

THE GENIUS OF “THE TELL-TALE HEART”

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

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

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

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

Ours, for instance.

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