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EVERYTHING'S
EVENTUAL

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EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

14 DARK TALES



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The following selections, some in different form, were previously published:

'Autopsy Room Four' in Robert Bloch's *Psychos*; 'The Man in the Black Suit' in *The New Yorker* and *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror 1995*; 'All That You Love Will Be Carried Away' and 'The Death of Jack Hamilton' in *The New Yorker*; 'In The Deathroom' on *Blood and Smoke* (audio book); 'The Little Sisters of Eluria' in *Legends*; 'Everything's Eventual' in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and on *F13* (CD-ROM); 'L.T.'s Theory of Pets' in *The Best of the Best 1998*; 'The Road Virus Heads North' in *1999*; 'Lunch at the Gotham Café' in *Dark Love, Years Best Fantasy and Horror 1996* and on *Blood and Smoke* (audio book); 'That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French' in *The New Yorker*; '1408' on *Blood and Smoke* (audio book); 'Riding the Bullet' as a Scribner e-book; 'Luckey Quarter' in *USA Weekend*

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First published in Great Britain in 2002 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline

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A New English Library Paperback

5 7 9 1 0 8 6

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 340 77074 0

Typeset in Bembo by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

PRAISE FOR STEPHEN KING

‘King has inspired a whole generation to read. He’s made them read good, witty prose . . . a fabulous teller of stories who can create an entire new world and make the reader live in it’ – *Express*

‘An incredibly gifted writer’ – *Guardian*

‘A writer of excellence . . . King is one of the most fertile storytellers of the modern novel’ – *The Sunday Times*

‘His work . . . plumbs, with unnerving accuracy, the hopes and fears of an entire nation’ – *Observer*

‘As a storyteller, he is up there in the Dickens class’ – *The Times*

*By Stephen King and published by
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FICTION:

Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
Night Shift
The Stand
Christine
Pet Sematary
It
Misery
The Tommyknockers
The Dark Half
Four Past Midnight
Needful Things
Gerald's Game
Dolores Claiborne
Nightmares and Dreamscapes
Insomnia
Rose Madder
Desperation
The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger
The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three
The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands
The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass
Bag of Bones
The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon
Hearts in Atlantis
Dreamcatcher
From a Buick 8

By Stephen King as Richard Bachman

Thinner
The Bachman Books
The Regulators

NON-FICTION:

On Writing (A Memoir of the Craft)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen King was born in Portland, Maine, in 1947. He won a scholarship award to the University of Maine and later taught English, while his wife, Tabitha, got her degree.

It was the publication of his first novel *Carrie* and its subsequent film adaptation that set him on his way to his present position as perhaps the bestselling author in the world.

Carrie was followed by a string of bestsellers including *The Shining*, *It*, *Misery*, *Bag of Bones*, *On Writing* (A Memoir of the Craft) and *Dreamcatcher*.

He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist, Tabitha King.

PRACTICING THE (ALMOST) LOST ART

I've written more than once about the joy of writing and see no need to reheat that particular skillet of hash at this late date, but here's a confession: I also take an amateur's slightly crazed pleasure in the business side of what I do. I like to goof widdit, do a little media cross-pollination and envelope-pushing. I've tried doing visual novels (*Storm of the Century*, *Rose Red*), serial novels (*The Green Mile*), and serial novels on the Internet (*The Plant*). It's not about making more money or even precisely about creating new markets; it's about trying to see the act, art, and craft of writing in different ways, thereby refreshing the process and keeping the resulting artifacts – the stories, in other words – as bright as possible.

I started to write 'keeping [the stories] new' in the line above, then deleted the phrase in the interest of honesty. I mean, come on here, ladies and gentlemen, whom can I possibly kid at this late date, except maybe myself? I sold my first story when I was twenty-one and a junior in college. I'm now fifty-four, and have run a lot of language through the 2.2-pound organic computer/word processor I hang my Red Sox cap on. The act of writing stories hasn't been new for me in a long time, but that doesn't mean it's lost its fascination. If

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I don't find ways of keeping it fresh and interesting, though, it'll get old and tired in a hurry. I don't want that to happen, because I don't want to cheat the people who read my stuff (that would be you, dear Constant Reader), and I don't want to cheat myself, either. We're in it together, after all. This is a date we're on. We should have fun. We should dance.

So, keeping that in mind, here's yet another story. My wife and I own these two radio stations, okay? WZON-AM, which is sports radio, and WKIT-FM, which is classic rock ('The Rock of Bangor,' we say). Radio is a tough business these days, especially in a market like Bangor, where there are too many stations and not enough listeners. We've got contemporary country, *classic* country, oldies, *classic* oldies, Rush Limbaugh, Paul Harvey, and Casey Kasem. The Steve and Tabby King stations ran in the red for a lot of years – not deep in the red, but far enough to bug me. I like to be a winner, you see, and while we were winning in the Arbs (that would be the Arbitron ratings, which are to radio what the Nielsens are to TV), we kept coming up short on the bottom line at the end of the year. It was explained to me that there just wasn't enough ad revenue in the Bangor market, that the pie had been cut into too many slices.

So I had an idea. I'd write a radio play, I thought, sort of like the ones I used to listen to with my grandfather when I was growing up (and he was growing old) in Durham, Maine. A Halloween play, by God! I knew about Orson Welles's famous – or infamous – Halloween adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* on *The Mercury Theatre*, of course. It was Welles's conceit (his absolutely *brilliant* conceit) to do H.G. Wells's classic invasion story as a series of news bulletins and reports. It worked, too. It worked so well that it sparked a national panic and Welles (Orson, not H.G.) had to make a public apology on the

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following week's *Mercury Theatre*. (I bet he made it with a smile on his face – I know I'd be smiling, if I were ever to come up with a lie so powerful and persuasive.)

I thought what had worked for Orson Welles would work for me. Instead of starting with dance-band music, as the Welles adaptation did, mine would start with Ted Nugent wailing on 'Cat Scratch Fever'. Then an announcer breaks in, one of our actual WKIT air personalities (nobody calls em deejays anymore). 'This is JJ West, WKIT news,' he says. 'I'm in downtown Bangor, where roughly a thousand people are jammed into Pickering Square, watching as a large, silvery disc-like object descends toward the ground . . . wait a minute, if I raise the mike, perhaps you can hear it.'

And, just like that, we'd be off to the races. I could use our very own in-house production facilities to create the audio effects, local community theater actors to do the roles, and the best part? The very best part of all? We could record the result and syndicate it to stations *all over the country!* The resulting income, I figured (and my accountant agreed), would be 'radio station income' instead of 'creative writing income'. It was a way to get around the advertising revenue shortfall, and at the end of the year, the radio stations might actually be in the black!

The idea for the radio play was exciting, and the prospect of helping my stations into a profit position with my skills as a writer for hire was also exciting. So what happened? I couldn't do it, that's what happened. I tried and I tried, and everything I wrote came out sounding like narration. Not a play, the sort of thing that you see unspooling in your mind (those old enough to remember such radio programs as *Suspense* and *Gunsmoke* will know what I mean), but something more like a book on tape. I'm sure we still could have

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gone the syndication route and made some money, but I knew the play would not be a success. It was boring. It would cheat the listener. It was busted, and I didn't know how to fix it. Writing radio plays, it seems to me, is a lost art. We have lost the ability to see with our ears, although we had it once. I remember listening to some radio foley guy tapping a hollow block of wood with his knuckles . . . and seeing Matt Dillon walking to the bar of the Long Branch Saloon in his dusty boots, clear as day. No more. Those days are gone.

Playwriting in the Shakespearean style – comedy and tragedy that works itself out in blank verse – is another lost art. Folks still go to see college productions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, but let's be honest with ourselves: how do you think one of those plays would do on TV against *The Weakest Link* or *Survivor Five: Stranded on the Moon*, even if you could get Brad Pitt to play Hamlet and Jack Nicholson to do Polonius? And although folks still go to such Elizabethan extravaganzas as *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, the enjoyment of an art-form is light-years from the ability to create a new example of that art-form. Every now and then someone tries mounting a blank-verse production either on Broadway or off it. They inevitably fail.

Poetry is *not* a lost art. Poetry is better than ever. Of course you've got the usual gang of idiots (as the *Mad* magazine staff writers used to call themselves) hiding in the thickets, folks who have gotten pretension and genius all confused, but there are also many brilliant practitioners of the art out there. Check the literary magazines at your local bookstore, if you don't believe me. For every six crappy poems you read, you'll actually find one or two good ones. And that, believe me, is a very acceptable ratio of trash to treasure.

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The short story is also not a lost art, but I would argue it is a good deal closer than poetry to the lip of the drop into extinction's pit. When I sold my first short story in the delightfully antique year of 1968, I was already bemoaning the steady attrition of markets: the pulps were gone, the digests were going, the weeklies (such as *The Saturday Evening Post*) were dying. In the years since, I have seen the markets for short stories continue to shrink. God bless the little magazines, where young writers can still publish their stories for contributors' copies, and God bless the editors who still read the contents of their slush piles (especially in the wake of 2001's anthrax scare), and God bless the publishers who still greenlight the occasional anthology of original stories, but God won't have to spend His whole day – or even His coffee break – blessing those people. Ten or fifteen minutes would do the trick. Their number is small, and every year there are one or two fewer. *Story* magazine, a lodestar for young writers (including myself, although I never actually published there), is now gone. *Amazing Stories* is gone, despite repeated efforts to revive it. Interesting science-fiction magazines such as *Vertex* are gone, and, of course, the horror mags like *Creepy* and *Eerie*. Those wonderful periodicals are *long* gone. Every now and then someone will try to revive one of these magazines; as I write this, *Weird Tales* is staggering through such a revival. Mostly, they fail. It's like those plays in blank verse, the ones that open and then close in what seems to be no more than the wink of an eye. When it's gone, you can't bring it back. What's lost has a way of staying lost.

I've continued to write short stories over the years, partly because the ideas still come from time to time – beautifully compressed ideas that cry out for three thousand words, maybe nine thousand, fifteen thousand at the very most –

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and partly because it's the way I affirm, at least to myself, the fact that I haven't sold out, no matter what the more unkind critics may think. Short stories are still piecework, the equivalent of those one-of-a-kind items you can buy in an artisan's shop. If, that is, you are willing to be patient and wait while it's made by hand in the back room.

But there's no reason for stories to be *marketed* by the same old just-like-Father-did-it methods, simply because the stories themselves are created that way, nor is there any reason to assume (as so many stodgies in the critical press seem to have done) that the way in which a piece of fiction is sold must in some way contaminate or cheapen the product itself.

I'm speaking here of 'Riding the Bullet', which has surely been my oddest experience of selling my wares in the marketplace, and a story which illustrates the main points I'm trying to make: that what's lost cannot be easily retrieved, that once things go past a certain point, extinction is probably inevitable, but that a fresh perspective on one aspect of creative writing – the commercial aspect – can sometimes refresh the whole.

'Bullet' was composed after *On Writing*, and while I was still recuperating from an accident which left me in a state of nearly constant physical misery. Writing took me away from the worst of that pain; it was (and continues to be) the best pain-killer in my limited arsenal. The story I wanted to tell was simplicity itself; little more than a campfire ghost-story, really. It was The Hitchhiker Who Got Picked Up By A Dead Man.

While I was writing away at my story in the unreal world of my imagination, a dot-com bubble was growing in the equally unreal world of e-commerce. One aspect of this was the so-called electronic book, which, according to some,

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would spell the end of books as we'd always known them, objects of glue and binding, pages you turned by hand (and which sometimes fell out, if the glue was weak or the binding old). In early 2000, there was great interest in an essay by Arthur C. Clarke, which had been published only in cyberspace.

It was extremely short, though (like kissing your sister is what I thought when I first read it). My story, when it was done, was quite long. Susan Moldow, my editor at Scribner (as an *X-Files* fan, I call her *Agent* Moldow . . . *you* work it out), called one day prompted by Ralph Vicinanza and asked if I had anything I'd like to try in the electronic marketplace. I sent her 'Bullet', and the three of us – Susan, Scribner, and I – made a little bit of publishing history. Several hundred thousand people downloaded the story, and I ended up making an embarrassing amount of money. (Except that's a fucking lie, I wasn't embarrassed a bit.) Even the audio rights went for over a hundred thousand dollars, a comically huge price.

Am I bragging here? Boasting my narrow whiteboy ass off? In a way I am. But I'm also here to tell you that 'Riding the Bullet' made me absolutely crazy. Usually, if I'm in one of those fancy-schamncy airport lounges, I'm ignored by the rest of the clientele; they're busy babbling into phones or making deals at the bar. Which is fine with me. Every now and then one of them will drop by and ask me to sign a cocktail napkin for the wife. The wife, these handsomely suited, briefcase-toting fellows usually want me to know, has read *all* my books. They, on the other hand, have read none. They want me to know that, too. Just too busy. Read *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, read *Who Moved My Cheese?*, read *The Prayer of Jabez*, and that's pretty much it.

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Gotta hurry, gotta rush-rush, I got a heart attack due in about four years, and I want to be sure that I'm there to meet it with my 401(k) all in order when it shows up.

After 'Bullet' was published as an e-book (cover, Scribner colophon, and all), that changed. I was *mobbed* in the airport lounges. I was even mobbed in the Boston Amtrak lounge. I was buttonholed on the street. For a little while there, I was turning down the chance to appear on a giddy three talk-shows a day (I was holding out for Springer, but Jerry never called). I even got on the cover of *Time*, and *The New York Times* pontificated at some length over the perceived success of 'Riding the Bullet' and the perceived failure of its cyber-successor, *The Plant*. Dear God, I was on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. I had inadvertently become a mogul.

And what was driving me crazy? What made it all seem so pointless? Why, that nobody cared about the story. Hell, nobody even *asked* about the story, and do you know what? It's a pretty *good* story, if I do say so myself. Simple but fun. Gets the job done. If it got you to turn off the TV, as far as I'm concerned, it (or any of the stories in the collection which follows) is a total success.

But in the wake of 'Bullet', all the guys in ties wanted to know was, 'How's it doing? How's it selling?' How to tell them I didn't give a flying fuck how it was doing in the marketplace, that what I cared about was how it was doing in the reader's heart? Was it succeeding there? Failing? Getting through to the nerve-endings? Causing that little *frisson* which is the spooky story's *raison d'être*? I gradually realized that I was seeing another example of creative ebb, another step by another art on the road that may indeed end in extinction. There is something weirdly decadent about appearing on the cover of a major magazine simply because

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you used an alternate route into the marketplace. There is something weirder about realizing that all those readers might have been a lot more interested in the novelty of the electronic package than they were in what was inside the package. Do I want to know how many of the readers who downloaded 'Riding the Bullet' actually *read* 'Riding the Bullet'? I do not. I think I might be extremely disappointed.

E-publishing may or may not be the wave of the future; about that I care not a fiddler's fart, believe me. For me, going that route was simply another way of trying to keep myself fully involved in the process of writing stories. And then getting them to as many people as possible.

This book will probably end up on the best-seller lists for awhile; I've been very lucky that way. But if you see it there, you might ask yourself how many *other* books of short stories end up on the bestseller list in the course of any given year, and how long publishers can be expected to publish books of a type that doesn't interest readers very much. Yet for me, there are few pleasures so excellent as sitting in my favorite chair on a cold night with a hot cup of tea, listening to the wind outside and reading a good story which I can complete in a single sitting.

Writing them is not so pleasurable. I can only think of two in the current collection – the title story and 'L.T.'s Theory of Pets' – which were written without an amount of effort far greater than the relatively slight result. And yet I think I have succeeded in keeping my craft new, at least to myself, mostly because I refuse to let a year go by without writing at least one or two of them. Not for money, not even precisely for love, but as a kind of dues-paying. Because if you want to write short stories, you have to do more than *think* about writing short stories. It is *not* like riding a bicycle

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but more like working out in the gym: your choice is use it or lose it.

To see them collected here like this is a great pleasure for me. I hope it will be for you, as well. You can let me know at www.stephenking.com, and you can do something else for me (and yourself), as well: if these stories work for you, buy another collection. *Sam the Cat* by Matthew Klam, for instance, or *The Hotel Eden* by Ron Carlson. These are only two of the good writers doing good work out there, and although it's now officially the twenty-first century, they're doing it in the same old way, one word at a time. The format in which they eventually appear doesn't change that. If you care, support them. The best method of support really hasn't changed much: *read their stories*.

I'd like to thank a few of the people who've read mine: Bill Buford, at *The New Yorker*, Susan Moldow, at Scribner; Chuck Verrill, who has edited so much of my work across such a span of years, Ralph Vicinanza, Arthur Greene, Gordon Van Gelder and Ed Ferman at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*; Nye Willden at *Cavalier*, and the late Robert A.W. Lowndes, who bought that first short story back in '68. Also – most important – my wife, Tabitha, who remains my favorite Constant Reader. These are all people who have worked and are still working to keep the short story from becoming a lost art. So am I. And, by what you buy (and thus choose to subsidize) and by what you read, so are you. You most of all, Constant Reader. Always you.

Stephen King
Bangor, Maine
December 11, 2001

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What I did was take all the spades out of a deck of cards plus a joker. Ace to King = 1–13. Joker = 14. I shuffled the cards and dealt them. The order in which they came out of the deck became the order of the stories, based on their position in the list my publisher sent me. And it actually created a very nice balance between literary stories and the all-out screamers. I also added an explanatory note before or after each story, depending on which seemed the more fitting position. Next collection: selected by Tarot.

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