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Book Review: "IT"

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"IT"

Stephen King
 Viking, 1986.

As a childhood reminiscence, *IT* is a remarkably vivid and explicit account of seven self-styled "losers" from Derry, Maine. Fifth grade's out and, one by one, the seven are hounded, pursued, and battered by society, the school bullies, and cosmic consciousness into a tightly-knit group destined to scotch *IT* that summer of 1958. Twenty-seven years later, they are recalled for an encore and the final showdown.

While the real story lies in 1958, King shuffles the two time frames and scores of flashbacks as though they were two halves of a double pinocle deck with fifty jokers. In the end, *IT* is a marvel of tortured chronology which makes Robert Heinlein's convoluted time-travel masterpiece *All You Zombies* — seem like a two-piece puzzle.

The reader begins in the fall of 1957 as six-year-old George Denbrough sails his paper boat down the rain-swollen gutters of town. When the boat disappears into a storm drain, George peers in after it and sees Mr. Bob Gray, a.k.a. Pennywise the Clown, notable for his big orange buttons, who asks Georgie if he would like a balloon. As George reaches for the balloon, Pennywise grabs his arm, pulls it into the drain and rips it off. Derry has an ominous and unpublicized history of such violence, grounded in the disappearance of its entire population in 1741. Approximately every 27 years, a cycle of terror erupts, vaguely understood by children and largely ignored by Derry's semi-mesmerized adults.

In May, 1985, Mike Hanlon, the only member of the group to remain in Derry, sends out the recall. Stanley Uris promptly slashes his wrists in the tub but before he dies, writes *IT* with his blood on the bathroom tile. Richard Tozier, Ben Hanscom, Eddie Kaspbrak, Beverly Marsh Rogan, and Bill Denbrough (George's brother) agree to come back to Derry on the basis of a scarcely-remembered childhood promise, to finish what they started in 1958. Enroute, individual flashbacks, nows, and flashforwards ping-pong the reader into a laborious possession of the salient details.

Young Ben Hanscom saw the clown; he had the face of *The Mummy*. Mike Hanlon saw him — a huge bird with feathers the color of orange pompoms.

Eddie Kaspbrak saw him as a hobo with syphilis; he thought it leprosy. No, it's a werewolf (with orange pompoms), or voices and blood from the bathroom sink. At other when's and where's it's Frankenstein's monster, Paul Bunyan, a gnash of piranhas, your not-so-favorite fairy-tale character; the glamour, manitou, eyelak, and loup-garou. *IT* is ultimately revealed as a telepathic omnimorph that reaches into the mind to take whatever shape the beholder most fears. What is its purpose, other than random mayhem? Food! But served with special sauce. Cyril Kornbluth in *Mindworm* created an atomic mutant who aggravated emotions to feed upon their emanations. In *The Day of the Dove*, a *Star Trek* episode, another emotional vampire fed on anger. *IT* belongs to the same dietary category. While its staple is children, "Adults had their own terrors and their glands could be taped open so that all the chemicals of fear flooded the body and salted the meat."

Borrowing a concept from John Campbell's *Who Goes There?* better known to theatre audiences as *The Thing*. Stephen King tells us that *IT* is an interstellar alien who crashed on earth eons ago and buried itself in the soil which would one day support Derry. "It's because of that soil," Mike Hanlon's father once told him." It seems that bad things, hurtful things, do right well in the soil of this town." What a wonderful allusion to the possibility that Derry, not Nahum Gardner's farm west of Arkham, was the site of H.P. Lovecraft's *Colour Out of Space*.

Writing with the inevitable screen in mind, King has provided a stew of ripped off arms, severed heads, and rotting flesh." Eddie thrust the ragged base of the Perrier bottle at him. It ripped into Henry's face pulling open his right cheek in a twisted flap and puncturing Henry's right eye.... His slit eye, leaking whitish-yellow fluid, hung loosely from its socket."

Something for everyone...including boys lighting each other's farts and even 11-year olds having group sex... and after a thousand pages of anesthetic gore and foul language, the reader is numbed; the only feelings he is yet capable of are an acidic stomach and liquid bowels. Yet, King has given us a fearful addition to the Horror Hall

of Fame in Pennywise the Clown, and the first 1,000 pages of *IT* are worthy of praise for their gnawing terror and reader paralysis. But while Lovecraft would have left *IT* undecipherable and garbed in cosmic mist, King insists on full disclosure. The first hint comes on page 1,016 as *IT* thinks of a victim "hung high up in the middle of things, crisscrossed in silk." What began as a memoir of a horrifying childhood summer, nurtured by echoes of Lovecraft, Kornbluth, and Campbell, ends as a low-budget video of *The Spider That Ate Tokyo*.

Once run to bay in its 1985 lair, *IT* turns out to be anticlimactically pregnant. King had told us that *IT* "was" in the pre-universe void and a rational reader might surmise that the creature had been a mother before: in which case, why isn't the universe overrun with its brood? Or if this is its first attempt to breed, what did it recently find to mate with? And no wonder it's violent...4½ billion years is a long-time to either gestate or wait for sexual maturity.

There is little cleverness in King, few well-turned phrases or fascinating references. Only one stands out. Henry Bowers, childhood bully and nemesis of the "losers," is eventually committed to the insane asylum for the murder of his father. Terrified, Bowers sleeps with a night light — once Donald Duck, replaced with Mickey Mouse, then Oscar the Grouch, etc. King writes, with Eliot and Prufrock looking on: "Henry had measured out the years of his incarceration with burned-out nightlights instead of coffee-spoons."

Of greater interest are the autobiographical tidbits. King, who was born in 1946 and therefore nearly a peer to his characters, gives four pages to Bill Denbrough as a creative writing student. Denbrough's work is poorly received by the instructor whom he paints with eggheaded stupidity, and when his story comes back, graded "F", with two words scrawled on it (Pulp! Crap!), Denbrough immediately sells it to a pulp mag for \$200 and drops the course.

Yes, Stephen King sells—sells big—and, as he tells us through his Bill Denbrough ego, that's everything. Or is it? I have found it remarkably easy to buy his work, in hard cover, at reduced prices...at yard sales. Could it mean that while King has had his success through the cash registers of America, he is still an embarrassment on the library shelf? □

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