**Thoughts on IT by Stephen King, What it Takes to Enjoy Horror, and Why I Write It**

Posted on [January 19, 2015](http://annieneugebauer.com/2015/01/19/thoughts-on-it-by-stephen-king-what-it-takes-to-enjoy-horror-and-why-i-write-it/) by [Annie Neugebauer](http://annieneugebauer.com/author/dnhm-pip99/)

I recently finished the beast of a novel *It* by Stephen King. (Most people know it as ‘that one about the scary clown.’) Finding a book that will scare me again is sort of a white whale for me. I love being scared. Horror movies often scare me because they have the advantage of jump-frights and suspenseful music, etc. Books are at a disadvantage in the fear department, because if it begins to scare you, you can just put it down until you’re in a different mood. (Few people will pause a movie and finish it days later.) The fear has to be utterly insidious to stick with you from reading session to session, and there’s no such thing as a startle when you’re reading words on a page. (BOO doesn’t work; I’ve tried that one.)

It’s interesting to me that so many people assume I’m hard to scare. They think that because I’m a horror writer I must be tough as nails. The little-known secret? I’m quite easily scared. *That’s* why I write horror; I know and understand the emotion fear. How can I expect to scare readers if I can’t scare myself? Don’t believe this myth you hear that horror authors write about such things because we’re messed up in the head. That may be true for a few authors; I don’t know. But in my experience, horror writers are the nicest, mildest people you’ll meet. For one thing, we regularly exorcise our demons. It’s a very healthy thing. But also, we don’t write what we write because we’re disturbed ourselves; we write what we write because we’re afraid of how disturbed people (and the world) can be. By and large, we aren’t hardened cynics; we’re observant sensitives.

All of that to explain: I’m easily scared, and I love it. I’m not a ‘scaredy cat’ though; I *seek out* what frightens me. It’s a form of both thrill and conquer. And because I know that headspace so well, I’m good at putting others there. So why do I write horror? One answer out of many is that I’m good at it, and writing what I’m best at is super fun. Few emotions are as vivid and visceral as fear; creating that for readers is seriously empowering.

I can get most of my scares from movies. As I mentioned, movies have the advantage, but since I love books so much, I doubly like it when a book can get under my skin. It’s why I’m a horror reader! That said, although there are many horror books I love, very few have successfully scared me. Fun little creeps? Sure. But body-reacting level of fear is hard to come by. Poe’s short stories when I was a kid did it. [*The Shining*](http://annieneugebauer.com/2014/10/13/3-amazing-horror-authors-and-why-you-should-read-them/)and *‘Salem’s Lot* as a teen. And as an adult, [*House of Leaves*](http://annieneugebauer.com/2013/03/18/house-of-leaves/) (in a different way). Others have come close but ultimately failed to smoke that particular cigar.

Now we’ve circled back around to *It*. *It*, as an adult reading it for the first time, scared me. Like really, under-my-skin scared me. I have nightmares all the time (of my own making), but this was the first time *a book* has given me nightmares since I was a kid. I had a full-on, wake-me-up-scary nightmare about the monster from *It*. You guys, it was awesome. This is exactly why I love Stephen King.

I won’t give you any spoilers, but since *It* has been out so long. I’ll tell a tad more than I might for a new release. The famous clown of this story, Pennywise, isn’t actually a clown. He appears as a clown sometimes, but he’s more than that; he’s a shape-changing monster that takes the form of whatever his victim’s fear is. (Thus the ‘It’ and not just ‘Pennywise.’) So if one kid is afraid of werewolves, It becomes a werewolf. If another is afraid of homeless people, It becomes an aggressive hobo. And that brings me to the crux of my post today. What does it really take to enjoy good horror?

My answer is simple: Imagination! There’s a reason why kids get scared so much more than adults do; their imaginations are still stuck in the “on” position. Fear is based primarily in the unknown, the potential for something – *anything*. That is imagination’s breeding ground. Luckily for me, I’ve chosen a life that keeps my imagination going nearly 24/7. I’ve built a career out of letting my mind wander the unknowns, the what-ifs, the could-bes. So when a really good book or movie asks a scary question, my mind is more than willing to get to work coming up with the scary answer.

There is one more component, though. To really enjoy good horror, you have to let down your defenses. Anything “scary” seems stupid if you laugh at it before you let it sink in. To get a good scare, you have to banish the ego. Drop the defense mechanisms and be willing to feel small and embarrassed. Every once in a while a work will come along that smashes through defenses and scares even those who don’t want to be scared. (Those are cool and fascinating works.) But for most of us, for the rest of the time, we have to allow ourselves be scared. We have to sink into the questions and unknowns rather than racing to plug them with safe answers. Honestly, it’s the most fun way to enjoy horror.

And even beyond fun; you can learn a lot about yourself if you allow fear in instead of running from it. It is primarily negative, yes, but it’s one of the dominant emotions of the human experience. The best way to overcome negative things is to acknowledge them and learn. Fear isn’t going anywhere. It has a lot to teach us. Do you really want to block it out?

That’s my food for thought for today. As a side note, I had some problems with *It*. Some really big problems, actually, but that’s the joy of my Not Quite Book Reviews: I’m not giving a balanced review; I’m just ruminating on books I liked. In *It*’s case, I gave it five glowing stars because it’s the first book that’s truly scared me in years – and that’s nothing to sniff at.

Do you want to be scared as well? Whether for fun or for thought, I’d suggest any of Stephen King’s finest. My favorites so far have been *The Shining*, ‘*Salem’s Lot*, *It*, and *Pet Sematary*. If you sit down with a will to be scared, a willingness to let down your defenses and banish your ego, and a killer imagination, you won’t be disappointed.

When’s the last time a book scared you? I’m always looking for new recommendations!