

Stephen King: Fifty Years Scaring Us [C1]

Con una straordinaria carriera, la sua impronta nell'immaginario popolare è pari a quella di geni come Shakespeare. Esploriamo le sue fonti di ispirazione e il suo processo di scrittura con un esperto del suo lavoro.

Stephen King is one of the most prolific writers of modern literature. Known as the Master of Horror, the American author has published more than 250 novels and short stories, many of which have been adapted for film and television. His best-known stories have become cultural references, such as his debut novel *Carrie*, published half a century ago this year, and his first bestseller *The Shining*. His unique [blend](#) of horror, suspense, science fiction and psychological drama has terrified generations of fans and inspired authors and filmmakers the world over.

A COMPLETE EXPLORATION

An [overview](#) of his work reveals recurring themes, characters and places, building a literary universe that becomes frighteningly familiar. A new reference book by Canadian writer Bev Vincent puts it into detailed perspective. *Stephen King: A Complete Exploration of His Work, Life, and Influences* takes us through each of his books in chronological order, complete with memorabilia and a whole lot of background information, ranging from the source of inspiration to the reception and legacy of each book once it was published. Speak Up met with Vincent to talk about his book. We began by asking him why Stephen King is so universally popular. **Bev Vincent (Canadian accent):** Well, I think fundamentally there's two aspects. He's a very good, [natural born](#) storyteller. He knows how [to spin a tale](#), knows how [to hit the beats](#) and tell the story in a way that is just [compelling](#). You want to keep turning the pages to find out what's going to happen next. But beyond that, I think his brilliance is in his characterisation. He creates characters very quickly, with a few [broad brushstrokes](#). We feel like we know these people and then he goes deeper and deeper and we are so [invested](#) in those characters that, when something bad happens to them,

we're especially [invested](#) in knowing how the story comes out, because it's not just a matter of what scary thing is going to happen next — What's going to happen to these people? Are they going to survive? Are they going [to prevail](#) or not? And in King's case, they don't always. There's not always a happy ending.

BRANDED

Stephen King's first novel to be published was *Carrie*, a [coming-of-age](#) story of a bullied teenager with supernatural abilities. It was so successful that he found himself [pigeon-holed](#) as a horror writer. **Bev Vincent:** He had a choice for the second book. He had two manuscripts that he offered his editor. One was the book that ultimately became *Blaze*, published later in his career, which is more of a mainstream, non-supernatural, non-horror type story. And then he offered *'Salem's Lot*. And the editor told him at the time that if we go with *'Salem's Lot* [back-to-back](#) *'Salem's Lot* with *Carrie*, you're going [to be branded](#) as a horror writer. And King grew up reading horror writers who he respected immensely, people like Ray Bradbury and Richard Matheson. And so he didn't at all mind being grouped with that category of writers.

ALIAS STEPHEN KING

By the time he became an established writer, Stephen King wanted [to break free](#) from his usual formula. Moreover, publishers never wanted to publish more than one or two books a year by the same author — and King wrote a lot more. He decided to create a pseudonym, Richard Bachman, as Vincent explains. **Bev Vincent:** By that point in his career, he had become extremely famous. His career had [blown up](#) very quickly, and there was always a question in his mind: "Could I duplicate that with another set of books?" Now, Stephen King books are going to sell automatically. "Can [I break out](#) a new author?" The first four books sort of came and went. But with the fifth book, *Thinner*, that book really was a breakout book for Richard Bachman. It sold quite well as a hardcover before people found out that it

was Stephen King that wrote it. So there was a satisfaction there that it wasn't always his name that sold the books. It was his writing.

DOWN TO EARTH

Richard Bachman helped to validate King's [talent](#) in his own mind. Vincent's book paints a picture of a modest, unpretentious person, despite the level of success he has achieved. We asked what has kept King [so humble](#). **Bev Vincent:** I would say that the women in his life have kept him humble. His mother was a single mother. She worked all her life to support the two kids after his father left when he was two. And so I think [she ingrained](#) in him the importance of work, the importance of education. And then in later years, his wife, Tabitha, I think, has kept him very [grounded](#). He's often said how, anytime he sort of gets a little bit too [full of himself](#), she has ways of bringing him back down to Earth. And of course, it was her who helped [set him straight](#) when he was having addiction problems. But also I think living in Maine. [It] is a place where you [can keep your ego in check](#). He can go out into the world and be 'Big Stephen King' when he needs to, in front of the TV cameras for the interviews and that, and then go back to Bangor or Western Maine and just go to the café or the bookstore or just meet people on the street... Just be Steve.

PLOTTERS AND PANTSERS

Vincent has met and worked with Stephen King himself. He co-edited *Flight or [Fright](#)*, an anthology of horror stories, in 2018. During the project, King decided to contribute a new story himself and Vincent saw first-hand how [inspiration can strike](#) him from anywhere. Rather than [plotting](#) an [outline](#), King is known to write from an idea, without knowing how it will end. **Bev Vincent:** In my experience, there are generally two categories of writers. There are the 'plotters', who have everything mapped out before they write the first real word of prose, and there are what we call the 'pantsers'. And that comes from the phrase 'Fly by the seat of your pants'. You start with only a vague idea of the story and you see where the story goes as you write. And Steve has always said that, to discover the story, he needs to write. He can

have a certain amount of the story. He can have a scenario and he can have some characters and then he will start off once he feels confident enough. That sometimes means that he ends up with books that just die on him, because he gets to a certain point and he can't figure out where to go next. That happens on occasion. But he's good friends with writer John Irving, and John Irving once told him that the first thing Irving writes when he does a book is write the last sentence. And Steve has just said he couldn't possibly work that way because, if he knew the ending, then there would be no point in writing the story.

EVIL TOWNS

Two fictional towns occur in several of King's stories: Castle Rock and Derry. Castle Rock first appeared in *The Dead Zone* in 1979 and provides the backdrop for numerous works, including *Cujo* and *Needful Things*. Derry is most famously the setting of *It*. Vincent lists all the events that happen in each town in two separate chapters of his book. Put together, they describe places with a truly awful history. **Bev Vincent:** I really wanted to make a map of Castle Rock, taking all of the geographic stuff from all of his books. But he plays a little bit fast and loose with the geography and I found out there are just too many conflicts. I couldn't make them out. But I would say I could live in Castle Rock, because it's a place where bad things occasionally happen. But the people are fundamentally good. And it seems like a pretty nice town. Derry is an evil town. Evil sort of thrives under the belly. Derry is essentially Bangor, Maine, where King lived a lot of his life. But I definitely would not want to live there. The people there are nasty and mean and it's just a terrible place.

A SERIOUS WRITER

Stephen King once famously said his work is the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and fries. Vincent's book describes how, particularly at the start of his career, King was not taken seriously by critics. Today, however, the literary world takes a different view. **Bev Vincent:** Stephen King likes to joke these days that he outlived most of those critics who gave him a hard time earlier

in his career. And perhaps there's an element of truth to that. I think perhaps there is a newer wave of critics who have been with King's work over a number of decades, who appreciate the fact that he has persisted and flourished and [blossomed](#). To the point now I think where, people are teaching university classes about his work and people are writing doctoral theses about his work. www.bevvincent.com

Glossary

- **coming-of-age** = di formazione
- **gave him a hard time** = rendere la vita difficile
- **compelling** = persuasivo
- **to break free** = liberarsi
- **I break out** = avere successo
- **can keep your ego in check** = tenere sotto controllo
- **blossomed** = fiorire
- **make them out** = capire
- **broad brushstrokes** = ampie pennellate
- **to prevail** = prevalere
- **to be branded** = etichettare
- **blown up** = esplodere
- **plotting** = pianificare
- **outline** = abbozzo
- **natural born** = nato
- **to hit the beats** = cogliere il ritmo
- **back-to-back** = consecutivo
- **so humble** = umile
- **mean** = meschina
- **tale** = storia
- **grounded** = con i piedi per terra
- **backdrop** = sfondo
- **nasty** = odioso
- **full of himself** = essere pieni di sé
- **Fright** = spavento
- **outlived** = sopravvivere
- **plays a little bit fast and loose** = manipolare, distorcere
- **blend** = miscela
- **overview** = panoramica
- **invested** = coinvolti
- **she ingrained** = inculcare
- **set him straight** = mettere in riga, rigare dritto
- **inspiration can strike** = l'ispirazione può arrivare

- **to spin** = filare, tessere
- **pigeon-holed** = classificare
- **thrives** = prosperare