

The Stephen King Challenge

The summer before I entered the ninth grade, I took my first solo train ride to visit my cousins in Greeley, Colorado. It was a journey across some of the most boring scenery in Wyoming, so I spent all 12 hours of it reading a book called *The Shining*. Having been recently released in movie theaters as the horror blockbuster of the year, *The Shining* had fascinated me from the time I saw the first trailer on TV, but since the movie was R-rated (and I could not talk either of my parents into taking me), I was unfamiliar with this sure-to-be-terrifying story. I knew my cousins had already seen (by sneaking into) the movie, and I didn't want them to know I hadn't seen it too, so I bought the book the day before my trip. I figured I would read some of it before I got there and be able to talk to them about it. As one of those weird kids that liked being scared out of my wits, I was no stranger to horror fiction and scary movies, but until that train ride, I never knew what it meant to be *captivated* by a book. I was so involved in the story that I forgot to eat lunch...and I *never* forgot to eat lunch! Terrified but unable to stop reading, I was literally held *captive* by the story. I finished it moments before the train chugged into the Greeley station, and my life was forever changed.

Yeah, I know. That sounds corny, but I am certain that it is because of all the Stephen King books I went on to read over the next few years that I ended up doing what I do. After *The Shining*, I read everything else he had published (which was only three or four other books at the time), and when I ran out of Stephen King books to read and had to wait impatiently for the next one to be released in paperback, I discovered Harlan Ellison...who led me to Ray Bradbury...who led me to Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens and, well, to the whole world of literature. Before I knew what had happened, I was ENJOYING the so-called classics! Say what you will, it was because of the work of Stephen King that I ended up becoming an English teacher, a career I have enjoyed for the past 20 years.

Ironically, I've never been able to "teach" a Stephen King book to my classes because most of his books are banned (in effect, if not officially) in this school district. And, honestly, I see why. Part of the reason Stephen King fascinated me so much when I was 14 was because he was the first writer I had ever read who so unflinchingly looked at and talked about such terrible things: monsters and bugs and corpses and squishy things. No body part was safe! No uncomfortable truth was left unmentioned! Oh, and his language: *so vulgar!* He made an art form of profanity!

And I loved it! It was like belonging to some secret club. Those dopes that were rating movies so that kids couldn't see them had no clue: the books were *so much worse!* A small handful of my friends and I were members in good standing of this secret Stephen King club. We read everything of his we could find, but we didn't say much about it to our teachers because they, most assuredly, would have found it unacceptable reading that would corrupt our young minds and twist our souls beyond salvation. Since none of those teachers had ever read anything so demonic, we freely wrote all our book reports (there was no AR in those days, so we all did book reports) about the latest Stephen King novels. The teachers were happy, and so were we.

More importantly, we were reading... a lot! (Steve has about 60 or 70 books now, so there was always a new one on the way.) Avidly, hungrily, we devoured Stephen King books as soon as they hit the shelves. We talked about him in our lunch circles, went to see the movies that were never as good as the books, and -- here's the important part -- reading became a part of our lives. Stephen King taught us that reading could be engaging and enjoyable, and it became something we would do whether a teacher told us to or not. So fascinated were we by the horror, the gore, the cussing, and the ghosts that we didn't realize we were becoming excellent readers.

Flash forward to my classroom 30 years later. More than half of the kids in it willingly admit that they would never read *anything* if it weren't for teachers like me who force them to. In our effort to create competent readers, we have made them hate reading. I'd like to change that. To wit: The Stephen King Challenge.

Stephen King has now written so many books on such a variety of topics (not all of them horror novels) that there is practically something for everyone in his catalogue...and I know them all. Further, I'd like *you* to know some of them because it might turn you into the voracious reader I became when I was your age. Of course I realize that Stephen King isn't for everyone. In fact, around here, he isn't even especially well known despite the fact that he is the best selling writer in the history of publishing. But if you are willing to take the challenge, I will try to hook you up with a Stephen King book that will suit at least some of your tastes.

Don't like scary stuff? I know some that aren't meant to make you tremble. Prefer fantasy? He's got a couple good ones. Parents don't want you reading anything R-rated? He's got a couple G- and PG-rated books, one that was even turned into a children's picture book! Prefer short stories to those massive novels? He's written hundreds. Or maybe you *want to try* one of those massive novels? He has two of them that are more than 1000 pages long! Do you like all the recent serial novels like Harry Potter and Percy Jackson? Stephen King has a series of his own, and it's longer.

In the past 30 years, Stephen King has taken me to the future and the past; he's introduced me to the most incredible villains and the most unconquerable heroes; he has showed me parallel universes and the end of the world. Monsters, cowboys, possessed cars, and haunted hotels like the Overlook, which I inhabited during a 12-hour train ride all those years ago, have lived in my imagination since Stephen King brought them to life on the page.

Try one! You won't find any in the school library, but I've got extra copies to lend. All you have to do is ask...if you dare. Join the secret club! C'mon! What have you got to lose...except your mind?

*<%^) MRT

P.S. If you and a couple friends would all like to read the same book at the same time so you can talk about it (like I did with my friends), that too can be arranged. Heh-heh-heh!