

WHY WE CRAVE HORROR MOVIES

Stephen King

Stephen King's name is synonymous with horror stories. A graduate of the University of Maine in 1970, King had worked in a knitting mill and as a janitor, laundry worker, and high-school English teacher before he struck it big with his writing. Many consider Stephen King the most successful writer of modern horror fiction working in that genre today. His books have sold well over 20 million copies, and several of his novels have been made into popular motion pictures. His books include Carrie (1974), Salem's Lot (1975), The Shining (1977), The Dead Zone (1979), Firestarter (1980), Christine (1983), Pet Sematary (1983), and Tomnyknockers (1988). A short story from the collection Night Shift (1978) was produced as the movie Stand by Me. The widespread popularity of horror books and films attest to the fact that many people share King's fascination with the macabre. In the following selection, King analyzes the reasons we all flock to good horror movies.

I think that we're all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylums only hide it a little better—and maybe not all that much better, after all. We've all known people who talk to themselves, people who sometimes squinch their faces into horrible grimaces when they believe no one is watching, people who have some hysterical fear—of snakes, the dark, the tight place, the long drop . . . and, of course, those final worms and grubs that are waiting so patiently underground.

When we pay our four or five bucks and seat ourselves at tenth-row center in a theater showing a horror movie, we are daring the nightmare.

Why? Some of the reasons are simple and obvious. To show that we can, that we are not afraid, that we can ride this roller coaster. Which is not to say that a really good horror movie may not surprise a scream out of us at some point, the way we may scream when the roller coaster twists through a complete 360 or plows through a lake at the bottom of the drop. And horror movies, like roller coasters, have always been the special province of the young; by the time one turns 40 or 50, one's appetite for double twists or 360-degree loops may be considerably depleted.

We also go to re-establish our feelings of essential normality; the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary. Freda Jackson as the horrible melting woman in *Die, Monster, Die!* confirms for us that no matter how far we may be removed from the beauty of a Robert Redford or a Diana Ross, we are still light-years from true ugliness.

And we go to have fun.

Ah, but this is where the ground starts to slope away, isn't it? Because this is a very peculiar sort of fun, indeed. The fun comes from seeing others menaced—sometimes killed. One critic has suggested that if pro football has become the voyeur's version of combat, then the horror film has become the modern version of the public lynching.

It is true that the mythic, "fairy-tale" horror film intends to take away the shades of gray. . . . It urges us to put away our more civilized and adult penchant for analysis and to become children again, seeing things in pure blacks and whites. It may be that horror movies provide psychic relief on this level because this invitation to lapse into simplicity, irrationality and even outright madness is extended so rarely. We are told we may allow our emotions a free rein . . . or no rein at all.

If we are all insane, then sanity becomes a matter of degree. If your insanity leads you to carve up women like Jack the Ripper or the Cleveland Torso Murderer, we clap you away in the funny farm (but neither of those two amateur-night surgeons was ever caught, heh-heh-heh); if, on the other hand, your insanity leads you only to talk to yourself when you're under stress or to pick your nose on your morning bus, then you are left alone to go about your business . . . though it is doubtful that you will ever be invited to the best parties.

The potential lyncher is in almost all of us (excluding saints, 9
past and present; but then, most saints have been crazy in their
own ways), and every now and then, he has to be let loose to
scream and roll around in the grass. Our emotions and our
fears form their own body, and we recognize that it demands
its own exercise to maintain proper muscle tone. Certain of
these emotional muscles are accepted—even exalted—in civi-
lized society; they are, of course, the emotions that tend to
maintain the status quo of civilization itself. Love, friendship,
loyalty, kindness—these are all the emotions that we applaud,
emotions that have been immortalized in the couplets of Hall-
mark cards and in the verses (I don't dare call it poetry) of
Leonard Nimoy.

When we exhibit these emotions, society showers us with 10
positive reinforcement; we learn this even before we get out of
diapers. When, as children, we hug our rotten little puke of a
sister and give her a kiss, all the aunts and uncles smile and
twit and cry, "Isn't he the sweetest little thing?" Such coveted
treats as chocolate-covered graham crackers often follow. But if
we deliberately slam the rotten little puke of a sister's fingers in
the door, sanctions follow—angry remonstrance from parents,
aunts and uncles; instead of a chocolate-covered graham
cracker, a spanking.

But anticivilization emotions don't go away, and they demand 11
periodic exercise. We have such "sick" jokes as, "What's the
difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truck-
load of dead babies? (You can't unload a truckload of bowling
balls with a pitchfork . . . a joke, by the way, that I heard
originally from a ten-year-old). Such a joke may surprise a
laugh or a grin out of us even as we recoil, a possibility that
confirms the thesis: If we share a brotherhood of man, then we
also share an insanity of man. None of which is intended as a
defense of either the sick joke or insanity but merely as an
explanation of why the best horror films, like the best fairy
tales, manage to be reactionary, anarchistic, and revolutionary
all at the same time.

The mythic horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to 12
do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us. It is morbid-
ity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest fan-
tasies realized . . . and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the

dark. For those reasons, good liberals often shy away from horror films. For myself, I like to see the most aggressive of them—*Dawn of the Dead*, for instance—as lifting a trap door in the civilized forebrain and throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath.

Why bother? Because it keeps them from getting out, man. It keeps them down there and me up here. It was Lennon and McCartney who said that all you need is love, and I would agree with that.

As long as you keep the gators fed.

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Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What, according to King, are several of the reasons people go to horror movies? What other reasons can you add to King's list?
2. Identify the analogy King uses in paragraph 3, and explain how it works. (Glossary: *Analogy*)
3. What does King mean when he says "the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary" (4)?
4. What emotions does society applaud? Why? Which ones does King label "anticivilization" emotions?
5. In what ways is a horror movie like a sick joke? What is the "dirty job" that the two have in common (12)?
6. King starts his essay with the attention-grabbing sentence "I think that we're all mentally ill." How does he develop this idea of insanity in his essay? What does King mean when he says "the potential lyncher is in almost all of us" (9)? How does King's last line relate to the theme of mental illness?
7. What is King's tone in this essay? (Glossary: *Tone*) Point to particular words or sentences that led you to this conclusion.