

Why the World Is a Better Place with Stephen King in It: An Evolutionary Perspective

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The bestselling author Stephen King is famous for his scary stories. He has terrified millions of people and must be directly responsible for countless nightmares and sweat-drenched sleepless nights. I have heard of people who have had to sleep with the lights on for months because of a King story. I have heard of people whose childhood love of clowns curdled into dread because of King. If one were to type up King's literary rap sheet, the section "Incidents of Sleep Disturbances Caused by Stephen King's *It*" alone would require many sheaves of paper. Enough, maybe, for a limited print run of a new King novel. And yet, even though King has dispersed dread, anxiety, horror, and fear since the mid-seventies, I'll argue that the world is a better place with him in it.

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There's an obvious reason why that claim is true. The world is a better place with King in it because King generates a lot of sheer monetary value—with an annual income of some \$20 million (Watson, 2019), he pays a lot of taxes, and his prolificacy must keep dozens of people employed in the creative industries. Moreover, King and his wife Tabitha are famous for their philanthropy, donating an estimated \$4 million to charity each year (King, 2017b). That's value. But King also generates another kind of value, one that is harder to measure—*literary* value, by which I mean the pleasure and insight that people derive from reading his stories. It is this latter kind of value that is my focus here, and I approach the subject from the perspective of evolutionary literary criticism. This particular perspective has two benefits: One, it is lodged in empirical science, which gives the perspective genuine explanatory power (Carroll, 2011). And two, evolutionary literary theory—with its focus on storytelling as an adaptive mechanism—is keenly attuned to the psychological effects and functions of fiction (Boyd, 2009; Carroll, 1995). Indeed, previous King scholarship has tended to disregard the psychological appeals and

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30 functions of his stories, focusing predominantly on the ideological underpinnings
 31 and ramifications of his work (e.g., Dymond, 2013; Hansen, 2017; Hornbeck, 2016)
 32 or on his place in the literary-historical or critical landscape (e.g., Birke, 2014;
 33 *Magistrale*, 2013; Strengell, 2005).

34 While horror is a widely popular and culturally pervasive genre, some critics
 35 consider the genre—and King—unworthy of serious attention, typically on aes-
 36 thetic and/or moral grounds (Smith, 2002). Such dismissals are misguided. The hor-
 37 ror genre fulfills an important psychological function as threat simulation (Clasen,
 38 2017). King provides literary threat simulation, but his horror has extraordinarily
 39 wide appeal because it is not just about frightening readers. It is also about using
 40 threat simulations to probe *character*, about people's attempts to cope with terrible
 41 situations. When an interviewer asked about the "most essential element of a good
 42 horror story," King responded: "Character. You've got to love the people ... There is
 43 no horror without love and feeling" (Winter, 1990, p. 306). Indeed, character is
 44 central to King's fiction, and to his appeal.

45 King's literary world is one in which evil is real, but so is goodness. His protago-
 46 nists—compassionate, imaginative, courageous—usually stand a fighting chance
 47 against awe-inspiring, supernatural forces of evil. And while King's human charac-
 48 ters are seldom wholly good or wholly evil, some characters are more receptive to
 49 the forces of evil than others—and some characters, usually the most imaginative
 50 ones, are more *alert* to the forces of evil than others. Imagination, in King's view, is
 51 a double-edged sword—a capacity that generates fear and anxiety by producing
 52 images of "dark and dragging horrors" (King, 2011b, p. 413), but also a source of
 53 pleasure and a force for good. King tends to associate imaginative traits with his
 54 protagonists, and frequently pits imaginative protagonists against unimaginative
 55 evil. In *The Dark Half* (King, 1990), King's protagonist, Thad Beaumont, is an
 56 imaginative writer whose family is taken hostage by Beaumont's evil twin, George
 57 Stark, who has been brought to life by Beaumont's imagination—a dangerously
 58 antisocial literary character emerged in the flesh. But the flesh is ephemeral. Stark is
 59 slowly decomposing until he is written back into full health, but he himself is unable
 60 to create—he needs Beaumont to write for him. Like Stark, King's antagonists tend
 61 to be dully self-absorbed, whereas his protagonists are usually highly prosocial and
 62 imaginative, if somewhat socially awkward—not unlike King himself. As he said of
 63 his childhood in an interview, "I had friends and all that, but I often felt unhappy and
 64 different, estranged from other kids my age." He found pleasure in reading and was
 65 an imaginative child, but his vivid imagination seems to have been unusually morbid:

66 An active imagination has always been part of the baggage I've carried with me, and when
 67 you're a kid, it can sometimes exact a pretty grueling toll ... [W]hen I was growing up, I'd
 68 think a lot of what would happen if my mother died and I were left an orphan ... [W]ith the
 69 kind of imagination I had, you couldn't switch off the images once you'd triggered them, so
 70 I'd see my mother laid out in a white-silk-lined mahogany coffin with brass handles, her
 71 dead face blank and waxen; I'd hear the organ dirges in the background; and then I'd see
 72 myself being dragged off to some Dickensian workhouse by a terrible old lady in black
 73 (Norden, 1988, p. 40).

To the terror and delight of millions of readers across the planet, King has managed to convert his disposition for imaginatively probing the darkest possibilities of the world into a lucrative creative pursuit. His horror stories resonate with those millions of readers because King is uncommonly good at creating immersive imaginative worlds that look very much like our world, but in which vividly depicted and intuitively compelling supernatural forces of good and evil are afoot. Those forces collaborate with and work through fictional characters, whose motives—good or evil—King probes with real understanding of the complexities of human nature. King is not sadistic; he likes to scare readers, but he does so through compassionate depictions of vulnerable characters in confrontation with terrifying forces. This allows King to provide psychological and social insight and prompts for moral calibration by satisfying an evolved appetite for vicarious experience with threat scenarios. And while King is famous for his vivid depictions of horrifying evil, I maintain that his stories are, in fact, a force for good.

1 The Divided Reception of Stephen King 88

King enjoys massive popularity and continues to wield immense pop-cultural influence. He has published more than 60 novels, in addition to some 200 short stories and several non-fiction books. By one estimate, he has sold 350 million books. Many of his stories have been adapted for the screen—some of them to great critical acclaim (e.g., Darabont’s *The Shawshank Redemption* [1994]), and others to almost universal derision (e.g., King’s own *Maximum Overdrive* [1986]). Several King creations have entered popular culture and are instantaneously recognizable even to people who have never read any of his works, such as telekinetic Carrie, the haunted Overlook Hotel, or Pennywise the Dancing Clown. There are King fan clubs, there’s King merchandise (from *Carrie* t-shirts to Pennywise plush toys), and there are King quiz books to keep King fans occupied at get-togethers (e.g., Spignesi, 1990). There are anecdotes of deranged fans violating King’s privacy (Lant, 1997). Indeed, anybody who has read King’s 1987 novel *Misery* (2011a) must have wondered about the autobiographical element. In this novel, bestselling author Paul Sheldon is held captive by his self-proclaimed “number one fan,” Annie Wilkes, who forces him to resurrect the heroine of the bodice-ripper romance series for which Sheldon is famous, but which he has left behind to pursue more “serious” fiction. And although it’s too easy to read *Misery* as King’s hate-mail to his fans—Sheldon is clearly not a clone of King—the novel is supposedly inspired by King’s experiences with rabid fans (Beahm, 1998).

King’s wide appeal is undoubtedly due chiefly to the literary qualities of the stories he writes—the complex characters, the vividly depicted images of horror, the verisimilitude of his imaginative worlds, his suspenseful plots, and the accessibility of his language. Those are the recurrent qualities mentioned by King enthusiasts on such fora as Goodreads. King’s public persona and his life-story add to his appeal. He seems like an easy-going, down-to-earth guy, despite his massive wealth.

115 He does interviews on national television wearing well-worn blue jeans and casual
116 t-shirts. He jokes about being a bumpkin from Maine. He talks plainly and candidly
117 about growing up with an overworked single mother, struggling financially during
118 college and up until he sold the paperback rights to his 1974 debut novel, *Carrie*
119 (1999), and about a life-long dance with the demons of substance abuse (King,
120 2012). He loves dogs and thinks farts are funny. And his rags-to-riches story is
121 authentic and appealing (Magistrale, 2013; Rogak, 2009). There's a lot to like here,
122 and King's easy-going, good-natured yet compulsively morbid personality bleeds
123 into his stories.

124 Alongside the hard-core King fans are diehard critics. Among them, the ghost of
125 the late literary scholar Harold Bloom stands out as the most vocal and influential.
126 Bloom edited a volume of critical writings about King's work and said in his brief
127 introduction to the volume that "I find King very hard to read." (Why he would edit
128 such a collection remains a mystery.) He went on to say that "the triumph of the
129 genial King is a large emblem of the failures of American education" (Bloom, 2007,
130 p. 2). While Bloom granted to King a certain "decency," a certain "social benignity"
131 (p. 3)—presumably referring to King's acts of charity as well as to the "redeeming
132 social values" (p. 2) that Bloom found in some of King's stories—he was unequivocal
133 in his scorn. When in 2003 the National Book Foundation awarded King the
134 prestigious Medal for Contribution to American Letters, Bloom wrote an angry
135 op-ed, saying that the award represented "another low in the shocking process of
136 dumbing down our cultural life." He added that King "is an immensely inadequate
137 writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis"
138 (Bloom, 2003).

139 King scholars have puzzled over this divided reception. How can a writer inspire
140 almost-religious devotion in some and tooth-grinding scorn in others? While they
141 have not yet adequately answered that question, they have identified reasons why
142 some critics dismiss King (Smith, 2002)—the most prominent one being *genre*.
143 Horror, the genre for which King is best known, continues to struggle with a bad
144 reputation. The genre is, at least in some circles, conceived as a psychologically
145 shallow, aesthetically uninteresting, and maybe even morally problematic mode of
146 writing (Gutiérrez, 2017; Jancovich, 1992). And while there is a lot of bad horror
147 out there, there is also horror that has real merit—horror that is psychologically
148 probing, aesthetically ambitious, and morally nuanced (Clasen, 2017).

149 The best of King's horror has those qualities. King uses the elements of horror,
150 whether naturalistic or supernatural, not just for their own sake, but to examine
151 people and the world in which they find themselves. He has used pretty much every
152 Gothic and horror trope there is: haunted houses, psycho killers, ghosts, vampires,
153 zombies, werewolves, demons, evil extraterrestrials, possessed dolls, abominations
154 from other dimensions, terrors from the grave, you name it. Those tropes carry
155 intrinsic interest and value for King, but they are also used to qualify and deepen his
156 investigations of human motivations and social structures. In *The Shining* (King,
157 2011c), for example, he casts his eye on the main character, Jack Torrance's, futile
158 struggles against his inner demons and his psychological freefall into homicidal
159 madness. By situating this drama in a hotel haunted by external demons that fuel

Torrance’s inner ones, King elevates a social realist drama of thwarted ambition and pathological family relationships to an imaginatively and symbolically explosive scenario of horror (Clasen, 2017). He uses the trope of the haunted hotel with a sordid past to suggest that evil deeds leave lingering supernatural traces in the world, just as they leave lingering psychological traces. Conversely, he brings the horror tropes to life by situating them within a believable imaginative world that resembles the empirical one in most respects. As King himself puts it, he is “not merely dealing with the surreal and the fantastic but, more importantly, using the surreal and fantastic to examine the motivations of people and the society and institutions they create” (quoted in Smith, 2002, p. 338).

King says that “the art of story-fiction” is “one of the vital ways in which we try to make sense of our lives, and the often terrible world we see around us” (2010, p. 365). This functional proposal aligns with evolutionary theories about the adaptive functions of fiction, in particular the empirically supported hypothesis that fiction provides motivational orientation (Carroll, 2012). We use fiction to make sense of ourselves and the world. King, through his stories, thus provides to readers the kind of “emotionally saturated images of the world and of human experience” (Carroll, 2006, p. 42) for which we have an evolved desire, because such images help us navigate the uniquely complex social and psychological worlds in which we humans find ourselves.

2 The Uses of King’s Horror: An Evolutionary Perspective 180

The imaginative virtual worlds into which King invites his readers are usually scary, and King evidently enjoys scaring his readers. He is temperamentally drawn to the horror genre. As he said in a 1985 interview, “There are a lot of people who are convinced that, as soon as I’ve made enough money, I will just leave this silly bullshit behind me and go on to write *Brideshead Revisited* and spy novels and things like that. I don’t know *why* people think that. This is all I’ve ever wanted to write” (Winter, 1990, p. 305). And as he said in another interview, “I don’t think there’s anything sweeter on God’s green earth than scaring the living shit out of people.” He went on to explain that:

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! (Norden, 1988, p. 40).

King’s readers, in turn, enjoy being scared. As one Goodreads user wrote of *Pet Sematary* (in a five-star review), that novel “is the scariest and creepiest book I’ve ever read” (Mario, 2014). It is, at least on the surface, paradoxical that readers would enjoy being frightened by fiction.

199 While horror is a pervasive pop-cultural phenomenon, not *all* readers enjoy hor-
 200 ror. In a previous study sampling the American population (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-
 201 Christiansen, & Johnson, 2018), we found that more than half claim to enjoy horror
 202 media. Slightly more than a quarter say they don't like horror. And the remaining
 203 respondents are indecisive, claiming neither a preference for or against horror. This
 204 distribution of people on a scale ranging from avoidance of horror to liking of hor-
 205 ror, which results at least partly from personality differences among media users
 206 (Clasen et al., 2018), may help explain the divided reception of King. Some readers
 207 simply don't enjoy being scared by fiction. They stay away from anything labeled
 208 horror, and their understanding of what the genre is may be impoverished. For such
 209 readers, horror as a genre label may conjure up images of masked killers chasing
 210 buxom teenage scream queens. But as I hope to show in this chapter (and have
 211 argued elsewhere, e.g., Clasen, 2017), there is more to horror than masked killers
 212 and scream queens.

213 The widespread desire to be frightened by fiction is explicable in terms of threat
 214 simulation. Horror is a means for readers to become immersed in frightening fic-
 215 tional worlds—virtual worlds in which they can empathize with vulnerable charac-
 216 ters who confront terrifying forces of evil—and so to expand their experience. They
 217 learn what it feels like to be hunted prey, to be assaulted by dangerous forces. They
 218 vicariously live through worst-case scenarios (Morin, Acerbi, & Sobchuk, 2019).
 219 That kind of threat simulation is pleasurable to most people because it satisfies an
 220 adaptive desire for expanding experience through imaginative simulation (Clasen
 221 et al., 2018). The imaginative structures provided in King stories usually offer *dark*
 222 simulated experience—simulations that take us to the fringes of human experience,
 223 into realms of darkness and horror and despair.

224 King, then, like other accomplished horror writers, makes his living by creating
 225 imaginative virtual worlds in which his readers can playfully engage in threat simu-
 226 lation. However, his exceptionally wide appeal suggests that he offers readers some-
 227 thing more than the literary equivalent of yelling “BOO!” His horror allows him to
 228 provide psychological and social insight into the extremes of experience, and the
 229 compassion that saturates his stories appeals to many readers, perhaps because it
 230 makes the darkness into which he delves bearable by shooting it through with light.
 231 Some of King's stories are bleak, in particular the books written early in his career
 232 under the pen name Richard Bachman and in a state of “low rage and simmering
 233 despair” (King, 1996, p. vi). But while King can be bleak, and gleefully morbid, and
 234 irreverently gross, he is never nihilistic, never sadistic.

235 3 Charting the Dark Corners of the Psychological World: 236 *Pet Sematary*

237 Consider *Pet Sematary* (King, 2011b), King's notoriously scary 1983 novel about a
 238 family that loses first a cat and then a toddler to the highway that runs past their new
 239 house. The protagonist, Louis, learns from his elderly neighbor, Jud, about an
 240 ancient Native American burial ground deep in the woods behind his home.
 241 Whatever one buries there comes back from the grave, but it comes back “a little

dead. A little strange” (p. 181). When the family cat is killed by a vehicle, Louis hides the death from his daughter to protect her from the shock of mortality. He also hides the death from his wife, Rachel, who was traumatized by the horrible demise of her sister when she was a child, and now lives in denial of mortality. Goaded by Jud, who is compelled by a supernatural force of evil, Louis buries the cat in the Native American burial ground. The cat comes back, but it’s weird and mean. It kills and mangles a lot of birds and mice. Louis discreetly disposes of the corpses, thinking to himself that he is to blame—that he has “bought them”—by having taken advantage of the supernatural burial ground. Shortly thereafter two-year-old Gage is hit and killed by a truck. Louis, devastated by grief, decides to exhume his son and re-bury him in the Native American burial ground. Gage, too, returns from the grave, but he’s now evil. Resurrected Gage kills both Jud and his own mother. Louis, now completely shattered by horror and sorrow, takes his wife’s corpse to the Native American burial ground. She, too, returns. The end.

Even though this scenario is wildly implausible, there is real emotional depth here, real psychological insight. King gives us an imaginative world that is darkly re-enchanted, one in which magical forces and supernatural agents are real. There is a peculiar and ambivalent appeal in envisioning such imaginative worlds. The human mind evolved to helplessly, promiscuously, project magical forces and supernatural agents into the world (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Boyer, 2001). Science has struggled for centuries to banish those forces from the world, to disenchant the world, but science is up against deep-seated intuitions. Most people, despite rational convictions, occasionally intuit supernatural forces at work. And to most people, the intuition that such forces exist is both comforting and terrifying, suggesting some ulterior meaning to the universe and the individual life but also suggesting the existence of frightening supernatural agents. King exploits such intuitions by describing an imaginative world in which the forces are real. Doing so allows him to take his investigation of the depths of grief and horror to a level beyond that which a realistic depiction of the loss of a child would allow.

King takes on a big topic, one that most people don’t much enjoy thinking about, and creates an absorbing, deeply disturbing, but ultimately life-affirming story around it. That big topic is death. Death is a prominent theme in literature because it is a prominent theme in life. It is vast and shrouded in mystery, inescapable and unknowable, terrifying yet fascinating. Death excites the imagination, “goads people into attempting to imagine the end of all imagination, and compelling them to wonder about the meaning and value of a life that seems a mere flicker of conscious experience isolated within an unimaginable infinity of nothingness” (Carroll, 2019, p. 137). In *Pet Sematary*, death is not the end, but it should be. The dread of undeath makes the value of life stand out. Jud knows he should not bury anything in the Native American burial ground, and that he should not encourage his friend to do so. But the force of evil works on him, compels him. “That place ... all at once it gets hold of you,” says Jud in an attempt to explain why he told Louis about the burial ground. “You make up the sweetest-smelling reasons in the world” (King, 2011b, p. 183). Later in the story, when Gage is dead and Jud suspects that Louis may be contemplating the interment of his son in the Native American burial ground,

287 he tries to warn Louis: “It’s an evil, curdled place, and I had no business taking you
 288 up there to bury that cat. I know that now” (p. 307). Too late. Louis, weakened by
 289 grief and unable to accept the finality of death, gives in to the lure of the place and
 290 sets out on the course that ends with him toppling into an abyss of horror.

291 In the most disturbing scene of the novel, Louis breaks into a cemetery at night
 292 to exhume his son. King lets the reader into the thoughts and emotions of Louis,
 293 with whom the story is focalized. We do get a brief description of Gage’s corpse—
 294 which looks like “a badly made doll” with “damp moss” growing on its face
 295 (p. 387)—but the focus is on Louis’s inner turmoil, his rage and grief and deep
 296 doubts. When Louis has opened the coffin and shines his flashlight into it, “a deep
 297 horror that was very nearly awe stole over him—it was the sort of feeling usually
 298 reserved for the worst nightmares, the ones you can barely remember upon awaken-
 299 ing” (p. 386). Louis then proceeds to lift the corpse out of the grave:

300 Somehow, panting, his stomach spasming from the smell and from the boneless loose feel
 301 of his son’s miserably smashed body, Louis wrestled the body out of the coffin, then out of
 302 the grave. At last he sat on the verge of the grave with the body in his lap, his feet dangling
 303 in the hole, his mouth drawn down in a trembling bow of horror and pity and sorrow
 304 (p. 388).

305 The image is vivid and resonant. King paints the scene in uncomplicated, colloquial
 306 language and provides enough sensory detail for us to mentally simulate the scene,
 307 including the stench of decomposition and the tactile reality of a broken corpse. We
 308 see before us Louis’s “dangling” feet, we see him giving in to powerful emotion. We
 309 are being put right by the grave with Louis, and we are invited to share his pain, his
 310 grief. Since people respond to literary characters in much the same way as they
 311 respond to real people (Mar & Oatley, 2008), our empathy is mobilized and our
 312 emotions powerfully roused by this description of Louis’s response. Moreover, the
 313 death of an innocent child is a potent motif, for good evolutionary reasons—humans
 314 evolved to value and feel protective of children, who are more vulnerable to danger
 315 than are adults. Even the fictional death of a fictional child can stir our sympathy
 316 and grief. The “magnitude of the loss [of a child] evokes a special pathos,” says
 317 Carroll, because what is lost when a child dies “is the whole potential future life of
 318 the child” (Carroll, 2019, p. 148). King skillfully capitalizes on this in a short chap-
 319 ter that comes after Gage’s funeral. This chapter begins: “But none of those things
 320 happened” (King, 2011b, p. 309). The chapter goes on to detail, in short order, how
 321 Gage narrowly avoids being hit by the truck, how he grows up to become a univer-
 322 sity student and an avid swimmer and has a full and fulfilling life. And then Louis
 323 “woke up in the cold dead light of a rainy seven o’ clock, clutching his pillow in his
 324 arms ... the pillow was wet with his tears” (p. 312). It was just a dream. This gut-
 325 wrenching chapter brings home the “magnitude of the loss” by first giving the reader
 326 a sense of relief and then ramming home the terrible diegetic reality. Gage *did* die.
 327 He did not grow up, did not attend Johns Hopkins, never learned to swim.

328 King clearly wants us to feel what Louis feels. He has also been careful to depict
 329 Gage as a lively, trusting, likeable toddler and to depict the loving bond between

father and son. One long passage describes father and son flying a kite. Louis gets the kite into the air and hands Gage the kite-string:

“Gage flyne it?” Gage said ... He pulled the string experimentally; the kite nodded in the windy sky ... Louis and his son laughed together. Gage reached out his free hand, groping, and Louis took it in his own. They stood together that way in the middle of Mrs. Vinton’s field, looking up at the [kite].

It was a moment with his son that Louis never forgot. As he had gone up and into the kite as a child himself [imagining himself flying], he now found himself going into Gage, his son. He felt himself shrink until he was within Gage’s tiny house, looking out of the windows that were his eyes—looking out at a world that was so huge and bright ... where the kite soared miles above him, the string drumming in his fist like a live thing as the wind blew around him, tumbling his hair.

“Kite flyne!” Gage cried out to his father, and Louis put his arm around Gage’s shoulders and kissed the boy’s cheek, in which the wind had bloomed like a wild rose.

“I love you, Gage,” he said—it was between the two of them, and that was all right.

And Gage, who now had less than two months to live, laughed shrilly and joyously. “Kite flyne! Kite flyne, Daddy!” (pp. 248–249).

The scene captures the emotional depth and power of a healthy father–son relationship in general and of Louis’s affectionate bond with his son in particular. It also captures something of the evanescence of life. The stark subordinate clause toward the end of the passage—“who now had less than two months to live”—serves as a brutal memento mori to the reader who, absorbed in the moving depiction of these characters, had perhaps forgotten that they were reading a horror novel that thematizes the fragility of life and the tragedy, but also inevitability and naturalness, of death. The scene, moreover, captures the transformation of the pure pleasures of childhood into the mature, but more complicated, joys of parenthood. A child can be content with (and may be unable to transcend) its own perspective. A responsible parent, however, is always invested in several perspectives—their own, that of a co-parent, those of offspring. Here, in this passage, Louis inhabits his own and Gage’s perspectives and shares in Gage’s childish joy at the flying kite. As the story progresses, however, and Louis sinks into horror and grief, he forgets all but his own perspective.

King’s sympathetic depiction of Louis is nuanced by a critical perspective on his actions. We share Louis’s perspective visually and emotionally, but not necessarily morally. As the plot unfolds, Louis’s actions become increasingly morally problematic—culminating, of course, with the resurrection of his son. In one scene—not shocking, like the exhumation scene, but symptomatic of Louis’s psychological decline—Louis, his wife Rachel, his friend Jud, and his colleague Steve are gathered for a meal after Gage’s funeral service. Rachel has a breakdown, “sobbing into her hands”:

There was a queer moment then. There were crossing lines of tension then, and they all seemed to focus on Louis ... Even the waitress felt those converging lines of awareness. He saw her pause at a table near the back where she was laying placemats and silver. For a moment Louis was puzzled, and then he understood: They were waiting for him to comfort his wife.

He couldn’t do it. He wanted to do it. He understood it was his responsibility to do it. All the same, he couldn’t. It was the cat that got in his way ... The fucking cat ... with his

377 ripped mice and the birds he had grounded forever. When he found them, Louis cleaned up
 378 the messes promptly, with no complaint or comment ... He had, after all, bought them. But
 379 had he bought this? (pp. 270–271).

380 Louis is so wrapped up in his own grief, and his aimless rage at the unfairness of
 381 Gage's death ("had he bought this?"), that he finds himself unable to comfort his
 382 wife. He suddenly becomes aware of the others' perspectives, the "lines of aware-
 383 ness" that converge on him, but he is locked into his own concerns. "After a
 384 moment ... Steve put an arm around [Rachel] and hugged her gently. His eyes on
 385 Louis's were reproachful and angry" (p. 271). It's a painful scene. The reader is
 386 invited to share Louis's perspective, but also Rachel's, and Steve's. We understand
 387 Louis's behavior, but also condemn it. This scene—which is the kind of scene I have
 388 in mind when I say that King uses horror tropes to conduct serious and sensitive
 389 investigations of psychology and sociality—signals Louis's self-absorption, which,
 390 together with his unwillingness to accept the finality of death, becomes his tragic
 391 flaw. The flaw eventually leads to his fatal and immoral decision to resurrect his son.
 392 That selfish action serves only to counteract his own grief. It is depicted as unnatural
 393 and wrong, and it unleashes a horror that causes the death of both Jud and Rachel
 394 and also the complete mental unravelling of Louis. As Douglas Winter writes, "The
 395 death of a child is the ultimate horror of every parent, an outrage against humanity;
 396 and the reanimated Gage is precisely that horror made flesh, savaging and literally
 397 eating away at his mourning family" (1984, p. 134).

398 *Pet Sematary* allows the reader to vicariously feel the near-insane grief of a
 399 bereaved parent, to probe the disturbing question of "just how much horror the
 400 human mind can stand and still maintain a wakeful, staring, unrelenting sanity"
 401 (King, 2011b, p. 255). It prompts the reader to reflect on death and the value of
 402 life—not on an abstract level, but through emotional engagement with vividly
 403 drawn characters who find themselves confronted with a truly horrifying situation.
 404 The responsive reader participates imaginatively in this situation, but also stands
 405 back from it and evaluates it and the characters' behavior. The pay-off of reading a
 406 novel like *Pet Sematary*, then, is not just about the pleasure of being absorbed in an
 407 imaginatively and emotionally stimulating story populated by interesting charac-
 408 ters. That pleasure is real and valuable. But the pay-off is also about "deepening and
 409 widening one's emotional experience," in the horror writer Peter Straub's words
 410 (quoted in Clasen, 2009, p. 40), about coming face to face with a nightmarish evoca-
 411 tion of death, embodied in the reanimated corpses, and about becoming sensitized
 412 to the value and fragility of life, and about gaining insight into painful but important
 413 psychological and social dynamics. Nobody goes through life without pain and loss.
 414 Fiction that seriously explores the depths of pain and loss steels us for that.

415 **4 Moral Calibration: Agonistic Structure in *It***

416 Fiction has the capacity for letting us vicariously live through scenarios that would,
 417 in real life, be unattractive (like losing a child) or even impossible (like resurrecting
 418 a child), thus widening and qualifying our experience and ability to cope. Speculative

fiction—horror, fantasy, and science fiction—deals in imaginative worlds that depart from the empirical one, but such fiction still tends to aspire to psychological realism, which is how it can teach us about the qualities of experience. Fiction may also have the capacity for improving social cognition by “[augmenting] our capacity for empathy and social inference” (Mar & Oatley, 2008, p. 173). It does so by letting us adopt the perspectives of fictional characters and by giving us insight into their mental processes. Moreover, since fiction typically has a moral structure—expressed perhaps most clearly in agonistic structure, the distribution of characters along a moral continuum from evil to good—it can tweak the reader’s moral compass (usually toward the pole of prosociality, cf. Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, & Kruger, 2012; Johnson, 2012) and help them assign weight and value to behavioral alternatives.

Consider King’s *It* (King, 2017a), perhaps his most famous novel. This massive 1986 book depicts a small group of friends in the fictional town of Derry, Maine, in their attempt to defeat an ancient and shape-shifting force of evil that awakens every 27 years or so to feed on the flesh and fear and faith of the citizens of Derry, and to infect them with its evil. The good guys—a rag-tag band of kids who call themselves the Losers’ Club—take up the fight with this force of evil and with its human collaborators. They manage to momentarily defeat the evil force, but it returns 27 years later. The now-adult protagonists, most of whom have left Derry, must return for a final battle against It. They manage, through their combined efforts, to vanquish It.

It is a sprawling and famously frightening novel, a wide-ranging depiction of the terror and awe of childhood, the magic of friendships, the wonders of imagination, the horrors of history (Mercer, 2019), and the dark forces that hide in the sewer system under Derry and deep within human nature. The central conflict in *It*—man versus monster—reflects an ancient struggle, one that predates modern humans (Clasen, 2012). Our mammalian ancestors have for millions of years been preyed upon by hungry, fanged animals roaming in the dark (Hart & Sussman, 2009). The idea of being hunted by a hungry monster still carries salience and resonance beyond reason. The monster of *It* is a predator, but it is more than that. It has a supernatural ability to adopt a shape that mirrors the deepest fears of its prey, and it is able to manipulate its prey’s perception of reality. Despite the monster’s extraterrestrial origin, it has found Earth very hospitable to its needs:

It had discovered a depth of imagination here that was almost new, almost of concern. This quality of imagination made the food very rich. Its teeth rent flesh gone stiff with exotic terrors and voluptuous fears: they dreamed of nightbeasts and moving muds; against their will they contemplated endless gulphs (King, 2017a, p. 1220).

It targets children in particular, because King’s children are more perceptive, open-minded, and imaginative than adults (Alegre, 2001). Their fears are “simpler and usually more powerful” than adults’ fears (King, 2017a, p. 1232). Children are able to accept the impossible, King suggests. They are able to accept the reality of a shape-shifting monster, which makes them more vulnerable to the monster. However, as the protagonists discover, their faith can also be weaponized. They are

463 able to fight back when they believe that their weapons, such as home-made silver
464 bullets, are effective against the monster.

465 One memorable scene depicts one of the Losers—11-year-old Eddie Kasprak—
466 coming face to face with one of the monster’s embodiments. Eddie is investigating
467 an abandoned house, thinking about his fear of hobos. Eddie suffers from hypo-
468 chondria, instilled by his domineering mother, and is terrified of infection. Suddenly,
469 he is assaulted by what appears to be a hobo leper:

470 The skin of its forehead was split open. White bone, coated with a membrane of yellow
471 mucousy stuff, peered through like the lens of a bleary searchlight. The nose was a bridge of
472 raw gristle above two red flaring channels. One eye was a gleeful blue. The other socket was
473 filled with a mass of spongy brown-black tissue. The leper’s lower lips sagged like liver. It
474 had no upper lip at all; its teeth poked out in a sneering ring (p. 376).

475 This detailed depiction of Eddie’s nightmare monster—helpfully peppered with
476 similes that facilitate visualization (“like the lens of a bleary searchlight”; “sagged
477 like liver”)—exploits an evolved fear of contagion. Humans are biologically dis-
478 posed to respond with aversion to cues of infection (Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, &
479 DeScioli, 2013), and King provides plenty such cues here, again using unassuming
480 and colloquial language (“yellow mucousy stuff”). More than a zombie-like abomi-
481 nation, however, this particular monster is an externalization of Eddie’s fear, a hor-
482 ror image that reflects the psyche of a psychologically abused boy, and thus has a
483 narrative function beyond grossing the reader out.

484 Eddie and the other kids in the Losers’ Club share traits with protagonists
485 throughout literary history. They are keenly attuned to other people, considerate of
486 their needs, and respectful of their perspectives. They are self-sacrificing and prosoc-
487 ial. They are also socially awkward and slightly at odds with society. Bill has a
488 heavy stutter that impedes social interaction and makes him feel insecure. Ben is
489 overweight and friendless. Mike is an African-American and the target of racist
490 abuse. Richie is a wisecracking misfit. Stan is a geeky Jew with a passion for bird-
491 watching. Beverly is a social outcast with an abusive father. This motley crew bands
492 together and finds great pleasure in collaborative, constructive pursuits such as
493 building a dam and an underground clubhouse in the Barrens, the secluded area in
494 which they play. They are also united in being “extraordinarily imaginative” (King,
495 2017a, p. 1232). Their imagination gets them into trouble—by making them par-
496 ticularly vulnerable to It—but also helps them defeat evil. Here, again, King depicts
497 the imagination as a double-edged sword.

498 The Losers’ power to vanquish the evil force comes not just from their healthy
499 imaginations, King suggests. It comes from the strength of their bonds, from their
500 being a strongly bonded group with prosocial values even toward out-group indi-
501 viduals. In one scene, the Losers are bonding over a game of Monopoly. One of their
502 parents observes as the kids “[roar] with laughter” at an inappropriate joke: “There
503 was a feeling in the air, like static electricity, only somehow much more powerful,
504 much more scary. She felt that if she touched any of them, she would receive a wal-
505 loping shock” (pp. 1029–1030). King here depicts the social bonds between the
506 children as an almost-physical phenomenon, a power that frightens the parent.

Similarly, the force of evil intuitively that the children's togetherness is their primary power. It looks for a "wedge to drive among them, splitting them apart and destroying any chance of concerted action" (p. 955)—not just because of their aggregated strength, but because of the emergent supernatural or quasi-supernatural force that results from their bond. By elevating the bonds of friendship to an almost-supernatural or spiritual force—conceptualized here, colloquially, as a kind of electricity—King satisfies an evolved tendency to see supernatural or spiritual forces as real agencies.

In contrast to the prosocial protagonists stands the evil force, which finds nourishment in people's fear and suffering. It also eats children. That's about as evil as it gets. This supernatural agent is selfish and sadistic. It recruits people who share its antisocial orientation. In King's stories, external forces of evil often work through human characters by appealing to their antisocial motives. A signal instance of such a recruit is the minor antagonist Patrick Hockstetter, a 12-year-old who becomes a willing tool for It. One chilling chapter takes us into his head. We learn that Hockstetter "could not remember a time when he had believed that other people—any other living creatures, for that matter—were 'real'" (p. 995). His pathological lack of empathy sets him in stark contrast to the Losers. So does his complete lack of artistic inclination, his lack of interest in imaginative activities. At one point, his mother asks about his school day: "Patrick said it was all right and showed her his drawing of a house and a tree. His paper was covered with looping meaningless scribbles made with black and brown crayon ... Patrick brought home the same looping scrawls of black and brown every day. Sometimes he said it was a turkey, sometimes a Christmas tree, sometimes a boy" (p. 998).

In this chapter, we also learn of Hockstetter's dislike of his baby brother, Avery, who causes him minor discomfort—meals are late, Avery cries in the night, and so on. Hockstetter goes into Avery's room, where the infant is sleeping, and presses Avery's face into the pillow. When the noisome baby is dead, Hockstetter goes to the kitchen and gets himself a "plate of cookies and ... a glass of milk" (p. 998). Apart from a transitory feeling of excitement, he registers no strong emotion after the infanticide. No regret, no grief, no horror—not even sadness. He is just relieved, eventually, to find that his meals once again arrive on time. His selfishness is pathological, and he serves as a human analogue to the inhuman force of evil that terrorizes the protagonists.

This distribution of protagonists vs. antagonists on a prosocial-to-antisocial scale is no mere literary convention, but a reflection of evolved human social motives (Carroll et al., 2012). We tend to see prosociality as good and selfishness as bad; indeed, evil in popular culture tends to be characterized as selfish (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2016). Empirical studies have shown that prosociality is universally seen as morally desirable (Curry, Mullins, & Whitehouse, 2019). The reason is that we are an ultra-social species that depends on functioning social structures for psychological well-being and biological fitness. Prosocial individuals make up the fabric of such structures; antisocial ones endanger it. In the real world, however, most people harbor prosocial as well as antisocial motives, and we all feel the conflict of such competing motives occasionally. In fiction, the motives are often artificially

552 crystallized in morally polarized characters (Carroll et al., 2012). It seems that one
 553 of the functions of fiction is to tip the scales a bit and orient us toward prosociality
 554 at the expense of selfishness. It does so by mobilizing our admiration at prosocial
 555 characters and our disgust at antisocial ones—even *supernatural* antagonists like *It*.
 556 Indeed, the novel epitomizes King’s talent for embodying such abstractions as pro-
 557 sociality and antisociality in vivid and engaging characters.

558 5 The Value of King and Directions for Future Research

559 Stephen King’s popularity as a writer of scary stories makes sense from an evolu-
 560 tionary perspective. By constructing immersive stories populated by engaging char-
 561 acters in terrible situations, he provides an entertaining yet instructive experience to
 562 his readers. King thus caters to an evolved desire for imaginative experience with
 563 threat scenarios, and to an evolved desire for vicarious insight into psychological
 564 and social dynamics. A reader absorbed in *It* is likely to come away not just with a
 565 sense of horrified delight at having been immersed in a compelling but frightening
 566 virtual world of friendship, horror, loss, and death, but also with an admiration for
 567 the imaginativeness and prosociality that allow the Losers’ Club to prevail and with
 568 disgust for the dominance-seeking bullies who torment the Losers. Indeed, empiri-
 569 cal research has demonstrated that our values are subtly shaped by the fictional
 570 stories that we consume (Johnson, 2012; Gottschall, 2012). Norm transmission
 571 seems to be a chief function of fiction, and the norms transmitted by King’s stories
 572 are invariably prosocial.

573 King, then, does a lot more than “keep the publishing world afloat,” in Bloom’s
 574 dismissive phrase (2003). King’s best stories do good things in the world. Clearly,
 575 *Carrie* didn’t spell an end to bullying. *The Shining* didn’t abolish parental abuse.
 576 And *Pet Semetary* didn’t put an end to pathological coping with offspring loss. All
 577 the same, those novels, and other King stories, have done more than provide hair-
 578 raising entertainment for their readers. They have helped people understand the dark
 579 forces that roam the psychological as well as the socio-moral world. They have done
 580 so through their powerfully evocative depictions of “ordinary people in extraordi-
 581 nary situations” (King, 2010, p. 365)—of protagonists struggling with social exclu-
 582 sion, destructive ambition, soul-crushing loss, and terrifying forces of evil.

583 I hope to have demonstrated here that an evolutionary perspective can put into
 584 focus the value of King’s *oeuvre*. Even though evolutionary literary study has shown
 585 its explanatory and interpretive value (Carroll, 2018), King has largely escaped the
 586 attention of evolutionary critics. Indeed, “despite being one of the most widely read
 587 authors of all time, King is woefully understudied” (Cowan, 2018). There is plenty
 588 of work left to do for evolutionarily and quantitatively oriented scholars. Future
 589 research might investigate individual King stories from an evolutionary perspective,
 590 or perform systematic studies of agonistic structure in King’s works. It might take
 591 advantage of quantitative methods for hypothesis testing. To give just two examples,
 592 empirically minded scholars might investigate the psychological, behavioral, and

moral effects of King’s stories in controlled experiments. And they might use machine-assisted data analysis of publicly available reader responses (such as the user-generated reviews on Goodreads) to achieve a better understanding of what it is about King’s stories that readers enjoy. Such research would help us understand not just why King is popular, but what the effects of his stories are, and thus provide evidence for or against my claim that the world is a better place with Stephen King in it.

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