

# Introduction: Stephen King and His Critics

*Michael J. Blouin*

**Abstract:** The introduction establishes the purpose of the collection, highlights its thematic contours, and sets up the essays to come.

**Keywords:** Harold Bloom, methodology, critical theory, literary criticism

Stephen King does not much care for English professors.

Examples of his distaste abound. In his treatise *On Writing*, King bluntly states: “A good deal of literary criticism serves only to reinforce a caste system which is as old as the intellectual snobbery which nurtured it. No one can be as intellectually slothful as a really smart person” (143). He proceeds to dismiss the literary critics that dare critique his “symbolic simplicity” by posing the question, “What is this, rocket science?” (197). He repeatedly denounces these scholars as “little elites,” “avatars of high culture,” and “the ‘enlightened’ cognoscenti” (*Playboy Interview* 52–53). Throughout his storied career, King has insisted that most critics commit egregious errors in attempting to unpack the deeper meaning of his narratives.

King also makes clear his distaste for academic interpreters throughout his fiction. *The Tommyknockers* depicts a horrific faculty gathering of pompous profs, each of whom behaves like a gluttonous animal. *Lisey’s Story* demonizes not one but two English professors: Professor Woodbody, with his wooden, self-important posture and a life wasted on “footnoted fool’s gold” (536), and Professor Dashmiel, a petty coward with an “I’m-an-assistant-professor-on-my-way-up-and-don’t-you-forget-it” attitude—both of whom cause real harm for the titular protagonist (51). *Under the Dome* features the grating Thurgood Marshall, an adulterous, drug-addicted academic with a “fishbelly” and an “intelligence-to-exercise ratio [that is] out of whack” (366); by the end of the text, Marshall learns that emptying bedpans matters more than tenure or his insignificant contributions to obscure academic

journals. More recently, *Fairy Tale* goes out of its way to lambast “hoity-toity” academic writing, full of five-dollar words and tortured syntax” (183), while *Holly* foregrounds a cannibalistic scholar named Emily Harris, a serial killer who both figuratively and literally dissects her chosen targets. In these moments, and a host of others, King appears to be defensively striking back to discredit critics that dare to dissect his prose. One could perhaps attribute this antagonistic approach to King’s antipathy to institutional logic of all sorts, cultivated during his time as a college student in Maine during the 1960s; or one could perhaps attribute it to King’s strong sense of individualism as well as his tacit endorsement of certain neoliberal patterns of behavior that developed parallel to his successful career as a writer from the late 1970s to the present.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the specific cause, it is safe to assert that Stephen King routinely undercuts academics as the assumed gatekeepers of important cultural work.

King’s most visible clash with a real-world English professor occurred when the infamously priggish custodian of the western canon, Harold Bloom, wrote a short, acerbic, and derisive introduction to a collection of critical essays on King’s corpus. Bloom’s hit piece posits that King’s success is proof positive that American culture is forsaken: “I cannot locate any aesthetic dignity in King’s writing” (3). Bloom derided King’s “earnestness” as un-artistic, and added, with a hyperbolic flourish, that King’s coronation marked “the death of the Literate Reader” (3). Considering the outright hostility that his popularity has generated in the halls of the proverbial ivory tower, it is no small wonder that King continues to express ill-will toward literature professors. But it should be noted that, even as he laments his second-class status in the eyes of the academy, King periodically wrings his hands at the situation: “I don’t think I ever will be taken seriously” (*High Times Interview* 205). The stand-off between King and some of his critics shows no sign of easing.

The collection that follows brings together the leading scholars in the field of King studies in the name of reconsidering this relationship. As interest continues to grow in the study of King’s work, the time has come to reflect upon what has already been done (methods for reading King’s fiction) and what might come next—that is, the future for rigorous analysis of the author’s output. Accordingly, the collection is broken into four distinct sections: the first section contemplates the promise and peril of various methodological approaches to King’s corpus; the second section considers how King has helped American audiences to make meaning out of their

1 For a discussion of King’s relationship to neoliberalism, see Blouin (2021).

cultural experiences for half a century; the third section delves into the countless adaptations of King's texts and asks what adaptation studies contributes to this line of inquiry; the fourth and final section opens up exciting new ways to interpret King, from trauma studies to animal studies (and beyond). In sum, *Theorizing Stephen King* seeks to define the evolving field of King studies, to discuss the methodological challenges that confront his critics, and to (re)articulate the stakes of this ever-pressing question: "With fifty years of incredibly influential material by the author now in circulation, how am I to read Stephen King?"

## How to Read Stephen King

Critics might wonder how they ought to engage with King's corpus. Does King taunt academia to shield his fiction from the prying eyes of the self-proclaimed literati? Is King's caricature of the supercilious professor a fair one, or is it only further evidence of what Richard Hofstadter has described as the anti-intellectual streak in the United States? It remains difficult to know which one to mistrust more: Bloom's Literate Reader, defined as Literate with a capital L and representative of the college-educated crowd, with its assumed disdain for popular culture, or King's Constant Reader, defined as Constant with a capital C and representative of the so-called mindless masses. One can almost hear the gruff voice of the proverbial highwayman: which will it be—Literacy or Constancy?

Increasingly relevant in the early decades of the twenty-first century, given a growing chasm between supporters of Donald Trump (a group that adopted the moniker Make American Great Again, or MAGA) and the "woke" crowd, a bloc that sometimes has little patience for what it dismisses as working-class backwardness, the antipathy on display in the feud between King and Bloom foreshadows the thrusts and parries exchanged in polemics penned by "coastal elites" as well as the aggrieved commoners imagined to occupy "fly-over country." In his chapter for this volume, Philip Simpson ruminates upon King's complicated relationship to MAGA via the author's robust presence on social media. An enduring divide exists between King's scholarly critics, on one side, and many of his most devoted readers, who stand apart from the relatively insular world of academia. Not without justification, the typical Constant Reader could choose to resist overly technical jargon and view the Bloomian crowd as shackled by institutional demands that lack "real-world" corollaries (tenure/promotion, department politics, and so forth). At the same time, and

likewise not without justification, the typical Literate Reader could resist overly generalized readings of American culture by dismissing the Constant Reader's analysis of King's books as amateurish—the unsophisticated fluff of pure fandom; the Literate Reader theorizes Stephen King at risk of being labelled by her peers as a sell-out or relegated to the dustbin of disciplinary irrelevance. Although these two groups read King for different reasons, the faults that they find in one another tend to be based upon an assumption that there is only one reason that anyone should read in the first place: namely, to maintain the interpretive priorities of the group in question. Each group retreats into its own silo as the imaginative landscape flattens. Indeed, this simmering animosity speaks volumes to the troubled state of cultural criticism. A persistent Balkanization of cultural critique has been unproductive at best. Fortunately, I believe that King's critics can do better. This collection of essays by King readers of every stripe cuts through the clamor in hopes of glimpsing higher ground: a richer world in which the art of reading can be magical *and* critical, Constant *and* Literate.

Of course, it remains impossible for readers to analyze a piece of fiction without some kind of methodology, however haphazard or inconsistent that methodology may be. In the opening chapter for this book, Tony Magistrale, one of the longest-standing academic analysts of King's fiction, surveys the dominant methodological approaches that have been employed by King's Literate Readers. A good number of King's critics over the years have applied an approach called myth-and-symbol, in which the scholar hunts down cultural symbols to decipher King's contributions to an ongoing national *mythos* (an approach that remains "sociological" in the broadest possible sense). Other critics apply a model known as reader-response theory, first heralded by Stanley Fish, in which they paint a portrait of an intended audience and then view King to be catering to a specific set of concerns among his fan base. Still other critics of the author draw from a loosely defined psychoanalytical methodology by claiming to access the unconscious of King, or his reader(s), or both at once. And certain interpreters hold true to what has been described, unflatteringly, as the "intentional fallacy" by making extensive use of King's countless interviews as well as commentaries upon his own work (as the reader of this introduction will likely notice, I have already committed such a "sin" in the preceding paragraphs). This type of reader holds firm to the idea that, no matter what critics say, King's intentions really do matter. Still, the fact that the intentional fallacy persists as a lodestar for so much of King studies warrants greater scrutiny, if for no other reason than that countless postwar literary scholars have labored tirelessly to debunk it. Knowingly or not, King's readers

tend to drift in and out of these diverse theoretical encampments, and so the widespread resistance to theory among King and his interpreters must be defined in concrete terms. When King and a cohort of his critics vocally resist theorizing, what *precisely* do they resist? And why?

To be transparent, I have my own allegiances. My previous analyses of King's works rely quite a bit upon critical theory. With that proclivity in mind, I would seize this opportunity to reference Michel Foucault's influential lecture "What is an Author?" (1969) to complicate relatively facile deployments of the King name. Just how much does the critic owe to the flesh-and-blood man signified by the name Stephen King, a person with his own personality, history, and ever-evolving relationships to his environment? Jeffrey Weinstock's closing chapter poses a related question as it delves into how King's corpus engages in an ongoing commentary upon the role of writers. Does the name Stephen King signify anything more, or less, than a brand: a constellation of marketable tropes tied irrevocably to the demands of the literary marketplace as well as the profit margins of a Hollywood machine that relentlessly extracts profit from the moniker? The name signifies complex discursive constraints with which even King himself, in his more meta-moments, must do battle. He once noted, "Being a brand name is all right. Trying to be a writer, trying to fill the blank sheet in an honorable and truthful way, is better" ("On Becoming" 42). By bringing up Foucault's concept of the author function, I want to insist that every assumption a critic can make about King as well as his work begins with assumptions about what the author's appellation—his *brand*—actually means.

Every analysis of King's works should take as its foundation a thoughtful response to the King brand as a cultural phenomenon. After all, King remains one of the most frequently adapted authors in history. In their chapter for this volume, Joseph Maddrey and Carl Sederholm dissect the difficulty auteurs have had in transposing King from page to screen. The signifier Stephen King should be investigated with greater sophistication because, even though King does not always have a direct hand in adapting his own fiction, critics cannot isolate the literary brand "Stephen King" from its respective cinematic, televised, and streaming variants. Increasingly, King's adaptations influence the author's literary output, and so, as Matthew Holtmeier and Chelsea Wessels demonstrate in their contribution to this book, the endless adaptation of King's work can be compared to a sort of self-replicating virus.

To theorize Stephen King is to move fluidly back and forth between mediums—from paperback to projector to streaming platforms (and back again).

For example, *Doctor Sleep*, a 2019 adaptation directed by Mike Flanagan, must reckon with multiple sources, including the two novels penned by King, Stanley Kubrick's canonical adaptation, and a 1997 television miniseries based upon a teleplay by King. It is worth noting here that King's manifesto on the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*, spends more time discussing films than literary texts. King's adaptations have become so ubiquitous, his reservoir of filmic references so deep, that he has spawned what I would describe as a style in its own right: *the King-esque*. Simply put, because it has become extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to extricate the author's legacy from the ever-growing tome of adapted versions of his work, spanning a wide array of mediums, one cannot adequately theorize Stephen King without the aid of adaptation studies.<sup>2</sup> And if the Constant Reader never ventures into these admittedly murky waters, her interpretations of King's works may prove to be little more than sycophantic devotionals. To modify very slightly the rally cry of the late Fredric Jameson, "Always theorize!"

However, in their rush to "always theorize," it can be argued that some Literate Readers have too quickly dismissed the staunch resistance to critical theory by King as well as his staunchest defenders. Scholars who look down their noses at an under-theorized field of inquiry like "King studies"—and, one must ask, has such a field truly defined its boundaries yet, beyond the hallways of a handful of academic conferences?—maintain that King is always-already unworthy of being theorized. From their vantage point, critical theory is best reserved for works of "high culture." King's suspicion that most academics are soporific elitists is re-enforced the moment that the Literate Reader follows Bloom's lead and pooh-poohs King as only so much derivative dreck. In the spirit of open intellectual inquiry, King's readers from all walks of life ought to entertain, in good faith, the following hypothetical: what if King's antagonism of the literati is more than just sour grapes?

In developing a theoretical grammar that alienates even readers who are making a good faith effort to find meaning in the books that they read, it can be argued that a number of Literate Readers, although surely not all, busily pave their own path to irrelevance and leave thoughtful Constant Readers with few places to turn but the arms of mass-market authors (figures commonly recognized due to their lack of subtlety, their appeals to intuitive trust between reader and writer, as well as their privileging of gut feelings over intellectual engagement). As theorists heap scorn upon popular culture as little more than escapist drivel, and paint its consumers as hapless dupes,

2 For a seminal discussion of King's relationship to adaptation studies, see Brown (2018).

King's case against over-theorizing his work grows ever stronger. Unlike the stodgy literature professors of lore, King grants his readers permission to have a little fun, let loose, and enjoy what can be an otherwise insufferable human condition; this sentiment is conveyed nowhere more cogently than King's *Joyland*, a book about the need to relax and be amused by the author's carnivalesque output. Through King's identification with subjects roaming outside of the ivory tower, he consoles his audience in a pastoral sense, marking them with an affectionate nickname (his Constant Reader) and then leading them into a mode of reading stripped of pretense. In sum, King artfully manages the ways that his works are meant to be interpreted. In their chapters for this collection, Rebecca Frost reveals how King uses Christian epigraphs to encourage a certain heuristic, while Greg Littmann unpacks how King appropriates as well as deviates from the aesthetics of fellow horror writer H. P. Lovecraft to orient readers within his cosmos. In a variety of ways, King strives to maintain control over how his texts are read.

## King's Trap

Stephen King routinely lays a trap for over-zealous critics. To theorize King's works is to mirror his unworthy English professors—yet to refuse to theorize King's work is to act like the snobbish Bloom. To avoid this trap, readers in pursuit of greater meaning must trust King, which is to say, they must take him at his word, without sustained reflection, and obediently follow his lead by encountering his texts intuitively, as if his works are in fact “portable magic” (to borrow King's well-worn phrase) and not works of literature to be rigorously critiqued. Loyal readers of King's fiction are meant to be nothing if not Constant, poised and ready for the next offering.

I offer as a representative example King's novel *Dolores Claiborne*, in which a woman named Dolores, who has been accused of murder (twice), tells her own side of the events. In part due to its status as a confession, the book demands to be analyzed, in multiple senses of the term. Near the close of the text, a would-be analyst arrives on the scene named John McAuliffe, a county examiner that bears an uncanny resemblance to the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. McAuliffe figuratively devours Dolores and plumbs her depths to tease to the surface the deeper meaning that he believes must be lurking within her account. Dolores vents, “That smart little Scots doctor ... mad as hell at the idea of being beaten by an ignorant island woman” (310). This probing fellow reads a lot of mystery stories and fancies himself an “amateur detective” (303). The arrival of the cocky McAuliffe



underscores King's adversarial relationship with the literary scholar; like Dolores, King humiliates McAuliffe as well as any theorist who dares to try and "beat the house." When King includes an array of appendices to prove that Dolores was not being deceptive, and that her account was the "authentic" version of things, he seems to laugh at any Literate Reader who has modeled their behavior on the behavior of McAuliffe by trying to uncover his book's innermost secrets. These Literate Readers have been engaged in a pitiful act of misreading. Better to sit back and consume the story with a devoted heart, to marvel at its portable magic, than to behave like the penetrative McAuliffe. *Dolores Claiborne* maintains that critics violate the sanctity of King's work, which remains—in fascinating, if problematic, ways—coded as "feminine." In this way, King presents the English professor as both hyper-masculine and thoroughly emasculated, power-hungry and powerless before an all-powerful author (King himself). Once the trap has been sprung, *Dolores Claiborne* leaves the imagined literati with few opportunities for a breakout.

For academics—or individuals that choose to read like them—King's trap may be unavoidable. If the Bloomian critic takes King's word for it, and treats King's output as so many empty calories, as pleasurable stories without an intellectual agenda, she unwittingly assumes the posture of the *corps d'elite* and thus confirms King's caricature of the egoistic scholar. But if the critic rebuffs King and treats his output as deserving of an interpretive goring, the critic invariably "over-reads" and comes across as being too clever by half. Either way, King saves the last laugh for himself because the overzealous critic is left with no way to engage with King's corpus short of unwavering admiration. To imagine a way out of this trap—or, to understand this trap better—is the impetus of what follows.

## King Studies and a Big Tent Mentality

The mode of reading curated by King and his publishing team warrants neither automatic derision nor a slew of invectives. It can be argued that King treats his reader with something that a particular type of professor does not: respect. He also supplies his Constant Reader with a healthy dose of literate prose that references authors as diverse as T. S. Eliot, Edgar Allan Poe, William Butler Yeats, Shirley Jackson, Toni Morrison, and many others. Moreover, King provides the pleasant illusion of rubbing elbows with his Constant Reader. When he occasionally attempts to be clever or "meta," he quickly reassures his Constant Readers that they are not the target of his trickery; he saves



his most acerbic jokes for his adversarial critics. In *Theorizing Stephen King*, analysts of King's work that remain wary of critical theory have been invited to the table, and I maintain that it is worth hearing what they have to say. For example, the chapter by Patrick McAleer argues that theorists can become inflexible and dogmatic and as a result overlook King's profound points. Likewise, the chapter by Michael Perry argues that academic writing, with its stiff trappings and conventions, may be a less compelling answer to the challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence than King's fantastical fiction. At the very least, a quorum of King's diverse readers is overdue. The stakes of such a quorum are higher than they might appear upon first blush because when one considers King's enormous appeal, as well as his tendency to inject a significant amount of literariness into his bestsellers, the inchoate field of King studies could prove to be atypical in its capacity to generate a Big Tent mentality among cultural critics of various stripes.

King's fiction probes into the existential questions that preoccupy human beings in every walk of life. Several chapters in this book identify these preoccupations. Daniel Compora, for instance, charts the archetypical patterns in texts like *The Talisman*, Jacob Held explores how King encourages his readers to find deeper meaning in their lives, and Douglas Cowan reveals the complex relationship between King and America's religious imaginations, especially when it comes to monumental questions about fear and hope. To theorize Stephen King is to reframe the difficult questions that most of us ask ourselves daily, regardless of our perceived Literacy or Constancy. King compels his audience to linger with core questions about what it means to be human. This volume provides King's readers, new and old alike, Literate as well as Constant, with a set of tools meant to empower them to engage with his voluminous corpus and make ever greater meaning for themselves. In turn, King's readers as well as his critics might cultivate more generous, gracious, and inclusive interpretive communities.

Everyone will find something useful in the essays that follow. For first-time readers of King, this book offers an array of novel critical frameworks with which to make sense of King's fictional universe: Laura Mulcahy interrogates the assumed unrepresentability of trauma in King's works, for example, while Melissa Raines and Sarah Nilsen both return to King's *Pet Sematary*, through the lenses of disability studies and animal studies. Meanwhile, Theresa Mae Thompson, who has written seminal essays on the subject of King and gender studies, returns to King to contemplate how the author at times carries with what she calls "tongueless voices" that elude the patriarchy. For professional scholars with or without an affinity for critical theory, this volume affirms that King's *oeuvre* remains a site for robust

intellectual inquiry. For vested members of King studies, the conversation in the pages to follow provides an occasion to rethink King's relationship to the academy as well as his legacy as a preeminent American writer. By theorizing more diligently their relationship to the author, King's assorted readers facilitate a deeper understanding—of the author's enormous body of work and, even more crucially, of the shared projects that bind them together.

## Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." *Stephen King: Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1998, pp. 1—5.
- Blouin, Michael. *Stephen King and American Politics*. U of Wales P, 2021.
- Brown, Simon. *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television*, U of Texas P, 2018.
- "High Times Interview: Stephen King." *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, edited by Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, Grand Central Publishing, 1989, pp. 198—210.
- King, Stephen. *Dolores Claiborne*. Signet, 1993.
- King, Stephen. *Fairy Tale*. Scribner, 2022.
- King, Stephen. *Lisey's Story*. Pocket Books, 2007.
- King, Stephen. "On Becoming a Brand Name." *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King*, edited by Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, Underwood Books, 1982, pp. 15—42.
- King, Stephen. *Under the Dome*. Scribner, 2009.
- "Playboy Interview: Stephen King." *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, edited by Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, Grand Central Publishing, 1989, pp. 24—56.

## About the Author

**Michael J. Blouin**, PhD is a professor of English and Humanities at Milligan University. His recent publications include *Democracy and the American Gothic* (2024), *Stephen King and American Politics* (2021) and *Stephen King and American History* (2020). He currently serves as the editor for the *Popular Cultures Studies Journal*. Blouin's primary research interests are horror, popular culture, and critical theory.