

# STEPHEN KING

# THE SHINING

## ABOUT THE BOOK

### IN BRIEF:

Danny Torrance is only five years old, but in the words of old Mr. Hallorann, he “shines” with an exceptional psychic talent. For most of Danny’s life, his clairvoyant abilities have helped him to puzzle out his parents’ troubled relationship, but when his father accepts a position as the winter caretaker for the Overlook Hotel high in the Rocky Mountains, the little boy’s visions spiral into the realm of nightmare.

As blizzards isolate the Torrances, the hotel seems to develop a sinister life of its own. At night, unseen revelers ride the elevators and even the animal-shaped hedges of the topiary prowl the hotel’s grounds like threatening predators. But when Danny meets the woman in room 217, he discovers that the hotel’s phantom guests are more than shadows. Like Danny, the Overlook shines, but the energy it emanates is deadly.

### IN DETAIL:

Jack Torrance is a gifted young writer, but his alcoholism and his temper have almost ruined his life. When his three-year-old son Danny spilled a beer all over one of his manuscripts, Jack spun the little boy around to spank him and accidentally broke his arm. Although this incident filled him with self-loathing and almost destroyed his marriage, it was not until Jack and his drinking buddy Al Shockley thought that they’d hit a child while driving home from a late-night drinking session that Jack decided it was time to get sober. But unfortunately for Jack, even without alcohol to inflame it, his temper continued to get the better of him. While teaching English at a Vermont prep school, Jack struck a disgruntled student he caught slashing his tyres; a mistake which cost him his job.

Jack interviews for a position as the winter caretaker for the Overlook Hotel, an exclusive but isolated resort located high in the Rocky Mountains. Jack desperately needs the work to support his family, but just as importantly he craves five to six months of seclusion so that he can finish his current play. Although the hotel manager is uncertain about hiring a family man for the job (a previous winter caretaker slaughtered his wife and children during a murderous bout of cabin fever), Jack gets the position.

But Jack’s little boy Danny is less than enthusiastic about his family’s move to the Overlook Hotel. Although he is only five, Danny is a powerful telepath and already senses that the Overlook is a bad place. Danny does not openly share his fears with his parents, but begins to have more and more psychic trances which frighten them badly.

At the Overlook, Danny’s worries are eased by the hotel’s fatherly cook, Dick Hallorann. Like Danny, Hallorann has ‘the shine’ - a pronounced psychic ability - and assures Danny that the Overlook’s many ghosts are like pictures in a book and they can’t harm him. But though Hallorann speaks bravely to Danny, he’s less than certain that it’s wise for such a powerfully psychic boy to spend the winter in the evil old hotel.

As winter closes in, and as blizzards and snowdrifts trap the Torrance family in the Overlook, the hotel works its sinister magic in subtle and horrible ways. Determined to absorb Danny into itself so that it can use his psychic powers, the Overlook begins to prey upon Jack Torrance’s mind, and it is not above manipulating Jack’s personal demons to get what it wants. As Jack begins to change and as the spirits of the Overlook take on a terrifying physicality, Danny and his mother become more and more frightened. In the end, it is only Danny’s ‘shine’ that stands between the Torrances and the evil that wants to consume them all.

## QUOTES:

'Obviously a masterpiece, probably the best supernatural novel in a hundred years' Peter Straub

'Stephen King is one of America's finest writers' *Scotsman*

'Not since Dickens has a writer had so many readers by the throat . . . King's imagination is vast. He knows how to engage the deepest sympathies of his readers . . . one of the great storytellers of our time' *Guardian*

'Superb craftsmanship . . . this hotel is far more sinister than Hill House . . . the reader is in the grip of real fright, not wanting to go on yet unable to stop. You must know what comes next at any cost!' *Science Fiction Review*

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:

Stephen King was born in Portland, Maine, in 1947 and won a scholarship to attend the University of Maine at Orono. While working at the university library he met Tabitha Spruce, who was also an aspiring writer. The two of them married in 1971, the year after Stephen King graduated from college. Although during the first months of his marriage Stephen King worked as a labourer at an industrial laundry (supplementing his income by selling occasional short stories to men's magazines), by autumn he had taken up a teaching position at Hampden Academy. King continued to write on weekends and during the evening, but his teaching responsibilities seriously cut into his creative time. He also began to drink; as he describes in his guide *On Writing*, he didn't realize until much later that he was kind of writing about himself in *The Shining*.

King got his big break in 1973, when Doubleday and Co.(US) accepted the novel *Carrie*. In 1974, King and his family moved to Boulder Colorado where he wrote *The Shining*. In the Autumn of that year, Stephen King and his wife had spent one night at the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado. Since the hotel was due to close down the following day, the Kings were the only guests. As they wandered through the deserted corridors and ate a meal in the deserted dining room, King thought that the grand hotel would be the perfect setting for a ghost story.

That night, he had a nightmare which unified all of the fragments that he'd been trying to puzzle together. In his nightmare, his three-year-old son was running though the hotel's corridors, chased by a fire-hose. Waking with a start, King lit a cigarette and stared out the window at the imposing Rocky Mountains. *The Shining* was born.

## STARTING POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. In what ways does *The Shining* manoeuvre between the supernatural tale and the psychological drama? How does this combination help to make the story so terrifying?
2. Stephen King has said that *The Shining* was one of the easiest novels he'd ever written, but that it was also one of the most emotionally charged. Part of this was because King funneled so many of his own early fears into the doomed central character, Jack Torrance. How does he make Jack empathetic despite his many shortcomings?
3. One of the most powerful themes within *The Shining* is that of familial bonding and familial pain. In particular, King focuses on the difficult relationships between parents and children, and of love that can continue despite alcoholism and abuse. How does this love, and this abuse, add to the poignancy and also the horror of *The Shining*?
4. Jack and Al share a terrible secret – they both fear that they killed a child one evening while driving home from a drunken escapade. What effect does that secret have on the reader? How does it propel the narrative?

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5. According to traditional belief, babies born with cauls covering their faces are blessed (or cursed) with psychic powers. In other words, they are able to see beyond the veil that separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. Why do you think King decided to have Danny born with a caul?
6. One of the first signs of Jack's dangerous freefall into madness is that he begins to obsessively wipe his mouth. In fact, it almost becomes a nervous tick. What is the unconscious significance of this action for Jack, both symbolically and historically?
7. King believes that it is important to take a child's viewpoint seriously. Hence, children and adolescents are often the emotional focuses of his books. How does this work in *The Shining*? How does Danny's viewpoint, so carefully explained, affect the way we interpret the story?
8. Why do you think Danny's psychic ability takes the form of an imaginary playmate, and why do you think that the Overlook tries to block Danny's access to his invisible friend Tony?
9. The term 'The Shining' makes us think of lamps and of lights in dark places. Why do you think this is so? What role does this image of light amid darkness play in the book?
10. Why do you think King wanted to echo John Lennon's song 'Instant Karma' in the title of this book? What role has Lennon played in our cultural imagination?
11. In fairytales, images of mothers and fathers are often split into multiple characters, some good and some bad. What father figures (both actual and symbolic) do we find in *The Shining*?
12. When Jack first discovers the wasps' nest in the Overlook's roof, he interprets it both as a symbol of all that he's been through and as a good omen for the future. (After all, he was only stung once.) What fatal mistake does Jack make when he interprets his find? What do you think is the real symbolic significance of the wasps' nest?
13. Although Danny is attacked by the woman in room 217, and although Jack Torrance also has a run-in with the specter, when questioned by his wife Jack maintains that room 217 is empty and that Danny must have harmed himself. Why do you think he says this?
14. Stephen King has stated that 'there is no horror without love and feeling . . . , because horror is the contrasting emotion to our understanding of all the things that are good and normal. Without a concept of normality, there is no horror.' What do you think he means?

## READ EXTRACT:

Danny was standing outside room 217 again.

The passkey was in his pocket. He was staring at the door with a kind of drugged avidity, and his upper body seemed to twitch and jiggle beneath his flannel shirt. He was humming softly and tunelessly.

He hadn't wanted to come here. He was scared that he had taken the pass-key again, disobeying his father.

He *had* wanted to come here. Curiosity  
(killed the cat; satisfaction brought him back)

Was like a constant fishhook in his brain, a kind of nagging siren song that would not be appeased. And hadn't Mr Hallorann said, 'I don't think there's anything here that can hurt you'?

(You promised.)

(*Promises were made to be broken.*)

He jumped at that. It was as if that thought had come from outside, insectile, buzzing, softly cajoling.

*Promises were made to be broken my dear redrum, to be broken. Splintered.  
Shattered. Hammered apart. FORE!*

His nervous humming broke into low, atonal song. ‘Lou, Lou, skip to m’Lou, skip to m’Lou my daarlin . . .’

Hadn’t Mr Hallorannn been right? Hadn’t that been, in the end, the reason why he had kept silent and allowed the snow to close them in?

*Just close your eyes and it will be gone.*

What he had seen in the Presidential Sweet had gone away. And the snake had only been a fire hose that had fallen onto the rug. Yes, even the blood in the Presidential Sweet had been harmless, something old, something that had happened long before he was born or even thought of, something that was done with. Like a movie that only he could see. There was nothing, really nothing, in this hotel that could hurt him, and if he had to prove that to himself by going into this room, shouldn’t he do so?

‘Lou, Lou, skip to m’Lou . . .’

*(Curiosity killed the cat my dear redrum, redrum my dear, satisfaction brought him back safe and sound, from toes to crown; from head to ground he was safe and sound. He knew that those things)*

*(are like scary pictures, they can’t hurt you, but oh my god)*

*(what big teeth you have grandma and is that a wolf in a BLUEBEARD suit or a BLUEBEARD in a wolf suit and I’m so)*

*(glad you asked because curiosity killed that cat and it was the HOPE of satisfaction that brought him)*

up the hall, treading softly over the blue and twisting jungle carpet. He had stopped by the fire extinguisher, had put the brass nozzle back in the frame, and then had poked it repeatedly with his finger, heart thumping, whispering: ‘Come on and hurt me. Come on and hurt me, you cheap prick. Can’t do it, can you? Huh? You’re nothing but a cheap fire hose. Can’t do nothing but lie there. Come on, come on!’ He had felt insane with bravado. And nothing had happened. It was only a hose after all, only canvas and brass, you could hack it to pieces and it would never complain, never twist and jerk and bleed green slime all over the blue carpet, because it was only a hose, not a nose and not a rose, not glass buttons or satin bow, not a snake in a sleepy doze . . . and he had hurried on, had hurried on because he was

‘late, I’m late,’ said the white rabbit.)

the white rabbit. Yes. Now there was a white rabbit out by the playground, once it had been green but now it was white, as if something had shocked it repeatedly on the snowy, windy nights and turned it old . . .

Danny took the passkey from his pocket and slid it into the lock.

## IF YOU LOVE **THE SHINING**, YOU’LL LIKE:

*Bag of Bones*

*‘Salems’s Lot*

*The Dead Zone*

*‘1408 from Everything’s Eventual*

*Doctor Sleep (the sequel which follows the life of Danny Torrance as an adult)*

## OTHER BOOKS BY STEPHEN KING:

### FICTION:

*Carrie*  
*'Salem's Lot*  
*The Shining*  
*Night Shift*  
*The Stand*  
*The Dead Zone*  
*Firestarter*  
*Cujo*  
*Different Seasons*  
*Cycle of the Werewolf*  
*Christine*  
*Pet Sematary*  
*Skeleton Crew*  
*IT*  
*The Eyes of the Dragon*  
*Misery*  
*The Tommyknockers*  
*The Dark Half*  
*Four Past Midnight*  
*Needful Things*  
*Gerald's Game*  
*Dolores Claiborne*  
*Nightmares and Dreamscapes*  
*Insomnia*  
*Rose Madder*  
*Desperation*  
*Bag of Bones*  
*The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*  
*Hearts in Atlantis*  
*Dreamcatcher*  
*Everything's Eventual*  
*From a Buick 8*  
*Cell*  
*Lisey's Story*  
*Duma Key*  
*Just After Sunset*  
*Stephen King Goes to the Movies*  
*Under the Dome*  
*Full Dark, No Stars*  
*11.22.63*  
*Doctor Sleep*  
*Mr Mercedes*  
*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*  
*The Dark Tower V: Wolves of the Calla*  
*The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah*  
*The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower*  
*The Wind through the Keyhole: A Dark Tower Novel*

By Stephen King as Richard Bachman

*The Running Man*  
*Thinner*  
*The Bachman Books*  
*The Regulators*  
*Blaze*

### NON-FICTION:

*Danse Macabre*  
*On Writing (A Memoir of the Craft)*

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[www.readinggroups.org](http://www.readinggroups.org)

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11 NOVEMBER 2014

