

# Book Review: Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television by Simon Brown

*In Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television*, author **Simon Brown** examines the significance of Stephen King's literary career through an investigation of the numerous film and television adaptations of King's work and the impact of these on the horror genre since the mid-1970s. **Katherine Williams** recommends this book to those interested in film studies, the history of television, contemporary popular culture and, of course, any Constant Readers out there.

**Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television. Simon Brown. University of Texas Press. 2018.**

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For an author who infamously described his work as the [literary equivalent of a Big Mac and fries](#), Stephen King has seemingly achieved the impossible in his extraordinary ability to transcend the niche confines of the horror genre and achieve worldwide mainstream success. The numbers are, quite simply, staggering: King has published over 50 novels, short story collections and non-fiction works, and has worldwide sales of over 350 million books. At 70, King is still releasing two books per year, much to the delight of Constant Readers everywhere. Many of King's novels and short stories have been adapted for the big and small screen, and Simon Brown, Associate Professor of Film and Television at Kingston University, UK, aims to provide readers with a comprehensive analysis of the interactions between the horror genre and such adaptations, and to explore to what extent 'Brand Stephen King' has affected change and advancement in cinematic and televisual horror. This is a particularly useful exercise given the fact that many of the promotional materials used to market King adaptations rely on his connection to the horror genre, even if the adaptations themselves are not horror productions, as we shall see.



Given King's popularity, we may well expect the film and television adaptations of his work to be prime material for academics in the relevant fields. However, this is not the case: Brown posits that King's notable absence from the appropriate scholarly debates is due to both the poor reception of King adaptations in general, as well as, perhaps short-sightedly, King's success as a mainstream author. The perception of these adaptations is thus tarnished by their association with what some critics have termed the '[dumbing down](#)' of cultural life: compared to the 'gourmet delights' of canonical writers like Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare, King is but 'cotton candy' for the unsophisticated masses. *The Shining* (1980) is something of an exception, but this is undoubtedly due to Stanley Kubrick's reputation as a celebrated director and auteur: it is one of the few King adaptations to possess what Brown terms 'a mark of highbrow cinematic quality'. King himself wryly likened Kubrick's adaptation to a [beautiful Cadillac without an engine](#), calling *The Shining* 'cold' and lacking the nuance of the original narrative: 'all he [Jack Nicholson as Jack Torrance] does is get crazier. In the book, he's a guy struggling with his sanity and finally loses it. To me, that's a real tragedy. In the movie, there's no tragedy because there's no real change.'

As Brown points out, King has generally been quite sceptical of what he has termed 'academic bullshit', and his 'love of the straightforward' arguably extends to his taste in horror films, perhaps explaining why some King adaptations have not achieved critical success. King's lack of pretension, and his desire to entertain Constant Readers, lies at the heart of his literary work and, subsequently, any cinematic or televisual adaptation in which he might have had a degree of influence. In Chapter One, 'Mainstream Horror and Brand Stephen King', Brown attempts to unpack what made King an 'uncommon literary success' in the first place, and asks a pertinent question: who buys all these books, anyway?



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Brown reiterates that while the primary purpose of his book is to consider King's many works and adaptations as a particularly mainstream form of horror, we must first explore what makes King mainstream in the first place. As he notes, a good starting point is King's phenomenal literary success, which began with the publication of *Carrie* in 1974 and continues to this day. Again, the numbers are mindboggling: by 1980, for example, *The Shining* was in its 21st printing, with a total paperback circulation of 4.4 million books. As Brown notes, if huge book sales are the sole indicator of mainstream success, then it is 'far more challenging' to determine how King achieved worldwide popularity given the niche confines of the horror genre, as well as King's continued labelling as a horror writer. Aside from writing books that cross the boundaries of class, gender, age and intellect, Brown posits that King's success is due in part to the emerging 'renaissance' of the horror genre across literature, film and television in the early 1970s: notable film releases – and successful book adaptations – include *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Other* (1972).

King's early literary successes – *Carrie* (1974), *Salem's Lot* (1975) and *The Shining* (1977) – secured his reputation as a horror writer with wide mainstream appeal, and while part of this may be explained by his opportunistic emergence during the renaissance of the horror genre, the other part is arguably explained by what Brown terms King's 'hybridity'. King's tales often explore the lives of ordinary people that find themselves in extraordinary situations. In particular, it is King's use of language and place that taps into 'the vernacular of the everyday' with most works set in his home state of Maine, and with narratives that focus specifically on the quotidian lives of characters. A good example of this is *Dolores Claiborne* (1992), a stream-of-consciousness tale with a distinctly Yankee accent (both figuratively and literally). Consequently, the widely recognisable idiosyncrasies, and plights, of these characters 'speak' to readers on their own terms.

As Brown notes, the situation on screen is invariably more polarised, asserting that many recent film or television adaptations of King's work are successful precisely because they are not marketed as being connected to the author. In fact, many of these are based on short stories not immediately familiar to a general audience: *Stand by Me* (1986), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) are two notable examples. It becomes evident that visual Brand Stephen King is somewhat different from literary Brand Stephen King: readers and cinema-goers appear to be very different groups of consumers. Chapter Three, 'The Mainstream Adaptations, 1986-2007', explores how the playing down of the King association led to sleeper hits like *Stand by Me*, removing the 'requirement' that visual Brand Stephen King be associated with the horror genre at all. This is significant not only in terms of attracting a general audience, but in its marking of King as 'a chronicler of America' and not *just* a horror author, which, as aforementioned, is one of the most significant indicators of his literary success.

Following on from the popularity of *Stand by Me*, four strands of King adaptations subsequently emerged: bad horror films outside the mainstream, for example, *Maximum Overdrive* (1986); films that reworked their original inspiration beyond recognition, such as *The Running Man* (1987); prestige projects outside of horror, like *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *The Green Mile* (1999); and adaptations that moved toward the thriller genre, like *Pet Sematary* (1989) and *Misery* (1990). *Pet Sematary*, in particular, was a surprise success, despite King's name being attached to the project; he even wrote the screenplay. As Brown notes, this is again due to the hybridity present in King's works: the enduring appeal of *Pet Sematary* lies not in its moments of visceral horror, but in its utilisation of universal themes, in this case, the fear of losing a child – a fear very much grounded in the real world. While visual Brand Stephen King has had a tumultuous history, today there is a renewed and vigorous interest in both King's literary work, with the 'rebooting' of classic King adaptations like *IT* (2017), and *Pet Sematary* (upcoming). Additionally, recent, and diverse King works such as *Under the Dome* (2013), *The Mist* (2017), *11/22/63* (2016) and *Mr Mercedes* (2017) have been successfully adapted for television, bringing King's work to a new generation of viewers and reflecting his influence upon popular culture – Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016) being a case in point.

Brown has done an excellent job of bringing together the many film and television King adaptations – the good, the bad and the ugly – and has packaged them into one coherent and, most importantly, accessible volume. Charting King's contribution to the horror genre, and exploring how Brand Stephen King has transcended his literary works, the volume is a valuable contribution to the relatively small pool of academic work on King, and Brown's passion for King (being an avowed Constant Reader himself) is reflected on every page of his thoughtful analysis. Ultimately, King's enduring appeal lies in his ability to explore the extraordinary lives of ordinary people through the use of horror tropes that reflect common real-world fears. As King once said, monsters are real, and ghosts are real too; they live inside us, and sometimes they win.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*