with a degree in English and a teaching certificate, I found there was a glut on the teaching market, and I went to work pumping gas in a filling station and later on pressing sheets in an industrial laundry for \$60 a week. We were as poor as

church mice, with two small kids, and needless to say, it wasn't easy to make ends meet on that salary. My wife went to work as a waitress in a local Dunkin' Donuts and came home every night smelling like a cruller. Nice aroma at first, you know, all fresh and sugary, but it got pretty god-damned cloying after a while - I haven't been able to look a doughnut in the face ever since.

Anyway, in the fall of 1971, I finally got a job as an English instructor at Hampden Academy, just across the Penobscot River from Bangor, but it paid only \$6400 a year, barely more than I had been earning before. In fact, I had to go back and moonlight in the laundry just to keep our heads above water. We were living in a trailer on top of a bleak, snow-swept hillside in Hermon, Maine, which, if not the asshole of the universe, is at least within farting distance of it. I'd come home exhausted from school and squat in the

trailer's furnace room, with Tabby's little Olivetti portable perched on a child's desk I had to balance on my knees, and try to hammer out some scintillating prose.

That was where I wrote 'Salem's Lot, actually. It was my second published book, but the bulk of the writing was completed before Carrie was even accepted by Doubleday. And believe me, after a day of teaching and then coming home and watching Tabby gamely juggle her way through a mountain of unpaid bills, it was a positive pleasure to squeeze into that cramped furnace room and do battle with a horde of bloodthirsty vampires. Compared with our creditors, they were a fuckin' relief!

PLAYBOY: Were you selling any of your work at that time?

KING: Yes, but only short stories, and only to the smaller-circulation men's magazines, such as Cavalier and Dude. The money was useful, God knows, but if you know that particular market, you know there wasn't much of it. Anyway, the payment for my stories wasn't enough to keep us out of the red, and I was getting nowhere with my longer work. I'd written several novels, ranging from awful to mediocre to passable, but all had been rejected, even though I was

beginning to get some encouragement from a wonderful editor at Doubleday named Bill Thompson. But as gratifying as his support was, I couldn't bank it. My kids were wearing hand-me-downs from friends and relatives, our old rattletrap 1965 Buick Special was rapidly self-destructing and we finally had to ask Ma Bell to remove our phone.

On top of everything else, I was fucking up personally. I wish I could say today that I bravely shook my fist in the face of adversity and carried on undaunted, but I can't. I copped out to self-pity and anxiety and started drinking far too much and frittering money away

on poker and bumper pool. You know the scene: It's Friday night and you cash your pay check in the bar and

start knocking them down, and before you know what's happened, you've pissed away half the food budget for that week.

PLAYBOY: How did your marriage stand up under those strains?

KING: Well, it was touch and go for a while there, and things could get pretty tense at home. It was a vicious circle: The more miserable and inadequate I felt about what I saw as my failure as a writer, the more I'd try to escape into a bottle, which would only exacerbate the domestic stress and make me even more depressed. Tabby was steamed about the booze, of course, but she told me she understood that the reason I drank too much was that I felt it was never going to happen, that I was never going to be a writer of any consequence. And, of course, I feared she was right. I'd lie awake at night seeing myself at 50, my hair graying, my jowls thickening, a network of whiskey-ruptured capillaries spider webbing across my nose - "drinker's tattoos," we call them in Maine - with a dusty trunkful of unpublished novels rotting in the basement, teaching high school English for the rest of my life and getting off what few literary rocks I had left by advising the student newspaper or maybe teaching a creative-writing course. Yechh! Even though I was only in my mid-20s and rationally realized that there was still plenty of time and opportunity ahead, that pressure to break through in my work was building in a kind of psychic crescendo, and when it appeared to be thwarted, I felt desperately depressed, cornered. I felt trapped in a suicidal rat race, with no way out of the maze.

PLAYBOY: Did you ever seriously contemplate suicide?

KING: Oh, no, never; that phrase was just metaphorical overkill. I have my share of human weaknesses, but I'm also bone-stubborn. Maybe that's a Maine trait; I don't know. Anyway, wasn't it Mencken who said that suicide is a belated acquiescence in the opinion of your wife's relative? But what did worry me was the effect all that was having on my marriage. Hell, we were already on marshy ground in those days, and I feared that the quicksand was just around

the bend. I loved my wife and kids, but as the pressure mounted, I was beginning to have ambivalent feelings about them, too. On the one hand, I wanted nothing more than to provide for them and protect them - but at the same time, unprepared as I was for the rigors of fatherhood, I was also experiencing a range of nasty emotions from resentment to anger to occasional outright hate, even surges of mental violence that, thank God, I was able to suppress. I'd wander around the crummy little living room of our trailer at three o'clock on a cold winter's morning with my teething nine-month-old son Joe slung over my shoulder, more often than not spitting up all over my shirt, and I'd try to figure out how and why I'd ever committed myself to that particular lunatic asylum. All the claustrophobic fears would squeeze in on me then, and I'd wonder if it hadn't already all passed me by, if I weren't just chasing a fool's dream. A nocturnal snowmobile would whine in the dark distance, like an angry insect, and I'd say to myself, "Shit, King, face it; you're going to be teaching fuckin' high school kids for the rest of your life." I don't know what

would have happened to my marriage and my sanity if it hadn't been for the totally unexpected news, in 1973, that Doubleday had accepted *Carrie*, which I had thought had very little chance of a sale.

PLAYBOY: What was more important to you - the money from *Carrie* or the fact that you had finally been recognized as a serious

novelist?

KING: Both, actually, though I might question how serious a novelist Doubleday took me for. It wasn't about to promote *Carrie* as that year's answer to *Madame Bovary*, that's for sure. Even though there's a lot I still like and stand behind in the book, I'm the first to admit that it is often clumsy and artless. But both creatively and financially, *Carrie* was a kind of escape hatch for

Tabby and me, and we were able to flee through it into a totally different existence. Hell, our lives changed so quickly that for more than a year afterward, we walked around with big, sappy grins on our faces, hardly daring to believe we were out of that trap for good. It was a great feeling of liberation, because at last I was free to quit teaching and fulfill what I believe is my only function in life: to write books. Good, bad or indifferent books, that's for others to decide; for me, it's enough just to write. I'd been writing since I was 12, seriously if pretty badly at first, and I sold *Carrie* when I was 26, so I'd had a relatively long apprenticeship. But that first

hardcover sale sure tasted sweet!

PLAYBOY: As you've indicated, that compulsion to be a writer has been with you since you were a boy. Was it a means of escape from an unhappy childhood?

KING: Maybe, though it's generally impossible even to remember the feelings and motivations of childhood, much less to understand or rationally analyze them. Kids, thank God, are all deliciously, creatively crazy by our desiccated adult standards. But it's true that I was prey to a lot of conflicting emotions as a child. I had friends and

all that, but I often felt unhappy and different, estranged from other kids my age. I was a fat kid - husky was the euphemism they

used in the clothing store - and pretty poorly coordinated, always the last picked when we chose teams.

At times, particularly in my teens, I felt violent, as if I wanted to lash out at the world, but that rage I kept hidden. That was a secret place in myself I wouldn't reveal to anyone else. I guess part of it was that my brother and I had a pretty shirt-tail existence as kids. My father deserted us when I was two and David was four and left my mother without a dime. She was a wonderful lady, a very brave lady in that old-fashioned sense, and went to work to support us, generally at menial jobs because of her lack of any professional training. After my father did his moonlight flit, she became a rolling stone, following the jobs around the country. We traveled across New England and the Middle West, one low-paying job following another. She worked as a laundry presser and a doughnut maker - like my wife, 20 years later - as a housekeeper, a store clerk; you name it, she did it.

PLAYBOY: Did living on the edge of poverty leave any lasting scars?

KING: No, and I didn't think of it in terms of poverty, either then or now. Ours wasn't a life of unremitting misery by any means, and we never missed a meal, even though prime sirloin was rarely on our plates. Finally, when I was about ten, we moved back to Maine, to the little town of Durham.

For ten years, we lived a virtual barter existence, practically never seeing any hard cash. If we needed food, relatives would bring a bag of groceries; if we needed clothes, there'd always be hand-me-downs. Believe me, I was never on the best-dressed list at school! And the well dried up in the summer, so we had to use the outhouse.

There was no bath or shower, either, and in those icy Maine winters, we'd walk half a mile or so to my aunt Ethelyn's for a hot bath. Shit, coming home through the snow, we'd steam! So, yeah, I guess in many ways it was a hard-scrabble existence but not an impoverished one in the most important sense of the word. Thanks to my mother, the one thing that was never in short supply, corny as it may sound to say it, was love. And in that sense, I was a hell of a lot less deprived than countless children of middle-class or wealthy families, whose parents have time for everything but their kids.

PLAYBOY: Has your father ever contacted you in the years since he walked out, out of either guilt or - in view of your new-found wealth - greed?

KING: No, though I suspect the latter would be his more likely motivation. Actually, it was a classic desertion, not even a note of explanation or justification left behind. He said, literally, that he was going out to the grocery store for a pack of cigarettes, and he didn't take any of his things

with him. That was in 1949, and none of us have heard of the bastard since.

PLAYBOY: Now that you're a multimillionaire with more resources at your command than your mother could have dreamed of, have you ever considered launching your own investigation to track down your father or, at least, to determine whether he's alive or dead?

KING: The idea has crossed my mind now and then over the years, but something always holds me back. Superstition, I guess, like the

old saw about letting sleeping dogs lie. To tell the truth, I don't know how I'd react if I ever did find him and we came face to face. But even if I ever did decide to launch an investigation, I don't think anything would come of it, because I'm pretty sure my father's dead.

PLAYBOY: Why?

KING: From everything I've learned about my father, he would have burned himself out by now. He liked to drink and carouse a lot. In fact, from what my mother hinted, I think he was in trouble with the law on more than one occasion. He used aliases often enough - he was born Donald Spansky in Peru, Indiana, then called himself Pollack and finally changed his name legally to King.

He'd started out as an Electrolux salesman in the Middle West, but I think he blotted his copybook somewhere along the way. As my mother once told me, he was the only man on the sales force who regularly demonstrated vacuum cleaners to pretty young widows at two o'clock in the morning. He was quite a ladies' man, according to my mother, and I apparently have a beautiful bastard half-sister in Brazil. In any case, he was a man with an itchy foot, a travelin' man, as the song says. I think trouble came easy to him.

PLAYBOY: So you're not exactly eager to be taken for a chip off the old block?

KING: Let's hope heredity takes second place to environment in my case. From what I'm told, my father certainly beat hell out of me in the Lothario department, where I'm monotonously monogamous, though I do have a weakness for booze that I try to control, and I

love fast cars and motorcycles. I certainly don't share his wanderlust, which is one among many reasons that I've remained in Maine, even though I now have the financial freedom to live anywhere in the

world. Oddly enough, the only point of similarity may be our literary tastes. My father had a secret love for science fiction and horror tales, and he tried to write them himself, submitting stories to the major men's magazines of his day, such as *Bluebook* and *Argosy*. None of the stories sold and none survives.

PLAYBOY: A scrapbook of your vanished father's personal effects is prominent in the study of your summer house. Doesn't that preservation of the memorabilia of a man you never knew suggest that you're still mentally gnawing at the wound?

KING: No, the wound itself has healed, but that doesn't preclude an interest in how and why it was inflicted. And that, I think, is a far cry from picking at some psychic scab. Anyway, the scrapbook you mention isn't some kind of secret shrine to his memory, just a handful of souvenirs: a couple of dog-eared postcards he'd sent my mother from various ports of call, mainly in Latin America; a few photographs of different ships on which he'd sailed; a faded and rather idealized sketch from a Mexican market place. Just the odds and ends he'd left behind, like the corpse in the E.C. horror comics of the Fifties - God, I loved those mothers! - who comes back from a watery grave to wreak revenge on the wife and boyfriend who did him in but phones first and whispers, "I'm coming; I'd be there sooner but little bits of me keep falling off along the way."

Well, the little bits of my father that fell off along the way are preserved in that scrapbook, like a time capsule. It all cuts off in 1949, when he took a powder on us. Sometimes, I'll leaf through the pages and it reminds me of a chilly autumn day in the Fifties when

my brother and I discovered several spools of old movie film my father had taken. He was an avid photography buff, apparently, but we'd never seen much of his handiwork beyond a few snapshots. My mother had stowed the film away in my aunt and uncle's attic. So here you have these two kids - I must have been around eight and David ten - struggling to operate this old dinosaur of a movie projector we had managed to rent. When we finally got it working, the stuff was pretty disappointing at first - a lot of strange faces and exotic scenes but no sign of the old man. And then, after we'd gone through a couple of reels of film, David jumped up and said, "That's

him! That's our father!" He'd handed the camera to one of his buddies and there he was, lounging against a ship's rail, a choppy sea in the background. My old man. David remembered him, but it was a stranger's face to me. By the look of the sea, he was probably somewhere on the North Atlantic, so the film must have been taken during the war. He raised his hand and smiled, unwittingly waving at sons who weren't born yet. Hi, Dad, don't forget to write.

PLAYBOY: Considering what you write about, have you ever thought of going to a séance or of finding some other supernatural way to communicate with him?

KING: Are you kidding? I've never even attended a séance. Jesus, no! Precisely because I know a little bit about the subject, that's the last thing I'd ever do. You couldn't drag me to one of those things, and the same thing goes for a Ouija board. All that shit - stay away from it! Sure, I know most mediums are fakes and phonies and con artists, the worst kind of human vultures, preying on human suffering and loss and loneliness. But if there are things floating around out there - disembodied entities, spirit demons, call them what you will - then it's the height of folly to invite them to use you as a channel into this world. Because they might like what they found, man, and they might decide to stay!

PLAYBOY: Is your fear of séances an isolated phenomenon, or are you superstitious about other aspects of the so-called supernatural?

KING: Oh, sure, I'm very superstitious by nature. I mean, part of my mind, the rational part, will say, "Come on, man, this is all self-indulgent bullshit," but the other part, the part as old as the first caveman cowering by his fire as something huge and hungry howls in the night, says, "Yeah, maybe so, but why take a chance?" That's why I observe all the old folk superstitions: I don't walk under ladders; I'm scared shitless I'll get seven years' bad luck if I break a mirror; I try to stay home cowering under the covers on Friday the 13th. God, once I had to fly on Friday the 13th - I had no choice - and while the ground crew didn't exactly have to carry me onto the plane kicking and screaming, it was still no picnic. It didn't help that I'm afraid of flying, either. I guess I hate surrendering control over my life to some faceless pilot who could have been secretly boozing it up all afternoon or who has an embolism in his cranium, like an invisible time bomb. But I have a thing about the number 13 in general; it never fails to trace that old icy finger up and down my spine. When I'm writing, I'll never stop work if the page number is 13 or a multiple of 13; I'll just keep on typing till I get to a safe number.

PLAYBOY: Are you afraid of the dark?

KING: Of course. Isn't everybody? Actually, I can't understand my own family sometimes. I won't sleep without a light on in the room and, needless to say, I'm very careful to see that the blankets are tucked tight under my legs so I won't wake up in the middle of the night with a clammy hand clutching my ankle. But when Tabby and I

were first married, it was summer and she'd be sleeping starkers and I'd be lying there with the sheets pulled up to my eyes and she'd

say, "Why are you sleeping in that crazy way?" And I tried to explain that it was just safer that way, but I'm not sure she really understood. And now she's done something else I'm not very happy with: She's added this big fluffy flounce around the bottom of our double bed, which means that before you go to sleep, when you want to check what's hiding under there, you have to flip up that flounce and poke your nose right in. And it's too close, man; something could claw your face right off before you spotted it. But Tabby just doesn't appreciate my point of view.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever considered probing under the bed with a broom handle?

KING: Naw, man, that would be pussy. I mean, sometimes we have house guests staying overnight; how would it look if the next morning, they said, "Gee, we were going to the bathroom last night and we saw Steve on his hands and knees, sticking a broom handle under his bed"? It might tarnish the image. But it's not only Tabby who doesn't understand; I'm disturbed by the attitude of my kids, too. I mean, I suffer a bit from insomnia, and every night, I'll check

them in their beds to see that they're still breathing, and my two oldest, Naomi and Joe, will always tell me, "Be sure to turn off the light and close the door when you leave, Daddy." Turn off the light! Close the door! How can they face it? I mean, my God, anything could be in their room, crouched inside their closet, coiled under their bed, just waiting to slither out, pounce on

them and sink its talons into them! Those things can't stand the light, you know, but the darkness is dangerous! But try telling that to my kids. I hope there's nothing wrong with them. God knows, when I

was their age, I just knew that the bogeyman was waiting for me. Maybe he still is.

PLAYBOY: What, besides your own imagination, scared you?

KING: A movie I'll certainly never forget is Earth Vs. the Flying Saucers, starring Hugh Marlowe, which was basically a horror flick masquerading as science fiction. It was October 1957, I'd just turned ten and I was watching it in the old Stratford Theater in downtown Stratford, Connecticut - one of those quarter-a-shot Saturday-afternoon matinees for kids. The film was pretty standard stuff, about an invasion of earth by this deadly race of aliens from a dying planet; but toward the end - just when it was reaching the good part, with Washington in flames and the final, cataclysmic interstellar battle about to be joined - the screen suddenly went dead. Well, kids started to clap and hoot, thinking the projectionist had made a mistake or the reel had broken, but then, all of a sudden, the theater lights went on full strength, which really surprised everybody, because nothing like that had ever happened before in the middle of a movie. And then the theater manager came striding down the center aisle, looking pale, and he mounted the stage and said, in a trembling voice, "I want to tell you that the Russians have put a space satellite into orbit around earth. They call it Sputnik." Or Spootnik, as he pronounced it.

There was a long, hushed pause as this crowd of Fifties kids in cuffed jeans, with crewcuts or ducktails or ponytails, struggled to absorb all that; and then, suddenly, one voice, near tears but also charged with terrible anger, shrilled through the stunned silence: "Oh, go show the movie, you liar!" And after a few minutes, the film came back on, but I just sat there, frozen to my seat, because I knew the manager wasn't lying.

That was a terrifying knowledge for a member of that entire generation of war babies brought up on Captain Video and Terry and the Pirates and Combat Casey comic books, reared smug in the myth of America's military invincibility and moral supremacy, convinced we were the good guys and God was with us all the way. I immediately made the connection between the film we were seeing and the fact that the Russians had a space satellite circling the heavens, loaded, for all I knew, with H-bombs to rain down on our unsuspecting heads. And at that moment, the fears of fictional horror vividly intersected with the reality of potential nuclear holocaust; a transition from fantasy to a real world suddenly became far more ominous and threatening. And as I sat there, the film concluded with the voices of the malignant invading saucerians echoing from the screen in a final threat: "Look to your skies ... A warning will come from your skies ... Look to your skies ..." I still find it impossible to convey, even to my own kids, how terribly frightened and alone and depressed I felt at that moment.

PLAYBOY: Kids do, as you say, have active imaginations, but wasn't yours unhealthily overheated?

KING: I think most kids share some of my morbid preoccupations, and there's probably something missing in those who don't. It's all a matter of degree, I guess. An active imagination has always been part of the baggage I've carried with me, and when you're a kid, it can sometimes exact a pretty grueling toll. But many of the fears I had to learn to cope with had nothing to do with the supernatural. They stemmed from the same day-to-day anxieties and insecurities a lot of children have to come to terms with. For example, when I was growing

up, I'd think a lot of what would happen if my mother died and I were left an orphan. Now, a kid with relatively little imagination, the kind with a great future in computer programming or the chamber of

commerce, will say to himself, "So what, she's not dead, she's not even sick, so forget it." But with the kind of imagination I had, you couldn't switch off the images once you'd

triggered them, so I'd see my mother laid out in a white-silk-lined mahogany coffin with brass handles, her dead face blank and waxen; I'd hear the organ dirges in the background; and then I'd see myself being dragged off to some Dickensian workhouse by a terrible old lady in black.

But what really scared me most about the prospect of my mother's death was not being shipped off to some institution, rough as that would have been, but I was afraid it would drive me crazy.

PLAYBOY: Did you have any doubts about your sanity?

KING: I didn't trust it, that's for sure. One of my big fears as I was growing up was that I was going to go insane, particularly after I saw that harrowing film *The Snake Pit*, with Olivia de Havilland, on TV. There were all those lunatics in a state mental institution tormenting themselves with their delusions and psychoses and being tormented, in turn, by their sadistic

keepers, and I had very little trouble imagining myself in their midst. In the years since, I've learned what a tough, resilient organ the human brain is and how much psychic hammering it can withstand, but in those days, I was sure that you just went crazy all at once; you'd be walking down the street and - pfffft! - you'd suddenly think you were a chicken or start chopping up the neighborhood kids with garden shears. So, for a long time, I was very much afraid of going nuts.

PLAYBOY: Is there any history of insanity in your family?

KING: Oh, we had a ripe crop of eccentrics, to say the least, on my father's side. I can recall my aunt Betty, who my mother always said was a schizophrenic and who apparently ended her life in a loony bin. Then there was my father's mother, Granny Spansky, whom David and I got to know when we were living in the Middle West. She was a big, heavy-set woman who alternately fascinated and repelled me. I can still see her cackling like an old witch through toothless

gums while she'd fry an entire loaf of bread in bacondrippings on an antique range and then gobble it down, chortling, "My, that's crisp!"

PLAYBOY: What other fears haunted you in your childhood?

KING: Well, I was terrified and fascinated by death - death in general and my own in particular - probably as a result of listening to all those radio shows as a kid and watching some pretty violent TV shows, such as Peter Gunn and Highway Patrol, in which death came cheap and fast. I was absolutely convinced that I'd never live to reach 20. I envisioned myself walking home one night along a dark, deserted street and somebody or something would jump out of the bushes and that would be it. So death as a concept and the people who dealt out death intrigued me. I remember I compiled an entire scrapbook on Charlie Starkweather, the Fifties mass murderer who cut a bloody swath through the Midwest with his girlfriend. God, I had a hard time hiding that from my mother. Starkweather killed nine or ten people in cold blood, and I used to clip and

paste every news item I could find on him, and then I'd sit trying to unravel the inner horror behind that ordinary face. I knew I was looking at big-time sociopathic evil, not the neat little Agatha Christie-

style villain but something wilder and darker and unchained. I wavered between attraction and repulsion, maybe because I realized the face in the photograph could be my own.

PLAYBOY: Once again, those aren't the musings of your typical little leaguer. Weren't you worried even then that there might be something abnormal about your obsession?

KING: Obsession is too strong a word. It was more like trying to figure out a puzzle, because I wanted to know why somebody could do the things Starkweather did. I suppose I wanted to decipher the unspeakable, just as people try to make sense out of Auschwitz or Jonestown. I certainly didn't find evil seductive in any sick way - that would be pathological - but I did find it compelling. And I think most people do, or the bookstores wouldn't still be filled with

biographies of Adolf Hitler more than 35 years after World War Two. The fascination of the abomination, as Conrad called it.

PLAYBOY: Have the fears and insecurities that plagued you in childhood persisted into adult life?

KING: Some of the old faithful night sweats are still with me, such as my fear of sweats are still with me, such as my fear of darkness, but some of the others I've just exchanged for a new set. I mean, you just can't stick with yesterday's fears forever, right? Let's see, now, updated phobias. OK, I have a fear of choking, maybe because the night my mother died of cancer - practically the same minute, actually - my son had a terrible choking fit in his bed at home. He was turning blue when Tabby finally forced out the obstruction. And I

can see that happening to me at the dinner table, and everybody panics and forgets the Heimlich maneuver and I'm polished off by half a Big Mac. What else? I don't like bugs in general, though I came to terms with the 30 thousand cockroaches George Romero's roach wranglers imported from Costa Rica for a segment of our film Creepshow. But I just can't take spiders! No way - particularly those big hairy ones that look like furry basketballs with legs, the ones that are hiding inside a bunch of bananas, waiting to jump out at you. Jesus, those things petrify me.

PLAYBOY: Since you've mentioned Creepshow, which you wrote and starred in, this may be the time to ask you why it bombed so badly at the box office.

KING: We don't know that it did, because the gross receipts from around the country aren't all in and tabulated yet. It had a fantastic first couple of weeks and since then has done badly in some places and quite well in others. But I think the critical drubbing it got might have driven some adults away, though a lot of teenagers have flocked to see the film. I expected bad reviews, of course, because Creepshow is based on the horror-comic-book traditions of the Fifties, not a send-up at all but a recreation. And if the mainstream critics had understood and appreciated that, I'd have known right off that we'd failed miserably in what we were trying to do. Of course, a few big-name critics, such as Rex Reed, did love the film, but that's because they were brought up on those comics and remember them with affection.

PLAYBOY: Even Reed was less than overwhelmed by the bravura of your performance, writing, "King looks and acts exactly like an overweight Li'l Abner." Unjust?

KING: No, right on the mark, because that's the kind of local yokel I was supposed to be depicting, and Romero told me to play it "as broad as a freeway." Of course, my wife claims it was perfect typecasting, but I'll just let that one pass.

PLAYBOY: Back to what still petrifies you - besides bombing at the box office. What's your darkest fear today?

KING: I guess that one of my children will die. I don't think I could handle that. There are a lot of other things, too: the fear that something will go wrong with my marriage; that the world will blunder into war; shit, I'm not even happy about entropy. But those are all wolf-hour thoughts, the ones that come when you can't sleep and you're tossing and turning and it becomes quite

possible to convince yourself that you have cancer or a brain tumor or, if you're sleeping on your left side and can hear your heart pounding, that you're on the verge of a fatal coronary. And sometimes, particularly if you're overworked, you can lie there in the dark and imagine that you hear something downstairs. And then, if you really strain, you can hear noises coming up the

stairs. And then, Jesus, they're here, they're in the bedroom! All those dark night thoughts, you know - the stuff that pleasant dreams are made of.

PLAYBOY: You've mentioned your insomnia, and throughout this interview, you've been popping Excedrin like jelly beans. Do you also suffer from persistent headaches?

KING: Yes, I have very bad ones. They come and go, but when they hit, they're rough. Excedrin helps, but when they're really out of control, all I can do is go upstairs and lie in the dark till they go away. Sooner or later, they do, all at once, and I can function again. From what I've read in the medical literature, they're not traditional migraines but "stressaches" that hit me at points of tension or overwork.

PLAYBOY: You consume even more beer than Excedrin; and you've revealed that you once had a drinking problem. Do you smoke grass as well?

KING: No, I prefer hard drugs. Or I used to, anyway; I haven't done anything heavy in years. Grass doesn't give me a particularly great high; I'll get a little giggly, but I always feel ill afterward. But I was in college during the late Sixties. Even at the University of Maine, it was no big deal to get hold of drugs. I did a lot of LSD and peyote and mescaline, more than 60 trips in

all. I'd never proselytize for acid or any other hallucinogen, because there are good-trip personalities and bad-trip personalities, and the latter category of people can be seriously damaged emotionally. If you've got the wrong physiological or mental make-up, dropping acid can be like playing Russian roulette with a loaded .45 automatic. But I've got to say that for me, the results were generally beneficial. I never had a trip that I didn't come out of feeling as though I'd had a brain purgative; it was sort of like a psychic dump truck emptying all the accumulated garbage out of my head. And at that particular time, I needed that kind of mental enema.

PLAYBOY: Did your experience with hallucinogens have any effect on your writing later on?

KING: None at all. Acid is just a chemical illusion, a game you play with your brain. It's totally meaningless in terms of a genuine expansion of consciousness. So I've never bought the argument of Aldous Huxley that hallucinogens open the doors to perception. That's mystical self-indulgence, the kind of bullshit Timothy Leary used to preach.

PLAYBOY: Are you afraid of writer's block?

KING: Yes, it's one of my greatest fears. You know, earlier, we were discussing my childhood fear of death, but that's something with which I've pretty much come to terms. I mean, I can comprehend both intellectually and emotionally that a day will come when I'll have terminal lung cancer or I'll be climbing a flight of stairs and suddenly feel an icy pain run down my arm before the hammer stroke hits the left side of my chest and I topple down the stairs dead. I'd feel a little surprised, a little regretful, but I'd also know that it was something I'd courted a long time and it had finally decided to marry me. On the other hand, the one thing I cannot comprehend or come to terms with is just drying up as a writer.

Writing is necessary for my sanity. As a writer, I can externalize my fears and insecurities and night terrors on paper, which is what people pay shrinks a small fortune to do. In my case, they pay me for psychoanalyzing myself in print. And in the process, I'm able to "write myself sane," as that fine poet Anne Sexton put it. It's an old technique of therapists, you know: Get the patient to write out his demons. A Freudian exorcism. But all the violent energies I have - and there are a lot of them - I can vomit out onto paper. All the rage

and hate and frustration, all that's dangerous and sick and foul within me, I'm able to spew into my work. There are guys in padded cells all around the world who aren't so lucky.

PLAYBOY: Where do you think you'd be today without your writing talent?

KING: It's hard to say. Maybe I'd be a mildly embittered high school English teacher going through the motions till the day I could collect my pension and fade away into the twilight years. On the other hand, I might very well have ended up there in the Texas tower with Charlie Whitman, working out my demons with a high-powered telescopic rifle instead of a word processor. I mean, I know that guy Whitman. My writing has kept me out of that tower.

PLAYBOY: You've been candid in discussing your innermost fears and insecurities, but one area we haven't touched upon is the sexual. Do you have any hang-ups there?

KING: Well, I think I have pretty normal sexual appetites, whatever the word normal means in these swinging times. I mean, I'm not into sheep or enemas or multiple amputees or marshmallow worship or whatever the latest fad is. God, I was walking through a porn shop recently and saw a glossy magazine with a guy on the cover vomiting all over a naked girl. I mean, chacun á son goût and all that, but yucchhh! I'm not into the sadomasochism trip, either, on which your competitor Penthouse has built an entire empire. Hell, you can shoot a photo spread of a nude girl in a diamond-studded dog collar being dragged around on a leash by a guy in leather and jack boots, and despite all the artistic gloss and the gauzy lens and the pastel

colors, it's still sleaze; it still reeks corruptingly of concentration-camp porn. There's a range of sexual variations that turn me on, but I'm afraid they're all boringly unkinky.

PLAYBOY: So there are no bogeymen hiding in your libido?

KING: No, not in that sense. The only sexual problem I've had was more functional. Some years ago, I suffered from periodic impotence, and that's no fun, believe me.

PLAYBOY: What brought it on?

KING: Well, I'm really not good enough at clinical introspection to say for sure. It wasn't a persistent problem. Drinking was partially responsible, I guess - what the English call the old brewer's droop. Henry Fielding points out that too much drink will cause a dulling of the sexual appetite in a dull man, so if that's the case, I'm dull, because if I knock them down too fast, I'm

just too drunk to fuck. Booze may whet the desire, but it sure louses up the performance. Of course, part of it has to be psychological, because the surest way I know for a guy to become impotent is to say, "Oh, Christ, what if I'm impotent?" Fortunately, I haven't had any trouble with it for quite a while now. Oh, shit, why did I get onto this subject? Now I'll start thinking about

it again!

PLAYBOY: Have you found that your sex appeal has increased along with your bank balance and celebrity status?

KING: Yeah, there are a lot of women who want to fuck fame or power or whatever it is. The entire groupie syndrome. Sometimes, the idea of an anonymous fuck is sort of appealing; you know, some gal comes up to you at an autograph signing in a bookstore and says, "Let's go to my place," and you're leaving town the next morning and part of you is tempted to say, "Yeah, let's; we'll pour Wesson Oil over each other and really screw our eyes out." But it's better not to start down that slippery slope - no reference to the Wesson Oil intended - and I haven't. My marriage is too important to me, and anyway, so much of my energy goes into writing that I don't really need to fool around.

PLAYBOY: Have you always been faithful to your wife?

KING: Yes, old-fashioned as it may sound, I have been. I know that's what you'd expect somebody to say in print, but it's still true. I'd never risk my wife's affection for some one-night stand. I'm too grateful for the unremitting commitment that she's made to me and the help she's given me in living and working the way I want to. She's a rose with thorns, too, and I've pricked

myself on them many times in the past, so apart from anything else, I wouldn't dare cheat on her!

PLAYBOY: Did you feel at all threatened when your wife began to pursue her own writing career and published her first novel, *Small World*?

KING: I sure did. I felt jealous as hell. My reaction was like a little kid's: I felt like saying, "Hey, these are my toys; you can't play with them." But that soon changed to pride when I read the final manuscript and found she'd turned out a damned fine piece of work. I knew she had it in her, because Tabby was a good poet and short-story writer when we started dating, in my senior

year at college, and she'd already won several prizes for her work. So I was able to come to terms with that childish possessiveness pretty quickly. Now, the first time she outsells me, that may be another story!

PLAYBOY: Why is explicit sex so conspicuously absent from your work? Are you uncomfortable with it?

KING: Well, Peter Straub says, "Stevie hasn't discovered sex," and I try to dispute him by pointing to my three kids, but I don't think he's convinced. Actually, I probably am uncomfortable with it, but that discomfort stems from a more general problem I have with creating believable romantic relationships. Without such strong relationships to build on, it's tough to create sexual scenes that have credibility and impact or advance the plot, and I'd just be

dragging sex in arbitrarily and perfunctorily - you know, "Oh, hell, two chapters without a fuck scene; better slap one together." There is some explicit sex in *Cujo* and in my novella *Apt Pupil in Different Seasons*, in which the teenager, seduced by Nazi evil, fantasizes about killing a girl as he rapes her, electrocuting her slowly and savoring every spasm and scream until he coordinates his orgasm with her death throes. That was consonant with the kid's twisted character but about as far as I could ever go in the direction of S/M, because after a point, my mental circuit breakers just trip over.

PLAYBOY: Along with your difficulty in describing sexual scenes, you apparently also have a problem with women in your books. Critic Chelsea Quinn Yarbro wrote, "It is disheartening when a writer with so much talent and strength and vision is not able to develop a believable woman character between the ages of 17 and 60." Is that a fair criticism?

KING: Yes, unfortunately, I think it is probably the most justifiable of all those leveled at me. In fact, I'd extend her criticism to include my handling of black characters. Both Hallorann, the cook in *The Shining*, and Mother Abigail in *The Stand* are cardboard caricatures of super-black heroes, viewed through rose-tinted glasses of white-liberal guilt. And when I think I'm free of the charge that most male American writers depict women as either nebbishes or bitch-goddess destroyers, I create someone like Carrie - who starts out as a nebbish victim and then becomes a bitch goddess, destroying an entire town in an explosion of hormonal rage. I recognize the problems but can't yet rectify them.

PLAYBOY: Your work is also criticized for being overly derivative. In *Fear Itself*, a recent collection of critical essays on your novels, author Don Herron contends that "King seems content to rework well-worn material ... Rarely in King's stories are there supernatural creations that do not at least suggest earlier work in the genre [and] usually they are borrowed outright." Would you contest the point?

KING: No, I'd concede it freely. I've never considered myself a blazingly original writer in the sense of conceiving totally new and fresh plot ideas. Of course, in both genre and mainstream fiction, there aren't really too many of those left, anyway, and most writers

are essentially reworking a few basic themes, whether it's the angst-ridden introspection and tiresome identity

crises of the aesthetes, the sexual and domestic problems of the John Updike school of cock contemplators or the traditional formulas of mystery and horror and science fiction. What I try to do - and on occasion, I hope, I succeed - is to pour new wine from old bottles. I'd never deny, though, that most of my books have been derivative to some extent, though a few of the short stories are fairly sui generis, and *Cujo* and *The Dead Zone* are both basically original conceptions. But *Carrie*, for example, derived to a considerable extent from a terrible grade-B movie called *The Brain from Planet Arous*; *The Shining* was influenced by Shirley Jackson's marvelous novel *The Haunting of Hill House*; *The Stand* owes a considerable debt to both George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* and M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*; and *Firestarter* has numerous science-fictional antecedents. *'Salem's Lot*, of course, was inspired by and bears a fully

intentional similarity to the great classic of the field, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. I've never made any secret of that.

PLAYBOY: You also seem intrigued by the phenomenon of Nazism and have written about it at length in both *Different Seasons* and *The Dead Zone*, which deals with the rise to power of an American Hitler and the desperate efforts of one man to stop him before it's too late.

KING: Well, the nature of evil is a natural preoccupation for any horror writer, and Nazism is probably the most dramatic incarnation of that evil. After all, what was the holocaust but the almost literal recreation of hell on earth, an assembly-line inferno replete with fiery furnaces and human demons pitch-forking the dead into lime pits? Millions have also died in the gulag and in such places as Cambodia, of course, but the crimes of the Communists have resulted from the

perversion of an essentially rational and Apollonian 19th Century philosophy, while Nazism was something new and twisted and, by its very nature, perverted. But when it exploded onto the German scene in the Twenties, I can see how it exercised a dangerously compelling appeal. That werewolf in us is never far from the surface, and Hitler knew how to unleash and feed it. So,

yes, if I had been in Germany in the early Thirties, I suppose I might have been attracted to Nazism.

But I've got a pretty sure feeling that by 1935 or 1936, even before the concentration camps and the mass murders got going in earnest, I'd have recognized the nature of the beast, in myself as well as in the ideology, and would have gotten out. Of course, unless you're actually in a situation like that, you never know how you'd respond. But you can see echoes of the mad

Dionysian engine that powered the Nazis all around you. I'm a big rock-'n'-roll fan, and rock has been an important influence on my life and work, but even there you can sometimes hear that beast rattling its chains and struggling to get loose. Nothing so dramatic as Altamont, either; just the kind of wild, frenzied mob emotions that can be generated when you get a couple of thousand

people blasted out of their skulls on sound and dope in an auditorium.

I love Bruce Springsteen, and recently, my wife and I were at one of his concerts in Toronto, where he suddenly started pumping his arm straight out from his chest with a clenched fist, like a Fascist salute, and all the screaming fans in the audience followed suit, and for a discordant moment, we felt we were in Nuremberg. And there's obviously not the faintest hint of fascism or racism or violent nihilism in Springsteen, such as you'll find in some of the English punkers, but all at once, that mass hysteria you can get at rock concerts had coalesced into a dark and disturbing apparition. Of course, good, strong rock can evoke a powerhouse of emotional reaction, because

by nature, it's go-for-broke stuff; it's anarchistic in the most attractive sense

of the word; it's all about living fast, dying young and making a handsome corpse. And horror is like that, too. Both go for the jugular, and if they work, both evoke primal archetypes.

PLAYBOY: You're universally identified as a horror writer; but shouldn't such books as *The Stand*, which is essentially a futuristic disaster novel, really be classified as science fiction?

KING: Yes, technically, you're right. In fact, the only books of mine that I consider pure unadulterated horror are *'Salem's Lot*, *The Shining* and now *Christine*, because they all offer no rational explanation at all for the supernatural events that occur. *Carrie*, *The Dead Zone* and *Firestarter*, on the other hand, are much more within the science-fiction tradition, since they deal

with the psionic wild talents we talked about before. *The Stand* actually has a foot in both camps, because in the second half of the book, the part that depicts the confrontation between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, there is a strong supernatural element. And *Cujo* is neither horror nor science fiction, though it is, I hope, horrifying. It's not always easy to categorize these things, of course, but basically, I do consider myself a horror writer, because I love to frighten people. Just as Garfield says "Lasagna is my life," I can say, in all truth, that horror is mine. I'd write the stuff even if I weren't paid for it, because I don't think there's anything sweeter on God's green earth than scaring the living shit out of people.

PLAYBOY: How far will you go to get the desired effect?

KING: As far as I have to, until the reader becomes convinced that he's in the hands of a genuine, gibbering, certifiable homicidal maniac. The genre exists on three basic levels, separate but interdependent and each one a little bit cruder than the one before. There's terror on top, the finest emotion any writer can induce; then horror, and, on the very lowest level of all, the gag

instinct of revulsion. Naturally, I'll try to terrify you first, and if that doesn't work, I'll try to horrify you, and if I can't make it there, I'll try to gross you out. I'm not proud; I'll give you a sandwich squirming with bugs or shove your hand into the maggot-churning innards of a long-dead woodchuck. I'll do anything it takes; I'll go to any lengths, I'll geek a rat if I have to - I've geeked plenty of them in my time. After all, as Oscar Wilde said, nothing succeeds like excess. So if somebody wakes up screaming because of what I wrote, I'm delighted. If he merely tosses his cookies, it's still a victory but on a lesser scale. I suppose the ultimate triumph would be to have somebody drop dead of a heart attack, literally scared to death. I'd say, "Gee, that's a shame," and I'd mean it, but part of me would be thinking, Jesus, that really worked!

PLAYBOY: Is there anywhere you'd draw the line - at necrophilia, say, or cannibalism or infanticide?

KING: I really can't think of any subject I wouldn't write about, though there are some things I probably couldn't handle. There is an infanticide scene in 'Salem's Lot, in which the vampire sacrifices a baby, but it's only alluded to, not described in any detail, which I think heightens the obscenity of the act. As far as cannibalism goes, I have written a story about a kind of cannibalism. It's called Survivor Type and deals with a surgeon who's in a shipwreck and is

washed up on a tiny, barren coral atoll in the South Pacific. To keep alive, he's forced to eat himself, one piece at a time. He records everything meticulously in his diary, and after amputating his foot, he writes, "I did everything according to Hoyle. I washed it before I ate it." People claim I've become such a brand name that I could sell my laundry list, but nobody would

touch that story with a ten-foot pole, and it gathered dust in my file cabinet for five years before it was finally included in a recent anthology. I will admit that I've written some awful things, terrible things that have really bothered me. I'm thinking now mainly of my forthcoming book *Pet Sematary*, and one particular scene in which a father exhumes his dead son. It's a few days

after the boy has been killed in a traffic accident, and as the father sits in the deserted graveyard, cradling his son in his arms and weeping, the gas-bloated corpse explodes with disgusting belches and farts - a truly ghastly sound and smell that have been described to me in grim detail by mortuary workers and graveyard attendants. And that scene still bothers me, because as I

wrote it - in fact, it almost wrote itself; my typewriter raced like automatic writing - I could see that graveyard and I could hear those awful sounds and smell that awful smell. I still can. Brrrr! It was because of that kind of scene that Tabby didn't want me to publish the book.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever censored your own work because something was just too disgusting to publish?

KING: No. If I can get it down on paper without puking all over the word processor, then as far as I'm concerned, it's fit to see the light of day. I thought I'd made it clear that I'm not squeamish. I have no illusions about the horror genre, remember. It may be perfectly true

that we're expanding the borders of wonder and nurturing a sense of awe about the mysteries of the

universe and all that bullshit. But despite all the talk you'll hear from writers in this genre about horror's providing a socially and psychologically useful catharsis for people's fears and aggressions, the brutal fact of the matter is that we're still in the business of selling public executions.

Anyway, though I wouldn't censor myself, I was censored once. In the first draft of 'Salem's Lot, I had a scene in which Jimmy Cody, the local doctor, is devoured in a boardinghouse basement by a horde of rats summoned from the town dump by the leader of the vampires. They swarm all over him like a writhing, furry carpet, biting and clawing, and when he tries to scream a warning to his companion upstairs, one of them scurries into his open mouth and squirms there as it gnaws out his tongue. I loved the scene, but my editor made it clear that no way would Doubleday publish something like that, and I came around eventually and impaled poor Jimmy on knives. But, shit, it just wasn't the same.

PLAYBOY: Are you ever worried about a mentally unstable reader's emulating your fictional violence in real life?

KING: Sure I am; it bothers me a lot, and I'd just be whistling past the graveyard if I said it didn't. And I'm afraid it might already have happened. In Florida last year, there was a homosexual-murder case in which a famous nutritionist known as the Junk-Food Doctor was killed in a particularly grisly way, tortured and then slowly suffocated while the murderers sat around eating fast food and watching him die. Afterward, they scrawled the word Redrum, or

murder spelled backward, on the walls, and, of course, that's a word I used in *The Shining*. Not only should the dumb bastards be fried or

at least put away for life but they should be sued for plagiarism, too!

There were two other cases in a similar vein. In Boston in 1977, a woman was killed by a young man who butchered her with a variety of kitchen implements, and the police speculated that he'd imitated the scene in the film version of *Carrie* in which Carrie kills her mother by literally nailing her to the kitchen wall with everything from a corkscrew to a potato peeler. And in Baltimore in 1980, a woman reading a book at a bus stop was the victim of an attempted

mugging. She promptly whipped out a concealed knife and stabbed her assailant to death, and when reporters asked her afterward what she'd been reading, she proudly held up a copy of *The Stand*, which does not exactly exhort the good guys to turn the other cheek when the bad guys close in. So maybe there is a copycat syndrome at work here, as with the Tylenol poisonings.

But, on the other hand, those people would all be dead even if I'd never written a word. The murderers would still have murdered. So I think we should resist the tendency to kill the messenger for the message. Evil is basically stupid and unimaginative and doesn't need creative inspiration from me or anybody else. But despite knowing all that rationally, I have to admit that it is unsettling to feel that I could be linked in any way, however tenuous, to somebody else's murder. So if I sound defensive, it's because I am.

PLAYBOY: In a review of your work in *The New Republic*, novelist Michele Slung suggested that the grisly nature of your subject matter may lead some critics to underestimate your literary talents. According to Slung, "King has not been taken very seriously, if at all, by the critical establishment ... [His] real stigma - the reason he is not perceived as being in competition with real writers - is that he has chosen to write about ... things that go bump in the night." Do you think the critics have treated you unfairly?

KING: No, not in general. Most reviewers around the country have been kind to me, so I have no complaints on that score. But she has a point when she touches on the propensity of a small but influential element of the literary establishment to ghettoize horror and fantasy and instantly relegate them beyond the pale of so-called serious literature. I'm sure those critics' 19th Century precursors would have contemptuously dismissed Poe as the great American hack.

But the problem goes beyond my particular genre. That little elite, which is clustered in the literary magazines and book-review sections of influential newspapers and magazines on both coasts, assumes that all popular literature must also, by definition, be bad literature. Those criticisms are not really against bad writing, they're against an entire type of writing. My type of

writing, as it turns out. Those avatars of high culture hold it almost as an article of religious faith that plot and story must be subordinated to style, whereas my deeply held conviction is that story must be paramount, because it defines the entire work of fiction. All other considerations are

secondary - theme, mood, even characterization and language itself.

PLAYBOY: Time magazine, hardly a highbrow bastion, has condemned you as a master of "post-literate prose," and The Village Voice published a scathing attack illustrated by a caricature of you as a gross, bearded pig smirking over bags of money while a rat crunched adoringly on your shoulder. The Voice said, "If you value wit, intelligence or insight, even if you're willing to settle for the slightest hint of good writing, all King's books are dismissible."

KING: There's a political element in that Voice attack. You see, I view the world with what is essentially an old-fashioned frontier vision. I believe that people can master their own destiny and confront and

overcome tremendous odds. I'm convinced that there exist absolute values of good and evil warring for supremacy in this universe - which is, of course, a basically religious

viewpoint. And - what damns me even more in the eyes of the "enlightened" cognoscenti - I also believe that the traditional values of family, fidelity and personal honor have not all drowned and dissolved in the trendy California hot tub of the "me" generation. That puts me at odds with what is essentially an urban and liberal sensibility that equates all change with progress and wants to destroy all conventions, in literature as well as in society. But I view that kind of cultural radical chic about as benignly as Tom Wolfe did its earlier political manifestations, and *The Village Voice*, as a standard-bearer of left-liberal values, quite astutely detected that I was in some sense the enemy. People like me really do irritate people like them, you know. In effect, they're saying, "What right do you have to entertain people? This is a serious world with a lot of serious problems. Let's sit around and pick scabs; that's art."

The thrust of the criticism in the *Time* piece was a bit different. It basically attacked me for relying on imagery drawn from the movies and television, contending that that was somehow demeaning to literature and perhaps even heralded its imminent demise. But the fact is, I'm writing about a generation of people who have grown up under the influence of the icons of American popular culture, from Hollywood to McDonald's, and it would be ridiculous to

pretend that such people sit around contemplating Proust all day. The *Time* critic should have addressed his complaint to Henry James, who observed 80 years ago that "a good ghost story must be connected at a hundred different points with the common objects of life."

PLAYBOY: John D. MacDonald, a big fan of yours, has predicted that "Stephen King is not going to restrict himself to his present field of interest." Is he right? And if so, where will you go in the future?

KING: Well, I've written so-called mainstream stories and even novels in the past, though the novels were pretty early, amateurish stuff. I'll write about anything that strikes my fancy, whether it's werewolves or baseball. Some people seem convinced that I see horror as nothing more than a formula for commercial success, a money machine whose handle I'm going to keep pulling for the rest of my life, while others suspect that the minute my bank balance reaches the right critical mass, I'm going to put all that childish nonsense behind me and try to write this generation's answer to *Brideshead Revisited*. But the fact is that money really has nothing to do with it one way or the other. I love writing the things I write, and I wouldn't and couldn't do

anything else.

My kind of storytelling is in a long and time-honored tradition, dating back to the ancient Greek bards and the medieval minnesingers. In a way, people like me are the modern equivalent of the old Welsh sin eater, the wandering bard who would be called to the house when somebody was on his deathbed. The family would feed him their best food and drink, because while he was eating, he was also consuming all the sins of the dying person, so at the moment of death, his soul would fly to heaven untarnished, washed clean. And the sin eaters did that year after year, and everybody knew that while they'd die with full bellies, they were headed straight for hell.

So in that sense, I and my fellow horror writers are absorbing and defusing all your fears and anxieties and insecurities and taking them upon ourselves. We're sitting in the darkness beyond the flickering warmth of your fire, cackling into our caldrons and spinning out our spider webs of words, all the time sucking the sickness from your minds and spewing it out into the night.

PLAYBOY: You indicated earlier that you're a superstitious person. Do you ever fear that things are going just too well for you and that suddenly, some malign cosmic force is going to snatch it all away?

KING: I don't fear it, I know it. There's no way some disaster or illness or other cataclysmic affliction isn't already lurking in wait for me just down the road. Things never get better, you know; they only get worse. And as John Irving has pointed out, we are rewarded only moderately for being good, but our transgressions are penalized with absurd severity. I mean, take something

petty, such as smoking. What a small pleasure that is: You settle down with a good book and a beer after dinner and fire up a cigarette and have a pleasantly relaxed ten minutes, and you're not hurting anybody else, at least so long as you don't blow your smoke in his face. But what punishment does God inflict for that trifling peccadillo? Lung cancer, heart attack, stroke! And if you're a woman and you smoke while you're pregnant, He'll make sure that you deliver a nice, healthy, dribbling baby Mongoloid. Come on, God, where's Your sense of proportion? But Job asked the same question 3000 years ago, and Jehovah roared back from the whirlwind, "So where were you when I made the world?" In other words, "Shut up, fuck face, and take what I give you." And that's the only answer we'll ever get, so I know things are going to go bad. I just know it.

PLAYBOY: With anyone else, this final question would be a cliché. With you, it seems just right: What epitaph would you like on your gravestone?

KING: In my novella *The Breathing Method*, in *Different Seasons*, I've created a mysterious private club in an old brownstone on East 35th Street in Manhattan, in which an oddly matched group of men

gathers periodically to trade tales of the uncanny. And there are many rooms upstairs, and when a new guest asks the exact number, the strange old butler tells him, "I don't know, sir, but you could get lost up there." That men's club is really a metaphor for the entire

storytelling process. There are as many stories in me as there are rooms in that house, and I can easily lose myself in them. And at the club, whenever a tale is about to be told, a toast is raised first, echoing the words engraved on the keystone of the massive fireplace in the library: It Is The Tale, Not He Who Tells It. That's been a good guide to me in life, and I think it would make a good epitaph for my tombstone. Just that and no name.

STEPHEN KING: THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

From The Archives Issue 1221: November 6, 2014

The horror master looks back on his four-decade career

Stephen King's office building sits on a particularly dreary dead-end road on the outskirts of Bangor, Maine, just down the street from a gun-and-ammo store, a snowplow dealership and, appropriately enough, an old cemetery. From the outside, the anonymous building looks like a new branch of Dunder Mifflin, a very deliberate choice meant to keep King and his tiny staff safe. "We can't be on a main road because people would find us," says one of his assistants. "And it's not people you want to find you. He draws some weird people."

Once buzzed in, a visitor enters a sort of Stephen King nirvana rooms decorated with fan-created artwork populated with characters from his novels, a Stephen King Simpsons action figure, a freakish bobble-head doll of the demented clown from his 1986 book *IT*, and piles and piles of books. He keeps an old Gothic house (complete with spiderwebs and bats on the front gate) just a few miles away that draws bus loads of tourists, but he's virtually never there. Most of the year, he lives two and a half hours away in Lovell, Maine, and now with his three kids grown, he and his wife, Tabitha, head down to Sarasota, Florida, at the height of winter.

King himself only comes into the office about once a month, but today he stopped by and, as usual, he's juggling a lot of projects at once. He just polished off a final draft of his upcoming serial-killer book *Finders Keepers* (a sequel to his recent work *Mr. Mercedes*), a pretty astonishing feat considering he will also release two books this year, write a screenplay for the new Joan Allen/Anthony LaPaglia film *A Good Marriage* and continue to fine-tune *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*, a musical he wrote with John Mellencamp.

But right now, the 67-year-old is hunched over an easy chair in his office, chomping on a doughnut that's leaving a growing pile of powdered sugar on his black turtleneck shirt. He's excited about the upcoming publication of *Revival*, a modern-day Frankenstein story

about a preacher who's obsessed with the healing powers of electricity and his 50-year relationship with a drug-addled rock guitarist. It's basically guaranteed to land at Number One on The New York Times bestseller list.

Since 1974, when *Carrie* hit shelves, King has sold an estimated 350 million books, and he's now worth hundreds of millions of dollars. John Grisham and *Fifty Shades of Grey* author E.L. James may outsell him these days, but it's hardly a problem. "He's not competitive," says his longtime agent Chuck Verrill. "The only guy he ever cared about was Tom Clancy. They were both at Penguin once, and it was made clear to King that he was seen as the second banana to Clancy. He didn't like that, but he's very content where he is right now."

King hasn't done many recent in-depth print interviews since a van accident nearly killed him 15 years ago, but he decided to sit down with *Rolling Stone* to discuss his life and career.

The vast majority of your books deal with either horror or the supernatural. What drew you toward those subjects?

It's built in. That's all. The first movie I ever saw was a horror movie. It was *Bambi*. When that little deer gets caught in a forest fire, I was terrified, but I was also exhilarated. I can't explain it. My wife and kids drink coffee. But I don't. I like tea. My wife and kids won't touch a pizza with anchovies on it. But I like anchovies. The stuff I was drawn to was built in as part of my equipment.

Did you ever feel shame about that?

No. I thought it was great fun to scare people. I also knew it was socially acceptable because there were a lot of horror movies out there. And I cut my teeth on horror comics like *The Crypt of Terror*.

By writing horror novels, you entered one of the least respected genres of fiction.

Yeah. It's one of the genres that live across the tracks in the literary community, but what could I do? That's where I was drawn. I love D.H. Lawrence. And James Dickey's poetry, Emile Zola, Steinbeck??.?.?Fitzgerald, not so much. Hemingway, not at all. Hemingway sucks, basically. If people like that, terrific. But if I set out to write that way, what would've come out would've been hollow and lifeless because it wasn't me. And I have to say this: To a degree, I have elevated the horror genre.

Few would argue with that.

It's more respected now. I've spoken out my whole life against the idea of simply dismissing whole areas of fiction by saying it's "genre" and therefore can't be seen as literature. I'm not trying to be conceited or anything. Raymond Chandler elevated the detective genre. People who have done wonderful work really blur the line.

A lot of critics were pretty brutal to you when you were starting out.

Early in my career, The Village Voice did a caricature of me that hurts even today when I think about it. It was a picture of me eating money. I had this big, bloated face. It was this assumption that if fiction was selling a lot of copies, it was bad. If something is accessible to a lot of people, it's got to be dumb because most people are dumb. And that's elitist. I don't buy it.

But that attitude continues to this day. Literary critic Harold Bloom viciously ripped into you when you won the National Book Award about 10 years ago.

Bloom never pissed me off because there are critics out there, and he's one of them, who take their ignorance about popular culture as a badge of intellectual prowess. He might be able to say that Mark Twain is a great writer, but it's impossible for him to say that there's a direct line of descent from, say, Nathaniel Hawthorne to Jim Thompson because he doesn't read guys like Thompson. He just thinks, "I never read him, but I know he's terrible."

Film critics can look at a popular movie like Jaws and heap praise upon it, then in another section of the paper, the critics will bash you for The Stand.

By its very nature, film is supposed to be an accessible medium to everybody. Let's face it, you can take a fucking illiterate to Jaws and he can understand what's going on. I don't know who the Harold Bloom of the film world is, but if you found someone like that and said to him, "Compare Jaws with 400 Blows by Francois Truffaut," he'd just laugh and say, "Well, Jaws is a piece of crappy, popular entertainment, but 400 Blows is cinema." It's the same elitism.

Switching gears, your new book Revival talks a lot about religion. Specifically, one of the two main characters is a reverend that turns on God when his family dies but also delivers a sermon about why religion is a complete fraud. How much of that sermon mirrors your own beliefs?

My view is that organized religion is a very dangerous tool that's been misused by a lot of people. I grew up in a Methodist church, and we went to services every Sunday and to Bible school in the summer. We didn't have a choice. We just did it. So all that stuff about childhood religion in Revival is basically autobiographical. But as a kid, I had doubts. When I went to Methodist youth fellowship, we were taught that the Catholics were all going to go to hell because they worship idols. So right there, I'm saying to myself, "Catholics are going to go to hell, but my aunt Molly married a Catholic and she converted and she's got 11 kids and they're all pretty nice and one of them's my good friend they're all going to go to hell?" I'm thinking to myself, "This is bullshit." And if that's bullshit, how much of the rest of it is bullshit?

Did you relay any of your doubts to your mother?

Jesus, no! I loved her. I never would have done that. Once I got through high school, that was it for me. When you see somebody like Jimmy Swaggart and he's supposed to be this great minister

touched by God, and he's paying whores because he wants to look up their dresses, it's just all hypocrisy.

All that said, you've made it clear over the years that you still believe in God.

Yeah. I choose to believe in God because it makes things better. You have a meditation point, a source of strength. I don't ask myself, "Well, does God exist or does God not exist?" I choose to believe that God exists, and therefore I can say, "God, I can't do this by myself. Help me not to take a drink today. Help me not to take a drug today." And that works fine for me.

Do you believe in the afterlife?

I don't know. I'm totally agnostic on that one. Let's put it this way, I would like to believe that there is some sort of an afterlife. I do believe that when we're in the process of dying, that all these emergency circuits in the brain take over. I base what I'm saying not on any empirical evidence. I think it's very possible that when you're dying, these circuits open up, which would explain this whole white-light phenomena when people clinically die and they see their relatives and stuff and say, "Hello, it's great to see you."

Do you hope to go to heaven?

I don't want to go to the heaven that I learned about when I was a kid. To me, it seems boring. The idea that you're going to lounge around on a cloud all day and listen to guys play harps? I don't want to listen to harps. I want to listen to Jerry Lee Lewis!

Do you wish you had stronger beliefs? Would that give you comfort if you had more certainty?

No, I think uncertainty is good for things. Certainty breeds complacency and complacency means that you just sit somewhere in your nice little comfortable suburban house in Michigan, looking at CNN and saying, "Oh, those poor immigrant children that are all

coming across the border. But we really can't have them here that isn't what God wants. Let's send them all back to the drug cartels." There's a complacency to it.

How about evil? Do you believe there is such a thing?

I believe in evil, but all my life I've gone back and forth about whether or not there's an outside evil, whether or not there's a force in the world that really wants to destroy us, from the inside out, individually and collectively. Or whether it all comes from inside and that it's all part of genetics and environment. When you find somebody like, let's say, Ted Bundy, who tortured and killed all those women and sometimes went back and had sex with the dead bodies, I don't think when you look at his upbringing you can say, "Oh, that's because Mommy put a clothespin on his dick when he was four." That behavior was hard-wired. Evil is inside us. The older I get, the less I think there's some sort of outside devilish influence; it comes from people. And unless we're able to address that issue, sooner or later, we'll fucking kill ourselves.

What do you mean?

I read a thing on Huffington Post about a month ago that stayed with me. It was very troubling. It was a pop-science thing, which is all I can understand. It said we've been listening to the stars for 50 years, looking for any signs of life, and there's been nothing but silence. When you see what's going on in the world today, and you have all this conflict, and our technological expertise has far outraced our ability to manage our own emotions you see it right now with ISIS what's the solution? The only solution we see with ISIS is to bomb the shit out of those motherfuckers so that they just can't roll over the world. And that's what's scary about that silence maybe all intelligent races hit this level of violence and technological advances that they can't get past. And then they just puff out. You hit the wall and that's it.

So you think humanity's destiny is to someday wipe itself out?

I can't see the future, but it's grim. The depletion of resources we're living in this dine-and-dash economy. I love the Republicans, too. Whenever it comes to money the national debt, for instance they yell their heads off about "What about our grandchildren?" But when it comes to the environment, when it comes to resources, they're like, "We'll be OK for 40 years."

I want to talk about writing now. Walk me through your typical day when you're working on a book.

I wake up. I eat breakfast. I walk about three and a half miles. I come back, I go out to my little office, where I've got a manuscript, and the last page that I was happy with is on top. I read that, and it's like getting on a taxiway. I'm able to go through and revise it and put myself click back into that world, whatever it is. I don't spend the day writing. I'll maybe write fresh copy for two hours, and then I'll go back and revise some of it and print what I like and then turn it off.

Do you do that every day?

Every day, even weekends. I used to write more and I used to write faster it's just aging. It slows you down a little bit.

Is writing an addiction for you?

Yeah. Sure. I love it. And it's one of the few things where I do it less now and get as much out of it. Usually with dope and booze, you do it more and get less out of it as time goes by. It's still really good, but it's addictive, obsessive-compulsive behavior. So I'll write every day for maybe six months and get a draft of something and then I make myself stop completely for 10 days or 12 days in order to let everything settle. But during that time off, I drive my wife crazy. She says, "Get out of my way, get out of the house, go do something paint a birdhouse, anything!"

So I watch TV, I play my guitar and put in time, and then when I go to bed at night, I have all these crazy dreams, usually not very pleasant ones because whatever machinery that you have that goes into

writing stories, it doesn't want to stop. So if it's not going on the page, it has to go somewhere, and I have these mind dreams. They're always dreams that focus on some kind of shame or insecurity.

Like what?

The one that recurs is that I'm going to be in a play, and I get to the theater and it's opening night and not only can I not find my costume, but I realize that I have never learned the lines.

How do you interpret that?

It's just insecurity fear of failure, fear of falling short.

You still fear failure after all these years of success?

Sure. I'm afraid of all kinds of things. I'm afraid of failing at whatever story I'm writing that it won't come up for me, or that I won't be able to finish it.

Do you think your imagination is more active than most people's?

I don't know, man. It's more trained. It hurts to imagine stuff. It can give you a headache. Probably doesn't hurt physically, but it hurts mentally. But the more that you can do it, the more you're able to get out of it. Everybody has that capacity, but I don't think everyone develops it.

Fair enough, but not many people can do what you do.

I can remember as a college student writing stories and novels, some of which ended up getting published and some that didn't. It was like my head was going to burst there were so many things I wanted to write all at once. I had so many ideas, jammed up. It was like they just needed permission to come out. I had this huge aquifer underneath of stories that I wanted to tell and I stuck a pipe down in

there and everything just gushed out. There's still a lot of it, but there's not as much now.

When did you first get the idea for Revival?

I've had it since I was a kid, really. I read this story called The Great God Pan in high school, and there were these two characters waiting to see if this woman could come back from the dead and tell them what was over there. It just creeped me out. The more I thought about it, the more I thought about this Mary Shelley-Frankenstein thing.

How long did it take you to write it?

I started it in Maine and finished it in Florida. An actual book takes at least a year. A first draft can be rough, and then you polish it, take out the bad stuff. Elmore Leonard someone asked him, "How do you write a book someone wants to read?" And he said, "You leave out the boring shit."

Do you put some of yourself into the character of Jamie?

Yeah, sure. Jamie is a guy who gets addicted to drugs after a motorcycle accident, and I've had a drug problem ever since, man, I don't know. I guess I've had a drug problem since college.

You had a major drinking problem, too. When did that become an issue?

I started drinking by age 18. I realized I had a problem around the time that Maine became the first state in the nation to pass a returnable-bottle-and-can law. You could no longer just toss the shit away, you saved it, and you turned it in to a recycling center. And nobody in the house drank but me. My wife would have a glass of wine and that was all. So I went in the garage one night, and the trash can that was set aside for beer cans was full to the top.

It had been empty the week before. I was drinking, like, a case of beer a night. And I thought, "I'm an alcoholic." That was probably about '78, '79. I thought, "I've gotta be really careful, because if somebody says, 'You're drinking too much, you have to quit,' I won't be able to."

Were you buzzed when you wrote in the morning back then?

Not really. I didn't drink in the days. Sometimes if I had, like, two things going which I did a lot, sometimes I still do I would work at night. And if I was working at night, I was looped. But I never wrote original stuff at night, I just rewrote. It turned out all right.

At what point did hard drugs enter the picture?

It was probably about '78, around the same time that I realized that I was out of control with drinking. Well, I thought I was in control, but in reality I wasn't.

That was cocaine?

Yeah, coke. I was a heavy user from 1978 until 1986, something like that.

Did you write on coke?

Oh, yeah, I had to. I mean, coke was different from booze. Booze, I could wait, and I didn't drink or anything. But I used coke all the time.

You had three young kids at the time. It must have been very stressful to keep this huge secret while balancing all your responsibilities.

I don't remember.

Really?

No. That whole time is pretty hazy to me. I just didn't use it around people. And I wasn't a social drinker. I used to say that I didn't want

to go to bars because they were full of assholes like me.

I'm trying to comprehend how you lived this whole secret life of a drug addict for eight years, all the while churning out bestsellers and being a family man.

Well, I can't comprehend it now, either, but you do what you have to do. And when you're an addict, you have to use. So you just try to balance things out as best you can. But little by little, the family life started to show cracks.

I was usually pretty good about it. I was able to get up and make the kids breakfast and get them off to school. And I was strong; I had a lot of energy. I would've killed myself otherwise. But the books start to show it after a while. *Misery* is a book about cocaine. Annie Wilkes is cocaine. She was my number-one fan.

Did the quality of your writing start to go down?

Yeah, it did. I mean, *The Tommyknockers* is an awful book. That was the last one I wrote before I cleaned up my act. And I've thought about it a lot lately and said to myself, "There's really a good book in here, underneath all the sort of spurious energy that cocaine provides, and I ought to go back." The book is about 700 pages long, and I'm thinking, "There's probably a good 350-page novel in there."

Is *The Tommyknockers* the one book in your catalog you think you botched?

Well, I don't like *Dreamcatcher* very much. *Dreamcatcher* was written after the accident. [In 1999, King was hit by a van while taking a walk and left severely injured.] I was using a lot of Oxycontin for pain. And I couldn't work on a computer back then because it hurt too much to sit in that position. So I wrote the whole thing longhand. And I was pretty stoned when I wrote it, because of the Oxy, and that's another book that shows the drugs at work.

If you had to pick your best book, what would it be?

Lisey's Story. That one felt like an important book to me because it was about marriage, and I'd never written about that. I wanted to talk about two things: One is the secret world that people build inside a marriage, and the other was that even in that intimate world, there's still things that we don't know about each other.

Are you done writing Dark Tower books?

I'm never done with The Dark Tower. The thing about The Dark Tower is that those books were never edited, so I look at them as first drafts. And by the time I got to the fifth or sixth book, I'm thinking to myself, "This is really all one novel." It drives me crazy. The thing is to try to find the time to rewrite them. There's a missing element a big battle at a place called Jericho Hill. And that whole thing should be written, and I've thought about it several times, and I don't know how to get into it.

You've made a fortune over the years. A lot of people would be living it up, buying houses in Hawaii and the South of France and filling them with Picassos. That's obviously not your thing, so what does your money do for you?

I like to have money to buy books and go to movies and buy music and stuff. To me, the greatest thing in the world is downloading TV shows on iTunes because there are no commercials, and yet if I were a working stiff, I could never afford to do this. But I don't even think about money. I have two amazing things in my life: I'm pain-free and I'm debt-free. Money means I can support my family and still do what I love. Not very many people can say that in this world, and not many writers can say that. I'm not a clothes person. I'm not a boat person. We do have a house in Florida. But we live in Maine, for Christ's sake. It's not like a trendy community or anything. We have the houses and stuff. My wife likes all that. But I'm not very interested in stuff. I like cars, because I grew up in the country and a car was important. So we've got more cars than we need, but that's our biggest extravagance.

When you look at these hedge-fund guys just living like kings?..?..?

Totally foreign to me. I saw *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and it looked to me like this guy was living this sort of exhausting lifestyle. Money for the sake of money doesn't interest me. There's a lot of it, and we give a lot of it away.

I've read that you make large charitable donations, but you almost never hear about where it goes.

We were raised firmly to believe that if you give away money and you make a big deal of it so that everybody sees it, that's hubris. You do it for yourself, and you're not supposed to make a big deal about it. We have publicly acknowledged certain contributions, but the idea behind that is to say to other people, "This is the example we're trying to make, so we wish that you would do the same thing."

So if you give away \$1 million to Eastern Maine General Hospital here, you're doing it because you're hoping that somebody else will chip in. I'm not averse to using whatever celebrity that I have. I'm going to do a TV ad for the Democratic candidate Shenna Bellows this afternoon. She's running against Susan Collins for Senate. And I don't know how much goodwill I have in the state, but I think it's a fair amount, so maybe the ad will make a difference.

Do you worry that being too political will turn off some of your readers?

It happens all the time. I wrote an e-book after the thing in Newtown, Connecticut, when that guy shot all those kids. I got a lot of letters, somebody saying, "Asshole! I'll never read another one of your goddamn books." So what? If you're to a point where you can't separate the entertainment from the politics, who needs you? Jesus Christ.

I never really cared for Tom Clancy's books, but it wasn't because he was a Republican guy. It was because I didn't think he could write. There's another guy that I sense is probably a fairly right-wing writer. His name is Stephen Hunter. And I love his books. I don't think he likes mine.

Your father walked out when you were two. How much did his absence shape your life?

I don't know. I don't live an examined life, but I can remember when Tabby and I got married, back in '71. I can remember laying in bed with her and turning over and saying, "We ought to get married." And she said, "Let me think about it overnight."

And in the morning, she said, "Yeah, we should get married." We had nothing. I mean, I was working at a gas station. I was pumping gas. And then when I graduated from school, she was still in school. Then when I got a job working at a wet-wash laundry because I couldn't get a teaching job, we had jack shit for money. She was working in a Dunkin' Donuts when I finally got a teaching job. We didn't have a phone in the house, and we had two babies. Don't ask me why we did that. I can't remember what the mindset was there.

Looking back, would you do it all over again?

We must have been fucking crazy, but I love those kids, and I'm glad we did it. She would go to work at Dunkin' Donuts. She looked cute in the little pink uniform. God, she was so good-looking. She's still good-looking to me, but oh, my God. And there was something sexy about all that pink nylon.

She would bring home the empty buckets of filling from the doughnuts, and we used them as diaper pails. So I would teach school, come home, she'd work at Dunkin' Donuts. I would baby-sit the kids and give them the bottles and change them and everything until she came home at 11:00. And then we'd go to bed. And I'm thinking to myself, "I'm not going to leave this marriage no matter what happens."

Your dad died in 1980. Were you ever tempted to meet him, if only to hear his side of the story?

No. I was curious when I was a kid. I used to think, "I'd like to find him and knock his fucking head off." And then later on, I thought to

myself, “I’d like to find him and hear his side of the story and then knock his fucking head off.” Because there’s no excuse for it. It wasn’t just that he walked out and left us he left her holding a whole bunch of bills, which she worked to pay off.

What stopped you?

I was too busy. I was trying to carve out a career as a writer. And when I was teaching school, I would teach and come home and try to steal a couple of hours to write. To tell you the truth, man, I never thought about it that much.

Did you see that new documentary “Room 237” about obsessive fans of Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*?

Yeah. Well, let me put it this way I watched about half of it and got sort of impatient with it and turned it off.

Why?

These guys were reaching. I’ve never had much patience for academic bullshit. It’s like Dylan says, “You give people a lot of knives and forks, they’ve gotta cut something.” And that was what was going on in that movie.

You’ve been extremely critical of Kubrick’s film over the years. Is it possible he made a great movie that just so happens to be a horrible adaptation of your book?

No. I never saw it that way at all. And I never see any of the movies that way. The movies have never been a big deal to me. The movies are the movies. They just make them. If they’re good, that’s terrific. If they’re not, they’re not. But I see them as a lesser medium than fiction, than literature, and a more ephemeral medium.

Are you mystified by the cult that’s grown around Kubrick’s *Shining*?

I don't get it. But there are a lot of things that I don't get. But obviously people absolutely love it, and they don't understand why I don't. The book is hot, and the movie is cold; the book ends in fire, and the movie in ice. In the book, there's an actual arc where you see this guy, Jack Torrance, trying to be good, and little by little he moves over to this place where he's crazy. And as far as I was concerned, when I saw the movie, Jack was crazy from the first scene. I had to keep my mouth shut at the time. It was a screening, and Nicholson was there. But I'm thinking to myself the minute he's on the screen, "Oh, I know this guy. I've seen him in five motorcycle movies, where Jack Nicholson played the same part." And it's so misogynistic. I mean, Wendy Torrance is just presented as this sort of screaming dishrag. But that's just me, that's the way I am.

What's the best movie ever made from one of your books?

Probably *Stand by Me*. I thought it was true to the book, and because it had the emotional gradient of the story. It was moving. I think I scared the shit out of Rob Reiner. He showed it to me in the screening room at the Beverly Hills Hotel. I was out there for something else, and he said, "Can I come over and show you this movie?" And you have to remember that the movie was made on a shoestring. It was supposed to be one of those things that opened in six theaters and then maybe disappeared. And instead it went viral. When the movie was over, I hugged him because I was moved to tears, because it was so autobiographical.

But *Stand by Me*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *Green Mile* are all really great ones. *Misery* is a great film. *Delores Claiborne* is a really, really good film. *Cujo* is terrific.

What do you make of this surge in sales for young-adult books? There's a whole school of critics that say too many adults are reading them.

It's just crazy. I read all of the Harry Potter books, and I really liked 'em. I don't approach any books in terms of genre saying that "This is young adult," or "This is a romance," or science fiction, or

whatever. You read them because you read them. Someone asked me recently, "Have you ever considered writing a book for young people? You know, a YA novel?" And I said, "All of them." Because I don't see that genre thing.

Do you think you have fewer young readers than you had back in the first few decades of your career?

Yes, that's probably true. I'm seen as somebody who writes for adults because I'm an older man myself. Some of them find me, and a lot of them don't. But I came along at a fortunate time, in that I was a paperback success before I was a hardcover success. That's because paperbacks were cheap, so a lot of readers that I had were younger people. Paperbacks were what they could afford. You do say to yourself, "Well, are the younger readers coming along in terms of the e-books, the Kindles and all that stuff?" And the answer is, some of them are, but a lot of them probably aren't.

Does that bother you?

Well, I have a drive to succeed. I have a drive to want to please people, as many people as possible. But that ends at a certain point where you say, "I'm not going to sell out and write this one particular kind of thing." I had a real argument with myself about Mr. Mercedes, which is basically a straight suspense novel.

I had to sit down and have a discussion with myself and say, "Do you want to do what your heart is telling you you should do, or do you want to do what people expect? Because if you only want to write what people expect, what the fuck did you do all this for? Why don't you write what you want to write?"

Do you worry about the death of print?

I think books are going to be around, but it's crazy what happened. They're worried in the publishing industry about bookstores disappearing. Barnes & Noble creating the Nook was like Vietnam; they should have left that alone because Amazon got there first with

the Kindle. The death of the music business was insane, but audio recordings have been around now for maybe 120 years. Books have been around for, what, nine centuries? So they're more entrenched than music.

Speaking of Harry Potter, you've become friendly with J.K. Rowling, right?

Yeah. We did a charity event at Radio City Music Hall a few years back. She was working on the last of the Harry Potter books. Her publicist and her editor called her over, and they talked for about 10 minutes. And when she came back to me, she was steaming. Fucking furious. And she said, "They don't understand what we do, do they? They don't fucking understand what we do." And I said, "No, they don't. None of them do." And that's what my life is like right now.

What do you mean?

When someone says, "What are you working on?" I'll say, "I've got this wonderful story about these two families on two sides of a lake that end up having this arms race with fireworks," but I'm doing this event, and then I've got the political ad and all this other crap. So you have to be stern about it and say, "I'm not going to do this other stuff, because you've got to make room for me to write." Nobody really understands what the job is. They want the books, but they don't, in a way, take it seriously.

You mentioned watching a lot of TV. What's the best show of the past 15 years?

Breaking Bad. I knew it was great from the first scene you see him wearing jockey shorts. I thought it was amazingly brave since they look so geeky.

Do you think if you had been born at a later time you would have wanted to work as a TV showrunner?

No. Too much time for too little payoff. I don't mean in terms of money. Also, showrunning is a thing where you have to work with tons of different people. You have to schmooze people, you have to talk to network people. I don't want to do any of that.

It's interesting that mainstream movies are worse than ever, but TV just gets better and better.

Yeah. I mean, we aren't talking about shows like NCIS and CSI that basically show one story over and over. I'm not even talking about Mad Men, which I don't like. But Breaking Bad, Sons of Anarchy, The Walking Dead, The Bridge, The Americans. Those things are so textured and so involving that they make movies look like short stories. I was watching a show 12 years ago called The Shield. And in the first episode, Michael Chiklis, who played the protagonist, turns around and kills a fellow cop. And I thought to myself, "TV just underwent this seismic change." That show was the most important show on television. Breaking Bad is better, but The Shield changed everything.

Let's talk about music. Revival is about a rock guitarist. Do you think that could have been your path if you had a little more natural musical talent?

Sure! I love music, and I can play a little. But anyone can see the difference between someone who's talented and someone that's not. The main character in Revival, Jamie, just has natural talent. What he can do on the guitar, I can do when I write. It just pours out. Nobody taught me. In Revival, I took what I know about how it feels to write and applied it to music.

What's the best concert you ever saw?

Springsteen. I went to see him at the Ice Arena in Lewiston, Maine, in 1977. He played for about four hours. It was fantastic. There's so much energy, so much generosity in the show, and so much real life in the music. He was totally athletic, and he'd jump into the crowd, lay on his back and spin around. He was a great showman.

Do you respect him as a storyteller?

I respect him as a songwriter and the insight in his songs. My favorite album of his is Nebraska. I knew from the beginning of "Atlantic City" that it was amazing. He had really grown as a songwriter. He's done stuff in music that nobody else has done. That line in "The River," "Now I just act like I don't remember, and Mary acts like she don't care." Let's put it this way, it's a long way from "Palisades Park" by Freddy Cannon.

I feel like you and Bruce would both be doing what you're doing, even if you weren't paid for it.

Yeah, I think it's fair. And it'd be fair to say that we were both self-taught with a lot of ambition, a lot of drive to succeed, because I have that in me too. I have this one thing that I can do, and that's something Bruce expresses in a lot of his music.

Do you think President Obama is doing a good job?

Under the circumstances, he's been terrific. Look at how much improvement there's been with the job situation. But it's human nature to care about unresolved issues. And so this business with ISIS, or people breaking into the White House, this becomes, for some reason, Obama's fault somehow.

Do you think Obama is right to go after ISIS like this?

If they're as bad as the press says. I mean, they're cutting off heads in public and blowing up shit something's got to be done to those guys. That's my feeling anyway, and I'm a pacifist. It's depressing 'cause it's like 1984 all over again: constant war it's never going to end.

Why do you think the country is so divided?

It doesn't have anything to do with Obama. There's a fundamental discussion going on in America right now about whether or not we're

going to continue to protect individual freedoms or whether we're going to give some of them up. And the discussion has become extremely acrimonious.

In the wake of 9/11, we're searched invasively at airports. There are CCTV cameras everywhere. There's a whole bunch of people who say that America is for the individual and that we're all the gunslingers of our own house. Basically, there's a whole side of the country that's fearful. They're fearful that if same-sex marriage becomes legal, then God knows what will happen all at once, all of our kids will be gay and America's way of life will die out. They're afraid that immigrants are going to swamp the economy. And on the other side, there are all of those people who say, "Maybe there's a way to embrace these things, and maybe we need to give up our right that anybody can buy a gun." They're basic arguments.

Do you think much about what your legacy will be?

No, not very much. For one, it's out of my control. Only two things happen to writers when they die: Either their work survives, or it becomes forgotten. Someone will turn up an old box and say, "Who's this guy Irving Wallace?" There's no rhyme or reason to it. Ask kids in high school, "Who is Somerset Maugham?" They're not going to know. He wrote books that were bestsellers in their time. But he's well-forgotten now, whereas Agatha Christie has never been more popular. She just goes from one generation to another. She's not as good a writer as Maugham, and she certainly didn't try to do anything other than entertain people. So I don't know what will happen.

You've threatened to retire a few times, but you've obviously never gone through with it. Do you see yourself doing this into your eighties and maybe even beyond?

Yeah. What else am I going to do? I mean, shit, you've got to do something to fill up your day. And I can only play so much guitar and watch so many TV shows. It fulfills me. There are two things about it I like: It makes me happy, and it makes other people happy.