# Stephen King, The Art of Fiction No. 189

Interviewed by Nathaniel Rich & Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

ISSUE 178, FALL 2006

Stephen King began this interview in the summer of 2001, two years after he was struck by a minivan while walking near his home in Center Lovell, Maine. He was lucky to have survived the accident, in which he suffered scalp lacerations, a collapsed right lung, and multiple fractures of his right hip and leg. Six pounds of metal that had been implanted in King's body during the initial surgery were removed shortly before the author spoke to *The Paris Review*, and he was still in constant pain. "The orthopedist found all this infected tissue and outraged flesh," said King. "The bursas were sticking right out, like little eyes." The interview was held in Boston, where King, an avid Red Sox fan, had taken up temporary residence to watch his team make its pennant run. Although he was still frail, he was back to writing every day, and by night he would take his manuscript to Fenway Park so that he could edit between innings and during pitching changes.

A second interview session with King was conducted early this year at his winter home in Florida, which happens to be within easy driving distance of the Red Sox's spring training compound in Fort Myers. The house lies at the end of a sandy key, and looks—by virtue of a high vaulted ceiling—something like an overturned sailboat. It was a hot, sunny morning and King sat on his front steps in blue jeans, white sneakers, and a Tabasco hot sauce T-shirt, reading the local newspaper. The day before, the same paper had printed his home address in its business section, and fans had been driving by all morning to get a peek at the world-famous author. "People forget," he said, "I'm a real person."

King was born on September 21, 1947, in Portland, Maine. His father abandoned his family when King was very young, and his mother moved around the country before settling back in Maine—this time in the small inland town of Durham. King's first published story, "I Was a Teenage Grave Robber," appeared in 1965 in a fan magazine called *Comics Review*. Around that time he received a scholarship to attend the University of Maine in Orono, where he met his wife, Tabitha, a novelist with whom he has three children and to whom he is still married. For several years he struggled to support his young family by washing motel linens at a laundry, teaching high-school English, and occasionally selling short stories to men's magazines. Then,

in 1973, he sold his novel *Carrie*, which quickly became a best seller. Since then, King has sold over three hundred million books.

In addition to forty-three novels, King has written eight collections of short stories, eleven screenplays, and two books on the craft of writing, and he is a co-author with Stewart O'Nan of *Faithful*, a day-by-day account of the Red Sox's 2004 championship season. Virtually all of his novels and most of his short stories have been adapted for film or television. Although he was dismissed by critics for much of his career—one *New York Times* review called King "a writer of fairly engaging and preposterous claptrap"—his writing has received greater recognition in recent years, and in 2003 he won the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation. King has also been honored for his devoted efforts to support and promote the work of other authors. In 1997 he received the Writers for Writers Award from *Poets & Writers* magazine, and he was recently selected to edit the 2007 edition of Best American Short Stories.

In person, King has a gracious, funny, sincere manner and speaks with great enthusiasm and candor. He is also a generous host. Halfway through the interview he served lunch: a roasted chicken—which he proceeded to hack at with a frighteningly sharp knife—potato salad, coleslaw, macaroni salad, and, for dessert, key lime pie. When asked what he was currently working on, he stood up and led the way to the beach that runs along his property. He explained that two other houses once stood at the end of the key. One of them collapsed during a storm five years earlier, and bits of wall, furniture, and personal effects still wash ashore at high tide. King is setting his next novel in the other house. It is still standing, though it is abandoned and, undoubtedly, haunted.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you when you started writing?

STEPHEN KING

Believe it or not, I was about six or seven, just copying panels out of comic books and then making up my own stories. I can remember being home from school with tonsillitis and writing stories in bed to pass the time. Film was also a major influence. I loved the movies from the start. I can remember my mother taking me to Radio City Music Hall to see *Bambi*. Whoa, the size of the place, and the forest fire in the movie—it made a big impression. So when I started to write, I had a tendency to write in images because that was all I knew at the time.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin reading adult fiction?

KING

In 1959 probably, after we had moved back to Maine. I would have been twelve, and I was going to this little one-room schoolhouse just up the street from my house. All the grades were in one room, and there was a shithouse out back, which stank. There was no library in town, but every week the state sent a big green van called the bookmobile. You could get three books from the bookmobile and they didn't care

which ones—you didn't have to take out kid books. Up until then what I had been reading was Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and things like that. The first books I picked out were these Ed McBain 87th Precinct novels. In the one I read first, the cops go up to question a woman in this tenement apartment and she is standing there in her slip. The cops tell her to put some clothes on, and she grabs her breast through her slip and squeezes it at them and says, "In your eye, cop!" And I went, Shit! Immediately something clicked in my head. I thought, That's real, that could really happen. That was the end of the Hardy Boys. That was the end of all juvenile fiction for me. It was like, See ya!

INTERVIEWER

But you didn't read popular fiction exclusively.

KING

I didn't know what popular fiction was, and nobody told me at the time. I read a wide range of books. I read *The Call of the Wild* and *The Sea-Wolf* one week, and then *Peyton Place* the next week, and then a week later *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Whatever came to mind, whatever came to hand, I would read. When I read *The Sea-Wolf*, I didn't understand that it was Jack London's critique of Nietzsche, and when I read *McTeague*, I didn't know that was naturalism, that it was Frank Norris saying, You can never win, the system always beats you. But I did understand them on another level. When I read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, I said to myself two things. Number one, if she didn't wake up when that guy fucked her, she must have really been asleep. And number two, a woman couldn't catch a break at that time. That was my introduction to women's lit. I loved that book, so I read a whole bunch of Hardy. But when I read *Jude the Obscure*, that was the end of my Hardy phase. I thought, This is fucking ridiculous. Nobody's life is this bad. Give me a break, you know?

INTERVIEWER

In *On Writing*, you mention how the idea for your first novel, *Carrie*, came to you when you connected two unrelated subjects: adolescent cruelty and telekinesis. Are such unlikely connections often a starting point for you?

KING

Yes, that's happened a lot. When I wrote *Cujo*—about a rabid dog—I was having trouble with my motorcycle, and I heard about a place I could get it fixed. We were living in Bridgton, Maine, which is a resort-type town—a lake community in the western part of the state—but over in the northern part of Bridgton, it's really rough country. There are a lot of farmers just making their own way in the old style. The mechanic had a farmhouse and an auto shop across the road. So I took my motorcycle up there, and when I got it into the yard, it quit entirely. And the biggest Saint Bernard I ever saw in my life came out of that garage, and it came toward me.

Those dogs look horrible anyway, particularly in summer. They've got the dewlaps, and they've got the runny eyes. They don't look like they're well. He started growling at me, way down in his throat: arrrrrrrrrrgggggghhhhhh. At that time I weighed about two hundred and twenty pounds, so I outweighed the dog by maybe ten pounds. The mechanic came out of the garage and said to me, Oh, that's Bowser, or whatever

the dog's name was. It wasn't Cujo. He said, Don't worry about him. He does that to everybody. So I put my hand out to the dog, and the dog went for my hand. The guy had one of those socket wrenches in his hand, and he brought it down on the dog's hindquarters. A steel wrench. It sounded like a rug beater hitting a rug. The dog just yelped once and sat down. And the guy said something to me like, Bowser usually doesn't do this, he must not have liked your face. Right away it's my fault.

I remember how scared I was because there was no place to hide. I was on my bike but it was dead, and I couldn't outrun him. If the man wasn't there with the wrench and the dog decided to attack . . . But that was not a story, it was just a piece of something. A couple of weeks later I was thinking about this Ford Pinto that my wife and I had. It was the first new car we ever owned. We bought it with the Doubleday advance for *Carrie*, twenty-five hundred dollars. We had problems with it right away because there was something wrong with the needle valve in the carburetor. It would stick, the carburetor would flood, and the car wouldn't start. I was worried about my wife getting stuck in that Pinto, and I thought, What if she took that car to get fixed like I did my motorcycle and the needle valve stuck and she couldn't get it going—but instead of the dog just being a mean dog, what if the dog was really crazy?

Then I thought, Maybe it's rabid. That's when something really fired over in my mind. Once you've got that much, you start to see all the ramifications of the story. You say to yourself, Well, why didn't somebody come and rescue her? People live there. It's a farmhouse. Where are they? Well, you say, I don't know, that's the story. Where is her husband? Why didn't her husband come rescue her? I don't know, that's part of the story. What happens if she gets bitten by this dog? And that was going to be part of the story. What if she starts to get rabid? After I got about seventy or eighty pages into the book I found out the incubation period for rabies was too long, so her becoming rabid ceased to be a factor. That's one of the places where the real world intruded on the story. But it's always that way. You see something, then it clicks with something else, and it will make a story. But you never know when it's going to happen.

INTERVIEWER

Are there other sources for your material besides experience?

KING

Sometimes it's other stories. A few years ago I was listening to a book on tape by John Toland called The *Dillinger Days*. One of the stories is about John Dillinger and his friends Homer Van Meter and Jack Hamilton fleeing Little Bohemia, and Jack Hamilton being shot in the back by a cop after crossing the Mississippi River. Then all this other stuff happens to him that Toland doesn't really go into. And I thought, I don't need Toland to tell me what happens, and I don't need to be tied to the truth. These people have legitimately entered the area of American mythology. I'll make up my own shit. So I wrote a story called "The Death of Jack Hamilton."

Or sometimes I'll use film. In *Wolves of the Calla*, one of the seven books in the Dark Tower series, I decided to see if I couldn't retell *Seven Samurai*, that Kurosawa film, and *The Magnificent Seven*. The story is the same, of course, in both cases. It's about these farmers who hire gunslingers to defend their town against bandits, who

keep coming to steal their crops. But I wanted to up the ante a little bit. So in my version, instead of crops, the bandits steal children.

INTERVIEWER

What happens when the real world intrudes, as with the incubation period of rabies in *Cujo*? Do you go back?

KING

You can never bend reality to serve the fiction. You have to bend the fiction to serve reality when you find those things out.

INTERVIEWER

*Cujo* is unusual in that the entire novel is a single chapter. Did you plan that from the start?

KING

No, *Cujo* was a standard novel in chapters when it was created. But I can remember thinking that I wanted the book to feel like a brick that was heaved through your window at you. I've always thought that the sort of book that I do—and I've got enough ego to think that every novelist should do this—should be a kind of personal assault. It ought to be somebody lunging right across the table and grabbing you and messing you up. It should get in your face. It should upset you, disturb you. And not just because you get grossed out. I mean, if I get a letter from somebody saying, I couldn't eat my dinner, my attitude is, Terrific!

INTERVIEWER

What do you think it is that we're afraid of?

KING

I don't think there's anything that I'm not afraid of, on some level. But if you mean, What are *we* afraid of, as humans? Chaos. The outsider. We're afraid of change. We're afraid of disruption, and that is what I'm interested in. I mean, there are a lot of people whose writing I really love—one of them is the American poet Philip Booth—who write about ordinary life straight up, but I just can't do that.

I once wrote a short novel called "The Mist." It's about this mist that rolls in and covers a town, and the story follows a number of people who are trapped in a supermarket. There's a woman in the checkout line who's got this box of mushrooms. When she walks to the window to see the mist coming in, the manager takes them from her. And she tells him, "Give me back my mushies."

We're terrified of disruption. We're afraid that somebody's going to steal our mushrooms in the checkout line.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say then that this fear is the main subject of your fiction?

KING

I'd say that what I do is like a crack in the mirror. If you go back over the books from *Carrie* on up, what you see is an observation of ordinary middle-class American life as it's lived at the time that particular book was written. In every life you get to a point where you have to deal with something that's inexplicable to you, whether it's the doctor saying you have cancer or a prank phone call. So whether you talk about ghosts or vampires or Nazi war criminals living down the block, we're still talking about the same thing, which is an intrusion of the extraordinary into ordinary life and how we deal with it. What that shows about our character and our interactions with others and the society we live in interests me a lot more than monsters and vampires and ghouls and ghosts.

INTERVIEWER

In *On Writing*, that's how you define popular fiction: fiction in which readers recognize aspects of their own experience—behavior, place, relationships, and speech. In your work, do you consciously set out to capture a specific moment in time?

KING

No, but I don't try to avoid it. Take *Cell*. The idea came about this way: I came out of a hotel in New York and I saw this woman talking on her cell phone. And I thought to myself, What if she got a message over the cell phone that she couldn't resist, and she had to kill people until somebody killed her? All the possible ramifications started bouncing around in my head like pinballs. If everybody got the same message, then everybody who had a cell phone would go crazy. Normal people would see this, and the first thing they would do would be to call their friends and families on their cell phones. So the epidemic would spread like poison ivy. Then, later, I was walking down the street and I see some guy who is apparently a crazy person yelling to himself. And I want to cross the street to get away from him. Except he's not a bum; he's dressed in a suit. Then I see he's got one of these plugs in his ear and he's talking into his cell phone. And I thought to myself, I really want to write this story.

It was an instant concept. Then I read a lot about the cell-phone business and started to look at the cell-phone towers. So it's a very current book, but it came out of a concern about the way we talk to each other today.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think *Cell*, because of its timeliness, might look dated in ten years?

KING

It might. I'm sure other books, like *Firestarter* for instance, look antique now. But that doesn't bother me. One hopes that the stories and the characters stand out. And even the antique things have a certain value.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think about which of your books will last?

KING

It’s a crapshoot. You never know who’s going to be popular in fifty years. Who is going to be in, in a literary sense, and who’s not. If I had to predict which of my books people will pick up a hundred years from now, if they pick up any, I’d begin with *The Stand* and *The Shining*. And *’Salem’s Lot*—because people like vampire stories, and its premise is the classic vampire story. It doesn’t have any particular bells or whistles. It’s not fancy, it’s just scary. So I think people will pick that up for a while.

INTERVIEWER

When you look back on your novels, do you group them in any way?

KING

I do two different kinds of books. I think of books like *The Stand*, *Desperation*, and the Dark Tower series as books that go out. Then there are books like *Pet Sematary*, *Misery*, *The Shining*, and *Dolores Claiborne* that go in. Fans usually will either like the outies or they’ll like the innies. But they won’t like both.

INTERVIEWER

But even in the more supernatural books the horror is psychological, right? It’s not just the bogeyman jumping out from behind a corner. So couldn’t they all be characterized as innies?

KING

Well, my categorization is also about character, and the number of characters. Innies tend to be about one person and go deeper and deeper into a single character. *Lisey’s Story*, my new novel, is an innie, for instance, because it’s a long book and there are only a few characters, but a book like *Cell* is an outie because there are a lot of people and it’s about friendship and it’s kind of a road story. *Gerald’s Game* is the innie-est of all the innie books. It’s about only one person, Jessie, who’s been handcuffed naked to her bed. The little things all get so big—the glass of water, and her trying to get the shelf above the bed to tip up so she can escape. Going into that book, I remember thinking that Jessie would have been some sort of gymnast at school, and at the end of it she would simply put her feet back over her head, over the bedstead, and wind up standing up. About forty pages into writing it, I said to myself, I’d better see if this works. So I got my son—I think it was Joe because he’s the more limber of the two boys—and I took him into our bedroom. I tied him with scarves to the bedposts. My wife came in and said, What are you doing? And I said, I’m doing an experiment, never mind.

Joe tried to do it, but he couldn’t. He said, My joints don’t work that way. And again, it’s what I was talking about with the rabies in *Cujo*. I’m saying, Jesus Christ! This isn’t going to work! And the only thing you can do at that point is say, Well, I could make her double-jointed. Then you go, Yeah, right, that’s not fair.

*Misery* was just two characters in a bedroom, but *Gerald’s Game* goes that one better—one character in a bedroom. I was thinking that eventually there’s going to be another book that will just be called “Bedroom.” There won’t be any characters at all.

INTERVIEWER

Mark Singer wrote in *The New Yorker* that you lost part of your audience with *Cujo* and *Pet Sematary* and *Gerald's Game* because those novels were too painful for readers to bear. Do you think that's actually the case?

KING

I think that I lost some readers at various points. It was just a natural process of attrition, that's all. People go on, they find other things. Though I also think that I have changed as a writer over the years, in the sense that I'm not providing exactly the same level of escape that *'Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, or even *The Stand* does. There are people out there who would have been perfectly happy had I died in 1978, the people who come to me and say, Oh, you never wrote a book as good as *The Stand*. I usually tell them how depressing it is to hear them say that something you wrote twenty-eight years ago was your best book. Dylan probably hears the same thing about *Blonde on Blonde*. But you try to grow as a writer and not just do the same thing over and over again, because there's absolutely no point to that.

And I can afford to lose fans. That sounds totally conceited, but I don't mean it that way: I can lose half of my fan base and still have enough to live on very comfortably. I've had the freedom to follow my own course, which is great. I might have lost some fans, but I might've gained some too.

INTERVIEWER

You have written a lot about children. Why is that?

KING

I wrote a lot about children for a couple of reasons. I was fortunate to sell my writing fairly young, and I married young and had children young. Naomi was born in 1971, Joe was born in 1972, and Owen was born in 1977—a six-year spread between three kids. So I had a chance to observe them at a time when a lot of my contemporaries were out dancing to KC and the Sunshine Band. I feel that I got the better part of that deal. Raising the kids was a lot more rewarding than pop culture in the seventies.

So I didn't know KC and the Sunshine Band, but I did know my kids inside out. I was in touch with the anger and exhaustion that you can feel. And those things went into the books because they were what I knew at that time. What has found its way into a lot of the recent books is pain, and people who have injuries, because that's what I know right now. Ten years from now maybe it will be something else, if I'm still around.

INTERVIEWER

Bad things happen to children in *Pet Sematary*. Where did that come from?

KING

That book was pretty personal. Everything in it—up to the point where the little boy is killed in the road—everything is true. We moved into that house by the road. It was Orrington instead of Ludlow, but the big trucks did go by, and the old guy across the street did say, You just want to watch 'em around the road. We did go out in the field. We flew kites. We did go up and look at the pet cemetery. I did find my daughter's cat, Smucky, dead in the road, run over. We buried him up in the pet cemetery, and I did

hear Naomi out in the garage the night after we buried him. I heard all these popping noises—she was jumping up and down on packing material. She was crying and saying, Give me my cat back! Let God have his own cat! I just dumped that right into the book. And Owen really did go charging for the road. He was this little guy, probably two years old. I'm yelling, Don't do that! And of course he runs faster and laughs, because that's what they do at that age. I ran after him and gave him a flying tackle and pulled him down on the shoulder of the road, and a truck just thundered by him. So all of that went into the book.

And then you say to yourself, You have to go a little bit further. If you're going to take on this grieving process—what happens when you lose a kid—you ought to go all the way through it. And I did. I'm proud of that because I followed it all the way through, but it was so gruesome by the end of it, and so awful. I mean, there's no hope for anybody at the end of that book. Usually I give my drafts to my wife Tabby to read, but I didn't give it to her. When I finished I put it in the desk and just left it there. I worked on *Christine*, which I liked a lot better, and which was published before *Pet Sematary*.

INTERVIEWER

Was *The Shining* also based on personal experience? Did you ever stay in that hotel?

KING

Yes, the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado. My wife and I went up there in October. It was their last weekend of the season, so the hotel was almost completely empty. They asked me if I could pay cash because they were taking the credit card receipts back down to Denver. I went past the first sign that said, Roads may be closed after November 1, and I said, Jeez, there's a story up here.

INTERVIEWER

What did you think of Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of the book?

KING

Too cold. No sense of emotional investment in the family whatsoever on his part. I felt that the treatment of Shelley Duvall as Wendy—I mean, talk about insulting to women. She's basically a scream machine. There's no sense of her involvement in the family dynamic at all. And Kubrick didn't seem to have any idea that Jack Nicholson was playing the same motorcycle psycho that he played in all those biker films he did —*Hells Angels on Wheels*, *The Wild Ride*, *The Rebel Rousers*, and *Easy Rider*. The guy is crazy. So where is the tragedy if the guy shows up for his job interview and he's already bonkers? No, I hated what Kubrick did with that.

INTERVIEWER

Did you work with him on the movie?

KING

No. My screenplay for *The Shining* became the basis for the television miniseries later on. But I doubt Kubrick ever read it before making his film. He knew what he wanted

to do with the story, and he hired the novelist Diane Johnson to write a draft of the screenplay based on what he wanted to emphasize. Then he redid it himself. I was really disappointed.

It's certainly beautiful to look at: gorgeous sets, all those Steadicam shots. I used to call it a Cadillac with no engine in it. You can't do anything with it except admire it as sculpture. You've taken away its primary purpose, which is to tell a story. The basic difference that tells you all you need to know is the ending. Near the end of the novel, Jack Torrance tells his son that he loves him, and then he blows up with the hotel. It's a very passionate climax. In Kubrick's movie, he freezes to death.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your earlier books ended with explosions, which allowed you to tie various plot strands together. But in recent stories and novels, like "Riding the Bullet" and *Cell*, you seem to have moved away from this. Your endings leave many questions unanswered.

KING

There is a pretty big bang at the end of *Cell*. But it's true, I get a lot of angry letters from readers about it. They want to know what happens next. My response now is to tell people, You guys sound like Teddy and Vern in *Stand by Me*, after Gordie tells them the story about Lardass and the pie-eating contest and how it was the best revenge a kid ever had. Teddy says, "Then what happened?" And Gordie says, "What do you mean, what happened? That's the end." And Teddy says, "Why don't you make it so that Lardass goes and he shoots his father, then he runs away and he joins the Texas Rangers?" Gordie says, "Ah, I don't know." So with *Cell*, the end is the end. But so many people wrote me about it that I finally had to write on my Web site, "It seems pretty obvious to me that things turned out well for Clay's son, Johnny." Actually, it never crossed my mind that Johnny wouldn't be OK.

INTERVIEWER

Really? I wasn't sure the kid was OK.

KING

Yeah, I actually believe that, man. I'm a fucking optimist!

INTERVIEWER

It's amazing that, in the introduction or afterword to many of your books, you regularly solicit feedback from your readers. Why do you ask for more letters?

KING

I'm always interested in what my readers think, and I'm aware that many of them want to participate in the story. I don't have a problem with that, just so long as they understand that what they think isn't necessarily going to change what I do. That is, I'm never going to say, I've got this story, here it is. Now here's a poll. How do you think I should end it?

INTERVIEWER

How important are your surroundings when you write?

KING

It's nice to have a desk, a comfortable chair so you're not shifting around all the time, and enough light. Wherever you write is supposed to be a little bit of a refuge, a place where you can get away from the world. The more closed in you are, the more you're forced back on your own imagination. I mean, if I were near a window, I'd be OK for a while, but then I'd be checking out the girls on the street and who's getting in and out of the cars and, you know, just the little street-side stories that are going on all the time: what's this one up to, what's that one selling?

My study is basically just a room where I work. I have a filing system. It's very complex, very orderly. With "Duma Key"—the novel I'm working on now—I've actually codified the notes to make sure I remember the different plot strands. I write down birth dates to figure out how old characters are at certain times. Remember to put a rose tattoo on this one's breast, remember to give Edgar a big workbench by the end of February. Because if I do something wrong now, it becomes such a pain in the ass to fix later.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned wanting your study to feel like a refuge, but don't you also like to listen to loud music when you work?

KING

Not anymore. When I sit down to write, my job is to move the story. If there is such a thing as pace in writing, and if people read me because they're getting a story that's paced a certain way, it's because they sense I want to get to where I'm going. I don't want to dawdle around and look at the scenery. To achieve that pace I used to listen to music. But I was younger then, and frankly my brains used to work better than they do now. Now I'll only listen to music at the end of a day's work, when I roll back to the beginning of what I did that day and go over it on the screen. A lot of times the music will drive my wife crazy because it will be the same thing over and over and over again. I used to have a dance mix of that song "Mambo No. 5," by Lou Bega, that goes, "A little bit of Monica in my life, a little bit of Erica"—deega, deega, deega. It's a cheerful, calypso kind of thing, and my wife came upstairs one day and said, Steve, one more time . . . you die! So I'm not really listening to the music—it's just something there in the background.

But even more than place, I think it's important to try to work every day that you possibly can.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write this morning?

KING

I did. I wrote four pages. That's what it's come to. I used to write two thousand words a day and sometimes even more. But now it's just a paltry thousand words a day.

INTERVIEWER

You use a computer?

KING

Yes, but I've occasionally gone back to longhand—with *Dreamcatcher* and with *Bag of Bones*—because I wanted to see what would happen. It changed some things. Most of all, it made me slow down because it takes a long time. Every time I started to write something, some guy up here, some lazybones is saying, Aw, do we have to do that? I've still got a little bit of that scholar's bump on my finger from doing all that longhand. But it made the rewriting process a lot more felicitous. It seemed to me that my first draft was more polished, just because it wasn't possible to go so fast. You can only drive your hand along at a certain speed. It felt like the difference between, say, rolling along in a powered scooter and actually hiking the countryside.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do once you finish a first draft?

KING

It's good to give the thing at least six weeks to sit and breathe. But I don't always have that luxury. I didn't have it with *Cell*. The publisher had two manuscripts of mine. One of them was *Lisey's Story*, which I had been working on exclusively for a long time, and the other was *Cell*, which I had been thinking about for a long time, and it just sort of announced itself: It's time, you have to do it now. When that happens, you have to do it or let it go, so *Cell* was like my unplanned pregnancy.

INTERVIEWER

You mean you wrote *Cell* in the middle of writing *Lisey's Story*?

KING

I was carrying both of them at the same time for a while. I had finished a first draft of *Lisey*, so I revised it at night and worked on *Cell*during the day. I used to work that way when I was drinking. During the day I would work on whatever was fresh and new, and I was pretty much straight as an arrow. Hung over a lot of the time, but straight. At night I'd be looped, and that's when I would revise. It was fun, it was great, and it seemed to work for me for a long time, but I can't sustain that anymore.

I wanted to publish *Lisey* first, but Susan Moldow, Scribner's publisher, wanted to lead with *Cell* because she thought the attention it would receive would benefit the sale of *Lisey*. So they put *Cell* on a fast track, and I had to go right to work on the rewrite. This is one thing publishers can do now, which isn't always necessarily good for the book.

INTERVIEWER

Can't you tell them no?

KING

Yes, but in this case it was actually the right thing to do, and it was a huge success. *Cell* was an unusual case though. You know, Graham Greene used to talk about books that were novels and books that were entertainments. Cell was an entertainment. I don't want to say I didn't care, because I did—I care about anything that goes out with my name on it. If you're going to do the work and if someone is going to pay you for it, I think you ought to do the best job that you can. But after I finished the first draft of *Lisey*, I gave myself six weeks. When you return to a novel after that amount of time, it seems almost as if a different person wrote it. You're not quite as wedded to it. You find all sorts of horrible errors, but you also find passages that make you say, Jesus, that's good!

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever do extensive rewrites?

KING

One of the ways the computer has changed the way I work is that I have a much greater tendency to edit "in the camera"—to make changes on the screen. With *Cell* that's what I did. I read it over, I had editorial corrections, I was able to make my own corrections, and to me that's like ice skating. It's an OK way to do the work, but it isn't optimal. With *Lisey* I had the copy beside the computer and I created blank documents and retyped the whole thing. To me that's like swimming, and that's preferable. It's like you're writing the book over again. It is literally a rewriting.

Every book is different each time you revise it. Because when you finish the book, you say to yourself, This isn't what I meant to write at all. At some point, when you're actually writing the book, you realize that. But if you try to steer it, you're like a pitcher trying to steer a fastball, and you screw everything up. As the science-fiction writer Alfred Bester used to say, The book is the boss. You've got to let the book go where it wants to go, and you just follow along. If it doesn't do that, it's a bad book. And I've had bad books. I think *Rose Madder* fits in that category, because it never really took off. I felt like I had to force that one.

INTERVIEWER

Who edits your novels, and how much are they edited?

KING

Chuck Verrill has edited a lot of the books, and he can be a very hard editor. At Scribner, Nan Graham edited *Lisey*, and she gave me an entirely different look, partially because it's about a woman, and she's a woman, and also because she just came to the job fresh. She went over that book heavily. There's a scene late in the book where Lisey goes to visit her sister, Amanda, at a nuthouse where she's been committed. Originally there was a long scene in which Lisey stops at Amanda's house on her way there, and then Lisey ends up coming back later with her sister. Nan said, You need to reconfigure this section, you need to take out this first stop at Amanda's house because it slows down the narrative and it's not necessary.

I don't think it's me, I don't think it's a best-seller thing, I think it's a writer thing, and it goes across the board—it never changes—but my first thought was, She can't tell me that. She doesn't know. She's not a writer. She doesn't understand my genius!

And then I say, Well, try it. And I say that especially loud, because I've reached a point in my career where I can have it any goddamn way I want to, if I want to. If you get popular enough, they give you all the rope you want. You can hang yourself in Times Square if you want to, and I've done it. Particularly in the days when I was doping and drinking all the time, I did what I wanted. And that included telling editors to go screw themselves.

INTERVIEWER

So if Cell is an "entertainment," which of your books would you put in the other category?

KING

They should all be entertainments, you know. That is, in some ways, the nub of the problem. If a novel is not an entertainment, I don't think it's a successful book. But if you talk about the novels that work on more than one level, I would say *Misery*, *Dolores Claiborne*, and *It*. When I started to work on *It*, which bounces back and forth between the characters' lives as children and then as adults, I realized that I was writing about the way we use our imaginations at different points in our lives. I love that book, and it's one of those books that sells steadily. People really respond to it. I get a lot of letters from people who say, I wish there were more of it. And I say, Oh my God, it's so long as it is.

I think that *It* is the most Dickensian of my books because of its wide range of characters and intersecting stories. The novel manages a lot of complexity in an effortless way that I often wish I could rediscover. *Lisey's Story* is that way. It's very long. It has a number of interlocking stories that seem to be woven together effortlessly. But I'm shy talking about this, because I'm afraid people will laugh and say, Look at that barbarian trying to pretend he belongs in the palace. Whenever this subject comes up, I always cover up.

INTERVIEWER

When you accepted the National Book Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, you gave a speech defending popular fiction, and you listed a number of authors who you felt were underappreciated by the literary establishment. Then Shirley Hazzard, that year's award winner in fiction, got on stage and dismissed your argument pretty flatly.

KING

What Shirley Hazzard said was, I don't think we need a reading list from you. If I had a chance to say anything in rebuttal, I would have said, With all due respect, we do. I think that Shirley, in a way, has proven my point. The keepers of the idea of serious literature have a short list of authors who are going to be allowed inside, and too often that list is drawn from people who know people, who go to certain schools, who come up through certain channels of literature. And that's a very bad idea—it's constraining for the growth of literature. This is a critical time for American letters because it's under attack from so many other media: TV, movies, the Internet, and all the different ways we have of getting nonprint input to feed the imagination. Books, that old way of transmitting stories, are under attack. So when someone like Shirley Hazzard says, I

Want to keep reading?
Subscribe and save nearly 40%.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Already a subscriber? Sign in below.

Email address

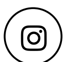
Password

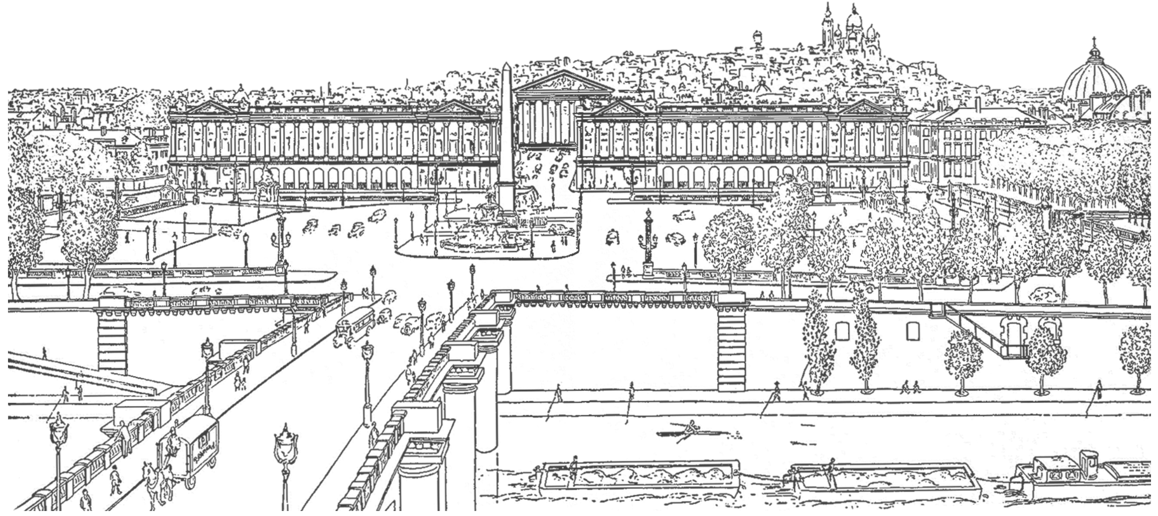
SIGN IN

Remember me

Link your subscription

Forgot password?





©2022 THE PARIS REVIEW. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED