

The King and His Minions: Thoughts of a TWILIGHT ZONE Reviewer

“The time has been,” Macbeth reminisces in Act V, “my senses would have cool’d to hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir as life were in it.” Read a few too many dismal treatises, however, and you may find, along with Macbeth, that: “I have sup-p’d full with horrors; direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, cannot once start me.”

It may be, however, that this disclaimer, coming just before his “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” speech, is the theatrical equivalent to the obligatory false alarm in every horror movie when the cat leaps out from behind the curtains and we all shriek, and then have to laugh to reassure ourselves that “It’s only the cat!”—though we know quite well that there is enough direness ahead of us to cool our senses to freezing. Not only such basic physical direness as death, disease, the frailty and corruption of the flesh, the hunger of various predators, and the dangers posed by psychopaths at loose after dark, but the further, horrible suspicion that the social system we are necessarily a part of, which is supposed to keep these dangers at bay, may instead have formed some kind of unholy alliance with them—the suspicion, to put it another way, that Macbeth may be the person who’s answering the phone when we dial 911.

Those would seem to be enough different varieties of direness to guarantee some degree of timeliness and universality to the genre of the horror story. This plentitude explains why the range of the horror story, in terms of literary sophistication, should be wider than that of any other literary genre, running the gamut from the elemental night-shrieking nastiness of EC Comics to the highbrow frissons of James’s *The Turn of the Screw* or Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Horror, like his brother Death, is an equal opportunity employer.

To the degree that a theme is universal, it is in proportion exploitable, and the proliferation of schlock horror novels in the wake of such box office successes as *The Omen* series, et al., is hardly to be wondered at. So long as there are rustics to buy ballad-sheets there will be balladeers to supply them, though as the mean reading speed of the audience and the technology of printing have both greatly advanced in recent centuries, it’s not ballad-sheets that are hawked nowadays but paperback originals.

Without dwelling on the easy irony of the word “original,” let’s take a quick peek inside a recent 329-page ballad-sheet brought out by Pocket Books, *The Deathstone*, by Ken Eulo, author of *The Bloodstone* and *The Brownstone* (and doubtless, if the market holds up, of *The Headstone*, *The Whetstone*, and *The Rhinestone*). There is nothing intrinsically unworkable in the book’s premise of a small town keeping up the pagan tradition of human sacrifice: it’s done yeoman service for Shirley Jackson’s story “The Lottery,” and the movie *The Wicker Man*. Horror stories are usually reenactments of favorite myths. What sinks Eulo’s book to the rock-bottom of the sophistication spectrum (from savvy to sappy) is the style of his reenactment, a style that is equal parts soap-opera mawkish and button-pushing portentous, graduating to dithering hysteria for the big moments:

They were circling the fire now, dancing in a madman’s frenzy, delirium, their huge animal heads weaving in and out of shadows. The fire blazed up with a roar, sending a column of red flames soaring. They moaned and wailed and shouted. Even though the words were unintelligible, Ron felt that their hideous shrieks were like a hand held toward him, a handshake with death.

Don’t worry though, kids. Ron doesn’t die. He saves Chandal and little Kristy from the Widow Wheatley and the other wicked Satanists and returns to his talent agency in Hollywood.

If there is one key to prejudging books and consigning them, half-read, to the holocaust, it must be Style, and “Style” is the single word most likely to provoke hack writers and hack readers to postures of defense. Storytelling and yarn-spinning are simple, wholesome crafts, they would aver, to which questions of Style are irrelevant. Style is to be left to stylists, like Hemingway or Faulkner or Joyce, the writers you have to read in school.

Nonsense. Style is simply a way of handling yourself in prose so as to signal to an attentive reader that she is in the presence of someone possessed of honesty, wit, sophistication, irony, compassion, or whatever other attributes one looks for in a person to whom one is about to give over n-many hours of one’s mental life. People who insist otherwise usually have mental halitosis.

Which is why I think it’s fair for reviewers to indicate which books they have found unreadable. Otherwise the longest, dullest, worst books would only be reviewed by people able to read them, i.e., unable or unwilling to recognize their gross defects. Only creative writing teachers

would review John Gardner. Only Scientologists and veterans of the Golden Age of science fiction would review *Battlefield Earth*. Only authors' friends would review, say, such a book as John Shirley's *Cellars*. And publishers would come to think that no one ever actually noticed what they were doing.

I might suggest burning *Cellars*, though, as it's a paperback, it will yield at most only enough heat to roast some marshmallows. The tell-tale elements are a willingness to fill a blank space with any cliché that comes to mind ("like a thundering symphony"), an urge to dress up the text with portentous guff ("And the sage remembers"), a merciless determination to recycle said guff, and an emotional sympathy lavished exclusively upon the first-person singular. To these attractions the novel proper adds a couple wheelbarrowfuls of standard-issue splatter-movie grue ("A woman spread-eagled on her back. Her blouse had been torn away. . . . Her breasts had been symmetrically quartered like fruit sections in salad"), and a misogynistic regard for the fair sex to a degree that makes Mickey Spillane look like a radical feminist—all smoothed over with mystic mummeries so false they're probably intended as comic relief, as when our hero explains to the Keystone Kops the killing style associated with the mayhem quoted above: "The lettering on the circle looks like ancient Persian to me, and I suspect the ritual has something to do with the demon Ahriman." Ah so!

So *Cellars* goes, the grue alternating with the hokum for 295 pages of prose that is 85 percent pulp padding and 15 percent amplified scream (under another hat Shirley is the head of a punk rock group called *Obsession*). There is, I admit, an aesthetic to screaming, and Shirley's shriller screams can get to your crystal ware, but screaming is, as a general rule, less effective on the printed page than in rock music, where the silly lyrics are blessedly incomprehensible and the beat goes on. Novels, alas, don't have a rhythm section to keep them moving—so when the pages refuse to turn: burn, baby, burn.

Let me state clearly here that I am not disparaging "escapist reading" in order to promote "serious literature." I have a keen appetite for entertainment novels of all kinds. For some readers, it may be, the very unnaturalness and ineptitude of the lower grade of occult novels are welcome distancing devices from what might otherwise be too scary, too close for comfort. For them, mustache-twirling villainy and dime-store Halloween masks serve the same sanitizing function that the code of genteel taste serves for readers of more middlebrow spinemasseurs (tinglers they're not), such as Jonathan Carroll's *Voice of Our Shadow*, a preppy ghost story

as decorously conventional and capably tailored as a Brooks Brothers suit. Carroll just doesn't believe in ghosts, and his disbelief is contagious. But does anyone believe in ghosts, after all?

Spiritualism flourished in the nineteenth century and lingered into the early decades of the twentieth. Since it was the chief tenet of spiritualist faith that there *are* ghosts, many writers of ghost stories in those years expropriated for their own use much of the spiritualists' genteel intellectual baggage. This new breed of ghosts were not specters of the damned, like Hamlet's father, nor bleedin' 'orrors, beloved by readers of the penny dreadfuls. They were, instead, Lost Souls—most in transit to the Other Side, confused about but not necessarily ill-disposed toward creatures of the flesh.

Under this new dispensation, ghosts were domesticated and made to conform to the decorous tastes of a middle-class, middlebrow audience. In the American pulps there was still full-frontal ghastliness, but British ghosts were expected to comport themselves like ordinary people. When an ex-wife wished to haunt her faithless husband (as in Mary Treadgold's "The Telephone"), her reproaches were conveyed over the phone, in what we must imagine to be a subdued tone. The theory is that ghosts are credible in proportion to the gentility of their manners. The brush of a sleeve, a stifled sigh—these are to be the stuff of horror, and in the hands of a good writer they serve very well. The greatest of all ghost stories, James's *The Turn of the Screw*, doesn't bother with horrid shrieks and rattled chains.

Yet if they were on their oaths, I'm sure most of the best ghost-story writers would admit that their ghosts are symbols of Something Else. Which is a roundabout way of saying that, finally, Eulo and Shirley and Carroll (and unnumbered others) fail for this reason—a reluctance to make eye contact with their fears. Instead of real horrors to sup upon, with meat and maggots on their bones, they offer plastic skeletons.

Stephen King is another matter. He has enjoyed his success precisely because he's remained true to his own clearest sense of what is fearful, fearfulest, fearfulest. What King fears is his own and other people's capacity for cruelty and brutality, madness, loneliness, disease, pain, and death: men, women, most forms of animal life, and the weather. When King introduces supernatural or paranormal elements into his tales it is as a stand-in for one of the above-mentioned "natural" fears. Thus, Carrie's telekinetic powers in his first novel are emblematic of the force of a long-stifled anger erupting into rage, and the horror of *Salem's Lot* is that of witnessing the archetypal Our Town of Rockwell, Wilder, and Bradbury electing Dracula as mayor and appointing his wives to the Board of Education.

King's *Different Seasons* is a collection of four quite separate tales, only one of which (and that, thankfully, the shortest) failed to shiver my timbers perceptibly—though King has throughout *Different Seasons* kept to the hither side of the natural/supernatural divide. The other three, in ascending order of both length and personal preference, are: “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption,” a quietly paranoid curtain-raiser that persuaded me *never* to be framed for murder and sentenced to life imprisonment; “The Body,” a vivid if sometimes self-consciously “serious” account of the rites of passage practiced by the aboriginal teenagers of Maine’s lower-middle class (and a telling pendant to the novel *Salem’s Lot*); finally, the hands-down winner of the four and, I think, King’s most accomplished piece of fiction at any length, “Apt Pupil.” (In his book’s afterword, King complains about the difficulty of publishing novellas of twenty-five thousand to thirty-five thousand words. Yet “The Body” and “Apt Pupil” are, respectively, double those lengths, and even the shorter tale would have made a weightier book than Carroll’s *Voice of Our Shadow*. I don’t mean to look a gift horse in the mouth, only to point out that *Different Seasons* is more nearly a collection of novels than of stories.)

The premise for “Apt Pupil” could scarcely be simpler. A bright, all-American thirteen-year-old discovers that one of his suburban neighbors is the infamous Kurt Dussander, commandant of a Nazi death camp. Instead of reporting Dussander to the police, this paragon of the eighth grade begins to blackmail him—not for money but just “to hear about it”:

“Hear about it?” Dussander echoed. He looked utterly perplexed.

Todd leaned forward, tanned elbows on bluejeaned knees. “Sure. The firing squads. The gas chambers. The ovens. The guys who had to dig their own graves and then stand on the ends so they’d fall into them. The . . .” His tongue came out and wetted his lips. “The examinations. The experiments. Everything. All the gooshy stuff.”

Dussander stared at him with a certain amazed detachment, the way a veterinarian might stare at a cat who was giving birth to a succession of two-headed kittens. “You are a monster,” he said softly.

To tell more of how this oddest of all couples leapfrog down the road to damnation would be a disservice to anyone who hasn’t yet read the book. I’m told by those who have a hand on the pulse of sf and fantasy fandom that “Apt Pupil” has not been exactly taken to the hearts of King’s usually quite faithful subjects. I can only suppose that this is a tribute to how closely it cuts to the bone. Surely, in terms simply of generating suspense and keeping the plot twisting, “Apt Pupil” cannot be faulted. I hope Losey

gets to make the movie, or that Hitchcock could return from the grave for just one more production. Not since *Strangers on a Train* has there been a plot so perfectly suited to his passion for ethical symmetries.

As I write this, Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* has already been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for ten weeks. The considerable interest (and ultimate failure) of *Pet Sematary* is directly related to the themes I've been dealing with above. The story concerns a doctor disordered by his grief for a loved child, and who succumbs to the temptation of "resurrecting" the child by interring its corpse in an Indian burial ground that has the spectral property of reanimating the dead. King does his usual skillful job of seducing us into accepting his unlikely story, and at the same time creates an atmosphere drenched in the fear of death. One would have to be a very guileless reader indeed not to foresee that the author has doomed his hero's child to an early death. The real element of suspense is how the child will behave in its resurrected state, and King's answer is to have the little zombie go on a rampage of homicide and dirty talk that is like watching a cassette of *The Exorcist* on fast-forward. My objection to this denouement is neither to its strain on credibility nor to its mayhem, but to the way it fails to carry forward, still less to resolve, the novel's so powerfully stated themes—the human need to believe, at any cost, in an after-life, a need that can drive those who lack the safety valve of a religious faith to such bizarre excesses as spiritualism.

King's opting for a conventional splatter-movie resolution to the question "What if the dead were to live again?" is all the more regrettable, since in the figure of Church, a zombified cat, he has prefigured a possibility that is both more harrowing and more pertinent to the central themes of loss and grief, though in Church's case it is the loss of those vital energies that together constitute the soul. From having been the beau ideal of cattiness, Church degenerates into a sluggish, surly scavenger; not at all a demonic cat, just spoiled meat. If the dead child had returned from the grave similarly disensouled, the horror would have been infinitely greater, because that loss would be a vivid correlative to a parental fear of a fate truly worse than death, the fear that one's child may be severely mentally impaired.

It's doubtful, of course, whether the public wants to be harrowed. The blustering denouement King does provide is reassuring to readers precisely to the degree that it's conventional; it's King's way of telling us not to be upset: it was only a ghost story, after all.

Part of the problem is simply that ghost stories are by their nature short, since the psychology of most literary ghosts is simple in the

extreme: they want to getcha. “Dark fantasy” (Charles L. Grant’s high-toned euphemism for “horror stories”; thus undertakers become “grief counselors” and garbagemen “sanitary engineers”) is a traditional rather than an experimental or innovative art form, as much a ritual as a form of literature, and its “devotees” bring to bear criteria of judgment that have less to do with criticism than with incantation and magic. The old ways must not be departed from, nor any traditional rite omitted.

There are undeniable advantages to playing the game by the rules. Geniuses may fly in the face of tradition, but when their epigones attempt to follow them, the result is likely to lack both the strength of conventional post-and-lintel construction and the energy of first defiance. Traditional values in fiction (a strong plot, believable characters, flowing prose) are a safeguard against major debacle in much the way that wearing evening clothes protects one against sartorial solecisms. They offer, as do the sonnet and the sonata form, the aesthetic satisfaction of tight closure. But the chief virtue of a traditional narrative, for most readers, is surely that it is *comfortable*, like a couch one has lived with many years and that has learned the shape of one’s head. Since horror stories must deal with subjects that are inherently disquieting, this observance of aesthetic decorums (“Once upon a time”) helps defuse—or at least distance—feelings that could be genuinely dangerous, if given a less circumscribed expression.

At his best, Stephen King has shown himself capable of combining the frissons of the supernatural thriller with the weightier stuff of tragedy, but in the present instance he has decided to sidestep that harder task and just lay on the special effects till he’s spent his budget of potential victims. I hope it doesn’t represent a long-term decision.

In the two-and-a-fraction years that I reviewed for *Twilight Zone* magazine, I was able to divide my column inches about equally between the genres of science fiction and horror, with occasional forays outside those adjoining ghettos, but I confess that I found less and less of it that I could read with pleasure, interest, or vigorous dissent. In the case of horror fiction, this is probably not to be wondered at. Being by definition limited to the evocation of a single emotion, and by hoary convention to a few traditional narrative themes, a steady diet of the stuff is calculated to produce an eventual toxic reaction. As well give all one’s musical attention to oboe concerti.

Even in science fiction, while its potential may be undiminished, the actual stuff that sees print has been (with some honorable exceptions) more tepid, more formulaic, and more ill-written than at any time since

its last cyclic nadir in the late fifties and early sixties. In part it's the publishers who are to be blamed; they manufacture a product suitable for the most reliable part of their market, the proverbial Lowest Common Denominator, who are, not to put too fine a point on it, dopes, or if that seems too harsh, let us say they suffer from reading dysfunctions.

There has been increasingly louder lamentation in the publishing industry during the last few years over the fate of what is euphemistically called midlist fiction, by which is meant novels not likely to become best-sellers. Most fiction of any quality nowadays falls into this midlist category, as witness the now virtually total disparity between the books the *New York Times Book Review* commends to our attention and those that fill its hardcover and paperback bestseller lists. Consider the sf titles on the *Times* list for the week of, say, January 9, 1983. There is *The E.T. Storybook*, titles by Clarke and Asimov (I won't rehash my dissatisfaction with *Foundation's Edge* and *2010* except to say I found the plots of both books numbingly predictable and the wattage of the prose varying between sixty and fifteen), a prehistoric bodice-ripper, and a new potpourri of toothless whimsies by Douglas Adams. A sorry lot, but no sorrier, in literary terms, than the rest of the list, which contained not a single title remotely conceivable as a candidate for the major literary awards.

Why does dreck so often rise to the top of the bestseller list? Is there some merit in these books that their prose disfigures, as acne can disfigure a structurally handsome face? Or is it (I will propose) precisely their faults that endear them to an audience who recognizes in these novels a true mirror image of their own lame brains?

Meanwhile, in the realm of Something Lower, where books are but numbers in a series, the hacks grind out and the presses print the sf and horror equivalent of Silhouette Romances, the sheer mass of which is awesome in much the same way that Niagara Falls is awesome: there is so much of it and it never stops. The metaphor needn't stop there: it is, similarly, not very potable, and most of it courses through the paperback racks without ever being reviewed. Why should it be, after all? Are sneakers or soft drinks or matchbooks reviewed? Commodities are made to be consumed, and surely it is an unkindness for those favored by fortune with steak in plenty to be disdainful of the "taste" of people who must make do with Hamburger Helper.

This is not the proper occasion to speculate how this situation has come about; whether the publishers by their greed, the writers by laziness or native incapacity, or the audience by its hunger for the swill are most culpable. Yet I can't resist stepping down from the platform without relating one final anecdote that bears on these matters. Recently at an sf

gathering where fans and writers were mingling, a younger writer from Texas insisted on explaining to me, at great length, the secret of his success. (His first tetralogy has been through several printings; his second, he assured me, was destined for still bigger bucks.) His secret was that he'd found out the name and address of every sales rep who worked for his publisher and had programmed his computer to write each one of them a warm and personal letter thanking them for the efforts he was sure they were making on his behalf. He said it was especially important to get the sales reps to stock your title at airport book stalls; he knew this because he'd been in the distribution end of the business before he'd turned to writing. He assured me that the quality of a book was quite beside the point and that what mattered most of all was the writer's relationship with the reps. When I was in high school we had a name for that relationship.

Well, it's a good anecdote, but I don't think it explains the smell of the world in general. Some lousy writers—and those usually the most successful—are doing their level best. Other lousy writers kvetch about market forces but are happy for the excuse to produce slipshod work. In many cases, the problem is engine failure.

My tenure of office as *Twilight Zone's* book critic from the issue of May 1982 until February 1985 was not all as discouraging as those last dire reflections may sound. I may be disgruntled by some of the poorer books that came under review, but not driven to despair by them. Indeed, re-reading assorted columns, I am reminded not only of the original pleasure of combat, but also of the simpler, gregarious pleasures of working with TZ's then-editor T. E. D. Klein, who offered a reviewer all he could ask for: *carte blanche* in the choice of what I reviewed, decent wages, a sufficiency of applause, and hours of good talk about writers and what they write. Since leaving my post at TZ, it is those visits with Ted that I've most missed.

Though I had *carte blanche* at TZ, it was nevertheless imperative that I should deal with any new Stephen King book that appeared. He was not only the King of the genre but already, even then, of bestsellerdom as a whole. Ordinarily I would have shied away from reviewing a writer in that position. As someone who tills in the same genres—but for vastly lower wages—enthusiasm for his work can easily look like one is sucking up to the man and his success, while to give him any critical lumps at all can easily be interpreted as sour grapes. In the context of *Twilight Zone*, such reservations seemed to loom less large.

Furthermore the kind of criticism that King's work most lacks is the

kind that deals with more than theme and that awards merits or demerits for “originality” or “style”—that is, a kind of criticism that goes beyond reviewing. But that kind of criticism is hard work, and I doubt whether King’s oeuvre really requires such attention. For that reason, and also because the latest additions to the oeuvre have not seemed especially tempting (I’ve read *Thinner* and thought it thin; I’ve contemplated the horrid bulk of *IT*, read its reviews, and shuddered), I have not taken advantage of this opportunity to double my two-cents-worth on the subject, except to note, in as neutral a tone as I can command, that the interest of King’s work stems at least as much from its success as a commodity as from its aesthetic merits. King is more than a writer, he is a publishing phenomenon and as such transcends criticism.

His most salient virtue, as a commodity, is the consistency and reliability with which the Product is produced. Fame hasn’t made King slack off or aspire greatly. The result is a fictional Levittown, acres of decent housing all at exactly the same middling level of accomplishment and ambition. It doesn’t give a critic much to consider.

It’s the personality and the situation that are interesting. King has been very successful in creating a public image of himself as a Big Kid who’s just having fun and goofing off and filling nickel tablets with million-dollar novels, the latest of which, *IT*, concerns a novelist in just that happy situation. Self-referentiality is supposedly a hallmark of postmodern writing, and there’s King being as self-referential as can be. But why? Because the Stephen King Story cries out to be told? Or because he has a canny sense of the market and knows that every fannish (i.e., addicted) Reader entertains daydreams of becoming a Writer like King, rich and famous and triumphant over all those insensitive souls who laughed when he sat down to play?