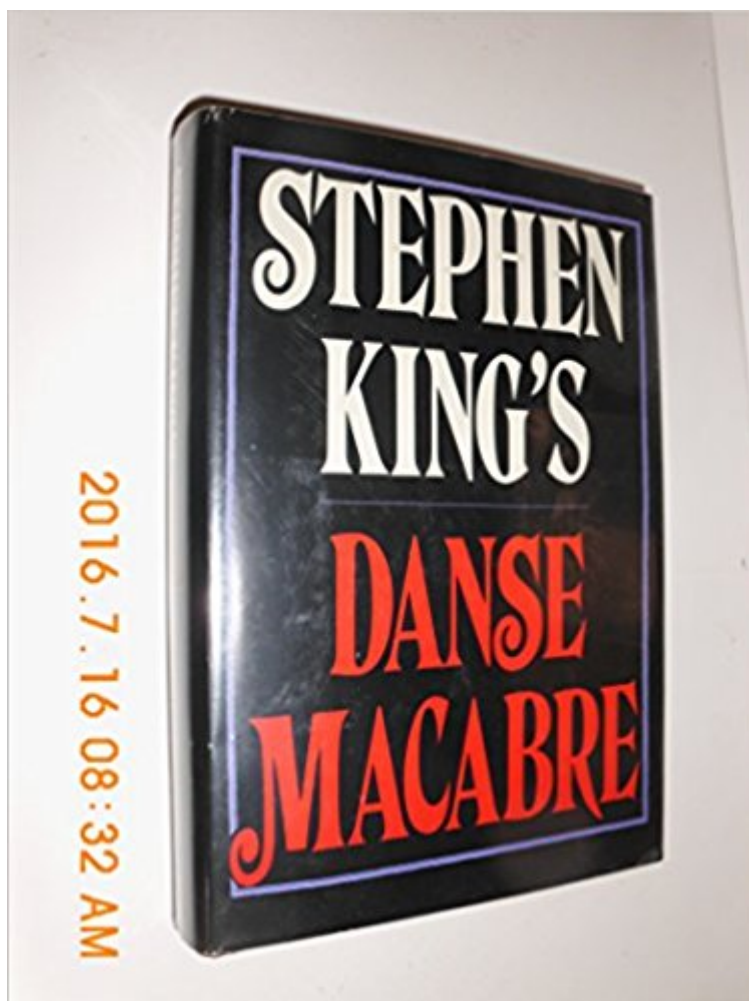


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Stephen King's Danse Macabre



Synopsis

The author whose boundless imagination and storytelling powers have redefined the horror genre, from 1974's *Carrie* to his epic *Under the Dome*, reflects on the very nature of terror—what scares us and why—in films (both cheesy and choice), television and radio, and, of course, the horror novel, past and present. Informal, engaging, tremendous fun, and tremendously informative, *Danse Macabre* is an essential tour with the master of horror as your guide; much like his spellbinding works of fiction, you won't be able to put it down. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

In the fall of 1978 (between *The Stand* and *The Dead Zone*), Stephen King taught a course at the University of Maine on "Themes in Supernatural Literature." As he writes in the foreword to this book, he was nervous at the prospect of "spending a lot of time in front of a lot of people talking about a subject in which I had previously only felt my way instinctively, like a blind man." The course apparently went well, and as with most teaching experiences, it was as instructive, if not more so, to the teacher as it was to the students. Thanks to a suggestion from his former editor at Doubleday, King decided to write *Danse Macabre* as a personal record of the thoughts about horror that he developed and refined as a result of that course. The outcome is an utterly charming book that reads as if King were sitting right there with you, shooting the breeze. He starts on October 4, 1957, when he was 10 years old, watching a Saturday matinee of *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*. Just as the

saucers were mounting their attack on "Our Nation's Capital," the movie was suddenly turned off. The manager of the theater walked out onto the stage and announced, "The Russians have put a space satellite into orbit around the earth. They call it ... Sputnik." That's how the whole book goes: one simple, yet surprisingly pertinent, anecdote or observation after another. King covers the gamut of horror as he'd experienced it at that point in 1978 (a period of about 30 years): folk tales, literature, radio, good movies, junk movies, and the "glass teat". It's colorful, funny, and nostalgic--and also strikingly intelligent. --Fiona Webster --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

King's 1987 disquisition on the nature, quality, and substance of the horror genre from 1950 to 1980 gains new life as an audiobook, and listeners will enjoy (and enjoy disagreeing with) King's conclusions and seeing which ones have held up. A new introduction features King revisiting his book and recent horror narratives. William Dufris narrates with a clear, easygoing tone that works well with King's playful and enthusiastic prose. Dufris keeps up with King's shifting tone and even attempts the occasional goofy impersonation when King's writing suggests it, such as the devious laugh of the Crypt Keeper. Though its breadth can be overwhelming, the book becomes a delight to listen to in the hands of Dufris's skillful performance--and listeners will leave with an extensive list of must-see and must-read material. A Berkley paperback. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Okay, let's be honest. Stephen King is pretty prolific. He's not only written many books but also mind-bogglingly lengthy. Some have been wordy. Some could have easily been shorter (namely Gerald's Game). But you have to hand it to good old king. He sure knows his stuff. If there's one thing I love from reading Stephen King, it's his introductions. Each one is a story within itself. Who can forget his story notes on Everything's Eventual, Skeleton Crew and Nightmares and Dreamscapes? Who can simply pass by The Importance of being Bachman (an intro into his life as a pseudonym and that eventual end.)? I know I can't. I know that the introduction isn't the biggest selling point of a story but it certainly is the tidiest way to move you along, find out the author's motivations for writing the story, a peek behind the curtain, if you will. Well, I'm here to tell you that his non-fiction book, Danse Macabre, is like one big introduction to the horror genre from 1920 -1980. Of course, it's King, so you can expect some divergent thinking and many tangents, even footnotes that sort of bog down the point. The first half is about the movies and myths he experiences from his

youth. He covers vampires, ghosts, werewolves, mad scientists and even that Hook story all the teeny boppers knew in the 1950's. Like the Red Sea that it is, it is a lot to wade through. But, if you hang steady and let the tide take you, you eventually get to the meat. Once he goes through the ins and outs of proper horror, classy horror, the black and white horror that we've forgotten with all this Psycho-in-your-face-torture-porn, he gets to movies that did it right and, more importantly, books that did it right. Back in those days you dealt with cold, hard, true terror. Now everything is done for shock value. That doesn't seem right to me. Something Wicked This Way Comes, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, The Incredible Shrinking Man did it the right way. He also pays tribute to the writers, sharing some insight on interviews behind the stories they wrote. The last chapter is, I think, by far the best, where he rotates real news stories on crimes inspired or inadvertently committed by horror films and books. There's this crazy article about Baltimore in 1980 where a woman gets attacked by someone while she's reading a book while waiting for the bus. I won't spoil what happens next. You'll have to read it to believe it. By the end of it all, you've gathered that half was criticism and half was the really delicious meat we were hunting for. The last two sections give an Appendix A and Appendix B. Appendix A is a list of all the classic, well-done, well-directed horror movies with a few stinkers just to get you started. The other index a list of every horror book referenced and they are classics. I suggest you read them. I've already added them to my reading list. If you can take one thing away from reading this book, you could say that, although lengthy at times, King was able to go through every nook and cranny to show us the classier horror of the day. No rock went un-turned. Truly, a good read from King.

Some of us love stories that leave us listening fearfully for shuffling footsteps in the dark, or movies that make us spray our popcorn about the room when the bogeyman leaps from the shadows, on reflection, we may wonder just what it is about scary stories that causes such fearful reactions. Those who scoff at the horror genre, who flinch at any mention of anything bad happening in a story and whose entertainment choices revolve around TV shows like American Idol, may wonder what all the excitement over the horror genre is about. The balm for both these groups is Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*, an homage, exploration, and critical analysis of the horror genre during the period 1950-1980, a period that experienced the cultivation and development of the scary story form through radio, TV, movie, and book formats. Lest the very idea of a thirty-year overview of the horror genre conjure up fears of a stale, academic, and tedious exposition, rest assured that this tour through the spooky and macabre is conducted by the perfect guide-King is an award-winning author of more than 49 horror novels and short stories with many movie and TV adaptations. In *Danse*

Macabre he approaches his task as someone who loves and lives the genre, not as the critic, who dissects and pontificates as an outsider. This book is an insider's tour delivered in King's pouncey-bouncy writing style, a conversational one that both entertains and educates. There are three main contributions in this book. First, there is the dutiful comb-through of the horror highlights of the radio, TV, movie, and book formats. But though it is interesting to hear about mid-1950s radio broadcasts, such as *Suspense* or Orson Wells's *War of the Worlds*, I suspect that most people today, in an era of streaming Internet movies, may have difficulty relating to (horror) radio broadcasts. Nevertheless, the inclusion of radio makes the overview of the horror genre complete, and it reinforces the fact that telling a scary story is not limited by technological channels--an entire world was frightened by Orson Wells intoning over just a radio microphone. In discussing horror movies and TV shows, rather than heavy analysis King focuses simply on which pieces speak most to our fears, whether they be universal, political, social, or cultural, along with mentioning those films and shows which are just plain entertaining to watch. Again, the tone is light and informational. While we learn how the movie *The Amityville Horror* can be seen as playing on our economic fears, we also gain insights into how this movie, though it was not critically acclaimed, nevertheless struck a resonant chord with the viewing audience. There are pages to this discussion, touching on many tangents and related movies, such as *The Exorcist*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Them!*, but King also sums up his point succinctly with this nugget: "As horror goes, *Amityville* is pretty pedestrian. So's beer, but you can get drunk on it." Time and again in *Danse Macabre* King similarly illuminates as well as he entertains. For novels, King discusses ten books that represent the best of the horror genre as both literature and entertainment, such as Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* and *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson. As with his discussion of radio, movie, and TV shows, King careens through the entire literary corpus with tangents, anecdotes, and behind-the-scenes commentary, such as entertaining stories about what happened when Harlan Ellison, an author with some notoriety, was invited to work on the script for the first *Star Trek* movie. Beyond just overviewing the horror genre, King more interestingly takes a step back and looks at the elements of the horror story--what scares us and why. He proposes three iconic monsters for the horror genre, and details especially the horror stories those monsters are known for: the thing, (in *Frankenstein*), the vampire (in *Dracula*), and the werewolf (in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). He also shows three levels of emotion horror stories can target within us: terror, horror, and revulsion. The finest and most primal emotional level reached by a scary story is terror, and we are terrified when stories allow our own minds to fill in the details about the baddies around the corner. So in stories that evoke terror--judged to be the most effective at being scary--we are actually not allowed to see the monster behind the

closed door. A slightly more coarse emotion, but still scary enough, is that of horror. Here, the door is opened and we see the monster, lurching. If a story can't achieve the effect of terror or horror, then it can at least cause revulsion--you see the monster, slurping the victim's entrails like pasta in a wine-dark marinara sauce. The third and perhaps most important contribution of *Danse Macabre* is that this book is an homage to the horror genre. King shows us why horror matters and why people who like horror stories aren't psychopaths. On the contrary, horror can help us understand our deepest fears by showing us a side of life that we don't often experience directly, lifting the lid of the casket, so to speak. By looking inside, we can learn the truth about ourselves. Horror stories have the power to transport us back to when we were young and the world was ominous and life was to be relished, and King generously shares his encyclopedic knowledge and enthusiasm for the genre in *Danse Macabre*. The book makes us want to be scared, to want to go investigate that strange sound, and King cheerfully leads the way for us down into the dark and dank catacomb. With his insights and recommendations we can crawl as far into the tunnels as we dare in seeking the creepy, guided by Stephen King in the role of our inner child.

I've read this book a half-dozen times and have always found something new. Or, at least, a new way of looking at something. I've read many of these books, seen most of the films and TV shows. King's analysis of the horror genre is based on a deep love and admiration of said genre and it shows. If you're looking for new things to read or watch -- and some commentary on why you might enjoy it -- you can't go wrong with using this book as a guide. Enjoy the dance.

If you want to know how something works, ask an expert. Stephen King's style, wit and imagination have captured millions of readers over the last few decades. And although he has a background in education, King makes his book both educational and entertaining, by using examples from his life and childhood, by discussing the old movies and fiction, as well as pulling it into the 20th century. Do realize that this book covers limited territory - up to around 1985 or so - which seems appropriate. After that, the ability to use CGI effects has made movies less appealing to those who love the old style horror. King takes the reader on a walk down a darkling path toward an understanding of why horror is art, and why it is necessary to our enjoyment of life. I've re-read this book every 5 years or so, and every time I find something more in it. Highly recommended.

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