

# STEPHEN KING HALLOWEEN'S ANSWER TO SANTA CLAUS

BY BRYON CAHILL

**'I think the world needs Santa Claus ... and America really needs Ronald McDonald. But America also needs a bogeyman. And Alfred Hitchcock's dead, so I got the job.'**

Scattered about my desk are 13 books of horror. Each one is stamped with bold, majestic letters that spell out the author's name—Stephen King.

When I flip open one of the books, I find myself in a chilling world filled with fascinating (and often creepy) characters.

For every terrified mother, there is a rabid Saint Bernard (*Cujo*); for every innocent child, there is a killer sewer clown (*It*); for every Gunslinger questing for universal truth, there is a Man in Black to impede his path (*The Dark Tower* series); and for every group of pure-hearted survivors of a worldwide plague, there is a clan of bad dudes out to destroy them (*The Stand*).

Within the first 50 pages of any of those books, I can't help but feel that I know the characters. As the suspense builds, I hesitate to turn the page, afraid for people made of words.

It's the creation of such haunting characters that has earned Stephen King the title "master of horror." But there's so much more to Stephen King than ghouls and gore. At 58, King is an award-winning author who began writing stories when he was in grammar school. His first novel, *Carrie*, was published in 1974, when he was 27. The story of a young girl with telekinetic powers became an instant best seller. Two years later, it was made into a movie. That was just the first of King's successes. He went on to write more than 67 books of fiction

and nonfiction, many of which have been made into classic films, including *Stand By Me*, *Misery*, *The Green Mile*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

As a writer, I've always been awed by King's mastery of the art of storytelling. As a reader, I've always felt as if I am sitting right by his side as he weaves his latest tale. Maybe that's because he was the first author who drew me in to a magnificent mix of nail-biting plot and gripping characters.

I remember sitting in my "reading tree" in my front yard at 13 with a copy of *Skeleton Crew* (a collection of short stories). When I read King's genial words in the introduction, I could have sworn he was right there guiding me: "I hope you like this book, Constant Reader," he wrote. "We are going to a number of dark places, but I think I know the way. Just don't let go of my arm."

A breeze in the leaves rattled the pages. The three hairs on my arm stood on end. The story began.

Fast-forward 14 years—there are a few more hairs on my arms and many more King reads under my belt. I can also now proudly say that I've had an actual conversation with the king of storytelling.

Stephen King's stories have never failed to fill my dreams with ghoulies. So of course I imagined that his voice would send me into sweaty heart palpitations. I was wrong. King has a relaxed demeanor and a cozy Maine accent that immediately put my childish fears at ease.

Here are some excerpts from our conversation, which covered everything from his writing process to what makes a scary story bone-chilling.



—Brian Smith/CORBIS OUTLINE

## THE KING FILES

- Born: Sept. 21, 1947
- Hometown: Bangor, Maine
- Author of more than 67 books, both fiction and nonfiction
- Recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters
- Loves: Red Sox, baseball, writing, rock music
- Has written under the pseudonym Richard Bachman
- In 1999, he was hit by a van while walking along the side of a country road in Maine. He had six operations before he could sit up and start writing again. During his recovery, he wrote his masterpiece autobiography and book of advice, *On Writing*.
- His formula for learning to write well: "Read four hours a day and write four hours a day."

**Writing:** You've written well over 40 books in your extensive career. What's the best advice you could give to our young writers?

**Stephen King:** If you want to write and you want to write well, do it a lot. Practice it the same way that you would practice anything else that you love. Get better. Work at it. Feel comfortable with it. Feel comfortable with sentences; feel comfortable with paragraphs until those things just roll off your fingertips. And the better you feel about it, the better it's going to go for you. Baseball players know about it, trombone players know about it, swimmers know about it. Use it or lose it.

**Writing:** When do you write?

**SK:** Usually from 8 a.m. until noon. That's when I feel the best. I get up in the morning and there's no grunge in my head. Once breakfast is out of the way, I can go and sit and write until noon. That's on an ordinary day when the world doesn't intrude. But the world doesn't stop for me! It doesn't stop for any writer. Sometimes the ideas don't wait; they just declare themselves.

**Writing:** In your book *On Writing*, you mention that you plot out your stories "as infrequently as possible." How can a writer write anything without having a plot in mind?

**SK:** I have a general story idea ... a situation. That's where I like to start. Then I let it play out. And

that always works as long as I'm honest about what my characters would do in a given situation. If you start to make characters do things because it would be more convenient for you, things wander off course.

**Writing:** You can tell the difference?

**SK:** Oh, yeah. You can tell the difference. Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm working on a story right now where I really didn't want this lady to call the cops because it would be inconvenient for me. I would have to write about police procedure and bring people into the story that I didn't want there.

But in the situation she was in, any sane person would call the police. So I let her call the police. And it was fine.

**Writing:** Your fans know you as a

great storyteller. In *On Writing*, you wrote, "My basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow." What would you say is the most important element of storytelling?

**SK:** All the elements of storytelling have their part to play, but for me the most important thing is that I want readers to turn the page. I want to make a connection with them that's emotional. I want them to read the story and I want to make them sweat a little, laugh a little, and even cry.

**Writing:** Many of the characters in your novels meet untimely

grunge *n.* Slang: dirt or filth

This passage describes a perfectly ordinary event: A girl who is lost in the woods loses her sneaker in some mud and pulls it out. But note the way the writer infuses the scene with a sense of impending doom.

EXCERPT FROM  
*THE GIRL WHO LOVED TOM GORDON*  
by Stephen King



Can't you just feel it?

She stepped from an oozy but stable patch of ground onto a hummock that wasn't a hummock at all but only a disguise. [Her foot went into a cold, viscous substance that was too thick

A powerful verb! How much less impact this line would have had if the author had simply written "it flew upward."

to be water and too thin to be mud.] She tilted, grabbed a jutting dead branch, screamed in fright and vexation when it snapped off in her hand. She fell forward into long grass that hopped with bugs. She got a knee under her and yanked her foot back. It came with a loud sucking plop, but her sneaker stayed down there someplace.

"No!" she yelled, loud enough to scare a big white bird into flight. It exploded upward, trailing long legs behind it as it became airborne. In another place and time, Trisha would have stared at this exotic apparition with breathless wonder, but now the bird barely registered. She turned around on her knees, her right leg covered with shining black muck up to the knee, and plunged her arm into the water-welling hole which had temporarily swallowed her foot.]

Find all the imagery of being buried alive that King has carefully planted.

"You can't have it!" she shouted furiously. "It's mine and you ... can't ... HAVE IT!"

She felt around in the cold murk, fingers tearing through membranes of roots or dodging between those too thick to tear. Something that felt alive pressed briefly against her palm, and then was gone. A moment later her hand closed over her sneaker and she pulled it out.

From *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, by Stephen King. Copyright © 1999 by Stephen King. Reprinted by permission of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., N.Y. Commentary by the editors of *Writing* magazine.

Great word! "oozy" not only describes the mud but makes us feel a little dizzy or sick.

King describes the action so that you can visualize it perfectly. His attention to details makes this passage so much more real than the simple statement "she fell in the mud."

Trisha addresses the muck as if it were a living entity, making an ordinary situation seem frightening and creepy.

Unknown forces seem to dwell under the ground.

apparition *n.* a ghostly figure or an unusual sight

ends. Do you ever feel bad about having to kill off a character?

**SK:** Yeah. Yeah, I do. My characters become very real to me. I wrote a series of books called *The Dark Tower*, and I lived with those characters from the age of about 22 up until when I finished the last one when I was 56. That's like 34 years all told. I'd been with some of those characters longer than I've been with my children. Some of them had to die and that was tough. Anybody will tell you that imaginary friends are as real as real people sometimes. Lucky for me, I still know the difference or else they'd put me away in a room.

**Writing:** In many of your books, your protagonist is a writer. In works such as *The Dark Half*, *Secret Window*, *Secret Garden*, and *The Shining*, your writer character is driven to insanity. How close to home does this hit? I'm not suggesting that you're nuts, but do you think one has to be a little cuckoo to be a successful writer?

**SK:** Yeah, you do have to be a little nuts to be a writer at all because you have to imagine worlds that aren't there. You're hearing voices, you're making believe, you're doing all of the things that we're told as children not to do. Writers don't outgrow that. If you look at writers' faces, they have young faces, child faces, especially around the eyes. And it's because they spend their life making believe. And all the kids who read *Writing* magazine

know about the play yard; some of them still go there. But people [adults] like me ... we still get to go to the play yard. From 8 a.m. to 12 noon every day, I get to go to the play yard. I sit there and I get to make believe. That's what I do, and they pay me to do it!

**Writing:** Are you ever not writing in your head?

**SK:** Sure. Yeah. You know what's funny is how often you find that you are writing in your head and you don't even realize it. I'll be someplace and an idea will surprise me. I'll see something and I'll think, Maybe I can use that. I think that the more you train yourself to write in your head, the more it goes on almost behind your back, behind the scenes.

**Writing:** When you were a kid, your mom used to encourage you to write by giving you a quarter every time you wrote a story. How important is it to have someone close to you recognize your talent at a young age?

**SK:** It's great to have people around you that care. You know what? They don't even have to care, exactly. All they have to do is say, "This is what you like to

do. That's OK." As long as they don't stomp on you and say, "That's a stupid thing to do. Go hoe the garden." It's OK to go hoe the garden as long as you can still find an hour to write or do whatever it is that you want to do because somebody recognizes it's important to you.

**Writing:** What is the one thing that you, as a writer, cannot

live without?

**SK:** Books. Books. You gotta have books. You gotta read. I go just about everywhere with a book.

**Writing:** What, if anything, scares you?

**SK:** Scary things are personal. Clowns have freaked me out and scared me ever since I was a kid. To me there's something scary, something sinister about such a figure of happiness and fun. I guess that sometimes what makes a scary thing really scary is when we realize there's something sinister behind a nice face.

**Writing:** Your books are filled to the brim with suspense. Is there any formula that you use to build up the suspense in a book?

**SK:** The most important thing about building suspense is building identification with the character. You have to take some time and make your reader care about



the characters in the story. I'm thinking about *Misery*, where you've got this writer, Paul Sheldon, and little by little you get to know this guy and understand him and you get to see different aspects of him. Then you start to empathize with him and you start to put yourself in his shoes and then you start to be very, very afraid because you don't want anything bad to happen to him. But because it's the kind of story that it is, you know that something bad is gonna happen. So one by one you close off the exits and things get more and more nerve-racking until finally there's an explosion.

**Writing:** Out of all the characters you have created over the years, who is your favorite?

**SK:** There's a character in the book I'm working on now named Lucy Landon, who's a widow. I like her because she's very resourceful; she's very brave. You know, she's been my constant companion for about two years now and I'm sort of in love with her. But you get to like them all! And the thing is, whether they're good or they're bad ... I can't remember who said this, but somebody said, "Everybody's a hero in their own life," and I try to remember that. Everybody gets their own story.

**Writing:** Do you have any rituals when you finish a book?

**SK:** I'm always very happy when I'm done. Sometimes I take my wife out to dinner. Beyond that, I'm just nice to the dog.

**Writing:** You once said, "I am the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and fries." Has that statement given you any heartburn over the years?

**SK:** Yeah, I'm still paying for that. What I meant is I'm tasty. I go down smooth. And I don't think that a steady diet of Stephen King would make anybody a healthy human being. I think that you oughtta eat your vegetables, you oughtta find some Dickens, some Ian McEwan ... you oughtta read all kinds of different stuff. You shouldn't just settle on one thing. I'd feel the same way about people that said they didn't read anything

but *Harry Potter*. I'd say, "There's something wrong with you, buddy." If you're gonna read fiction, read all kinds and challenge yourself; read some stuff that's really tough.

Go out and get *Crime and Punishment*, read that.


**Writing:** For a young teen who hasn't read any Stephen King and wants to get a taste of your writing, which book would you recommend he or she read first?

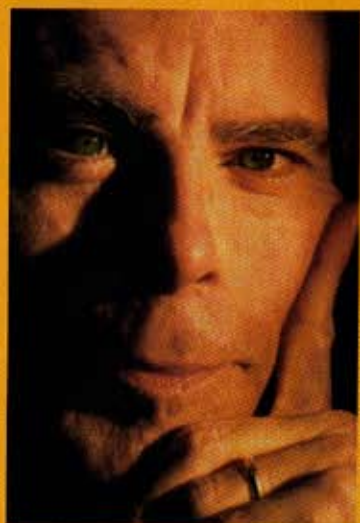
**SK:** *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*. I've never tried to write a young adult book. But if there was such a thing as a Stephen King young adult novel, it would be *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*. [Note: Tom Gordon is a former Red Sox pitcher. He currently pitches for the Yankees.]

**Writing:** What themes do you see running through all your works?

**SK:** I would say that if there's one theme that runs through my work, it would be, Live according to the truth and try to be brave. And, it's better to do the right thing than the wrong thing, even at costs.

**Writing:** After you were hit by a van in '99, rumors circulated that you would never write again. If that tragedy couldn't stop you, do you think you'll ever retire?

**SK:** Sure ... I'll die. Or I'll get Alzheimer's disease or something. You see, I'm a horror writer; I can think of all sorts of nasty reasons to stop. I thought that I would be done after *The Dark Tower* books. But you don't get to say "when" in a business like this. Ideas just surface and say, "Write me!" So here I am, at the same old stand. 



—Brian Smith/CORBIS Outline

**DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION FOR STEPHEN KING?** Here's your chance to ask it. Send your question to [writing@weeklyreader.com](mailto:writing@weeklyreader.com) before October 14, and we'll forward it to Stephen King. (The best-selling author has promised to answer the top 20 questions from teens across America.) Then go to [www.readandwriting.com](http://www.readandwriting.com) on October 31 to read his answers!

Greetings  
FROM

# BANGOR MAINE

HOME OF *Stephen King*

Since 1980, when Stephen King and his wife, Tabitha, bought their home in Bangor, the quiet, humble town has appeared in many of King's stories ... sort of. Oftentimes his plots are rooted in a charming burg called Derry. Despite having its own make-believe streets and ZIP code, Derry is very much Bangor's gruesome doppelganger.

Writing's associate editor, Bryon Cahill, recently visited the king of storytelling's stomping grounds to see just how much Bangor's sights and scenes have influenced the author's work. What he discovered: Whether the towns in King's stories really exist or whether he created them out of thin air hardly ever matters. Maine *lives* in the pages of his books.



## STEPHEN KING'S HOUSE

On a regular street (West Broadway, it's no secret) in the middle of Bangor is Stephen King's house, the highlight of any visit to the town. The wrought-iron fence that surrounds his Victorian home is adorned with bats, three-headed griffins, and a creepy spiderweb. Behind the closed doors, King writes his books while listening to very loud music. "Loud music keeps Steve focused," King's assistant of 17 years, Marsha DeFilippo, says. "It drowns out any distractions, and it's a good sign to anyone else to stay away."

## STEPHEN KING'S OFFICE

Tucked away at the edge of Bangor lies Stephen King's office. It's not where he does most of his writing, but it is where his assistant talks to editors, publishers, and agents and sorts through fan mail.

A deadly-looking statue of a beast sits center stage on King's desk. A gift from a devoted fan, the statue was inspired by King's novel *It*, which is about an evil presence that terrorizes the town of Derry every 27 years or so. This murderous clown is known as Pennywise. Check out those fingernails! Yikes!



## PET CEMETERY

When King's novel *Pet Sematary* was adapted into a film, parts of the movie were shot here, at Bangor's Mount Hope Cemetery. The book is based on an actual pet cemetery that existed behind King's 1979 home in Orrington, Maine. The unique spelling came from a child's innocent scrawl on a rudimentary sign in the original graveyard. Over the years the original pet cemetery has been vandalized and laid to waste by disrespectful fans. But the memory of that enchanted place is forever immortalized in King's words.



## PAUL BUNYAN

In Stephen King's classic novel *It*, a giant statue of Paul Bunyan comes to life and scares the wits out of one of the characters. Although it's doubtful it ever came to life, the Paul Bunyan statue in the center of Bangor symbolizes the town's claim that it was the "lumber capital of the world" in the 1800s. At a dizzying height of 31 feet and weighing in at 3,700 pounds (that's nearly 2 tons!), the ax-wielding Bunyan is clearly a man to be reckoned with.



## THE BARRENS

The Kenduskeag Stream, which runs through Bangor, probably looks like the stream that runs through your town. Even this small body of water has inspired King. In his novel *It*, he calls the stream "the Barrens" and transforms it into a safe space where a group of self-proclaimed "Losers" hang out and hide from their fears. When they decide to dam up the Barrens, you could say that they are also damming up their fears, waiting for them to explode.

## BASEBALL DIAMOND

In the heart of Bangor, the Shawn T. Mansfield Stadium hosts all the town baseball games. In 1992, King and his wife built the stadium with their own money and dedicated it to a little boy who had died of cerebral palsy and to "all the children who never had a chance to play."

Our country's pastime is portrayed in many of King's books and stories. Most recently, he coauthored a non-fiction book with Stewart O'Nan titled *Faithful: Two Diehard Boston Red Sox Fans Chronicle the Historic 2004 Season*.

## BETTS BOOKSTORE

Betts Bookstore ([www.bettsbooks.com](http://www.bettsbooks.com)) is a key tourist destination for King fans visiting from all over the world. Located on Hammond Street, Betts is filled with multiple copies of every King book ever written, including a \$2,450 copy of *The Stand*, which comes in its very own coffin-shaped carrying case.

In King's books, he shows Derry as being on the outskirts of Bangor, but many of the scenes take place in the area surrounding Betts Bookstore.

"The book *Insomnia* all takes place right in front of this store," owner Stu Tinker says. "It's the whole section of Hammond Street right here!"

Tinker also recognizes King characters around town, especially the old gypsy in *Thinner*. "He just got this guy," Tinker says. "His face was half eaten away and he had long, white hair, and he was the gypsy in that story, it was so obvious!"

