

It's huge, it's horrifying, it's

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

I think I started with *The Dead Zone* and *Firestarter*, and maybe *Night Shift*, all from the local library. And I remember carrying home *Christine* the week it showed up on the NEW shelf and reading it in one three-hour Saturday sitting. That was 1983. Since then I guess I've read — give or take a few — about a thousand novels. Maybe half have had Stephen King's name emblazoned in huge red or gold letters on the cover.

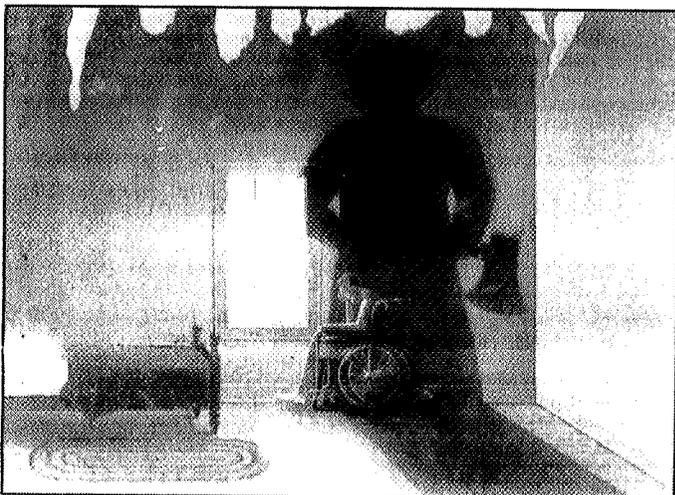
All right. A minor exaggeration. King has actually produced a mere 24 novels and short-story collections (plus seven screenplays) in those doz-



"Cujo," 1981.

en years, including *Rose Madder*, available on bookstore shelves this week.

But my God, 24 books? And these aren't "slender volumes." King cranks out paragraphs in bulk, enough pages about odd Maine towns to keep the casual reader occupied year-round. As his quantity has ballooned, though, his standards have nose-dived. His last consistently good novel, *Misery*, came out back in 1987, (the same year, incidentally, that King also produced *Eyes*



"Misery," 1987.

of the *Dragon*, a mild fantasy tale, and *The Tommyknockers*, a disappointing sci-fi horror novel).

KING IS prodigiously gifted, but lately he seems just plain prodigious. I suspect I'm not the only reader who skipped the middle 200 pages of *Needful Things* and *The Tommyknockers*, who didn't make it all the way through *Gerald's Game* or *Nightmares & Dreamscapes*, who barely cracked the *Dark Tower* trilogy.

Last fall's opus, *Insomnia*, got so crushingly stupid halfway through that I actually shut the book for good on the verge of finding out whether 2,000 pro-choice ralliers die in a terrorist bombing. Somehow, King managed to make me not care if all his characters died.

The books have become forbiddingly heavy: *Insomnia* is 787 pages; *Nightmares & Dreamscapes* (1993) is 816; *Needful Things* (1991) is 704; *Four Past Midnight* (1990) is 763. King's author's-cut reissue of *The Stand* (1990) runs 1,153 pages, topping even *It* (1986), at 1,138. Even the paperbacks are hard-pressed to squeeze into purses and briefcases.

"I have a real problem with bloat — I write like fat ladies diet," he writes in the introduction to *Skeleton Crew* (1985). In that book's afterword he refers to his "literary elephantiasis." He notes in the introduction to *Nightmares* that "every novel wants to be approximately four thousand pages long."

It's easy to pinpoint the beginning of the downward slide: In 1985, when an industrious fan discovered that pulp-thriller writer Richard Bachman was actually a pseudonymous King, King had Bachman's five books republished under his real name — and realized that the public had a bottomless appetite for his work. Since then, apparently, no editor has dared either to trim or tighten. He appears governed by what he calls "this restless need to publish what I write."

THE GOOD STUFF, still good in-

deed, is increasingly sparse, half-submerged in lakes of swill, brought into even sharper relief by the memories of his glory years of 10 and 15 years ago.

King is the Paul McCartney of popular fiction. Like the former Beatle, he's often unfairly dismissed by those unfamiliar with his work. No hack horrorist, he can be an immensely accomplished writer, with a matchless talent for characterization and dialogue. His fiction is populated with literally hundreds of indelible characters, characters with whom you'd like to get better acquainted, (or avoid at all cost), characters whose fates you truly care about.

His writing, shot through with italicized interior monologues, is stylistically unique, instantly recognizable. He has an ability to get inside lower-middle-class minds that's rare in popular fiction.

And in his best novels and novel-



"The Stand," 1990.

las — *The Shining*, *The Stand*, *The Dead Zone*, *Firestarter*, *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, and *The Running Man* (all 1977-1982) — he places interesting people in situations that force them to make agonizing choices. It makes for utterly compelling fiction that exists on a plane higher than simple, page-turning suspense.

King's problems are all in his plotting. Typically he presents a provocative premise, sets the story rolling — and then just keeps typing, like some ghoulish Jack Kerouac, until an ending finally shows up. In *Cujo* (1981), a rabid dog traps a mother and son in a stifling car until they're really, really thirsty; *Thinner* (1985) gives us a man cursed to lose weight until he's really, really, thin; *The Long Walk* (1979) offers a boy who walks in a contest, until he's really, really tired.

YOU GET the idea. Eventually, the stories come to a climax, but only when there's no other option. They're driven more by inertia than by suspense.

King manages to break all the

BOOKS

... a Stephen King novel!

rules he lays out in *Danse Macabre* (1981), his terrifically entertaining and insightful exploration of horror movies and books. In that book he explains how an unseen monster is far more terrifying than a visible one — yet in story after story, he lets us down by showing us his monsters. The title character in *It* is an eerily effective shape-shifting Nameless Thing, but at book's climax (1,048 pages later!) it becomes... a really big spider! Pretty silly, particularly since King clearly intends it to be a Vision of Ultimate Horror.

Also, there's his increasingly heavy reliance on kid-stuff demons and bogeymen in lieu of the inventive paranormal twists that drive *Firestarter* and *The Shining*. When SATAN is pulling the strings, there's not much opportunity to explore human nature in the intricate ways of *The Dead Zone* and *The Stand*.

A perfect example is *Needful Things*, whose opening is full of promise: An old man comes to town and opens a curio shop filled with all sorts of wondrous little items. His prices are bargains, but there's a catch — he wants his customers to play little pranks on their neighbors. Soon the whole town is breaking windows, smearing bedsheets and going at it with knives on street-corners, tapping wells of repressed hostility.

This should tell us something about the buried anger we all harbor within, no? No. The shopkeeper turns out to be SATAN, or something of that nature, the townspeople become senseless, violent automations, and at story's end — after hundreds of pages of mush that any self-respecting editor would have blue-penciled — the villagers drop their weapons, look at each other and wonder, "What were we thinking?"

Once we realize that King's characters are just puppets of some supernatural force, we lose all interest in them. And, frankly, we feel cheated.

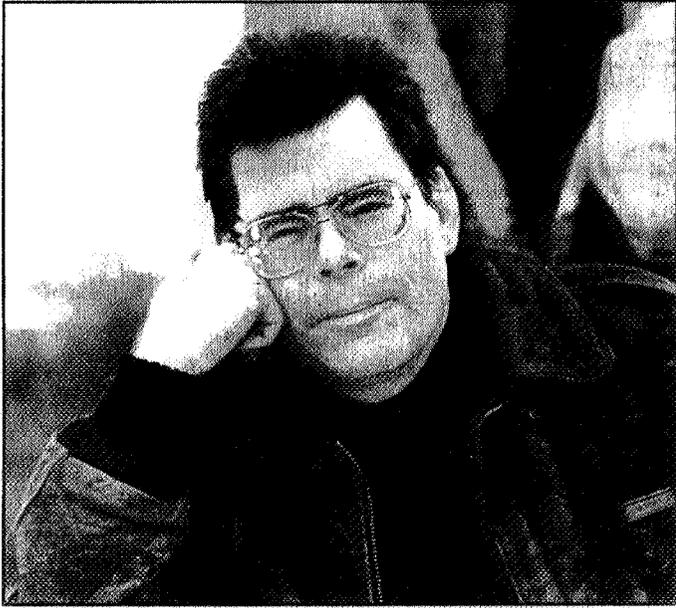
Ah, it's hard to be a longtime Stephen King reader. The relationship isn't what it used to be; most of the magic is gone. You know you should stop seeing him. Forget him, your friends say — he's no good for you. He's a waste of time and money. He's disappointed you for years.

But you remember how things used to be. You'd like to break up... but there's still enough of that old spark to keep you coming back for more.

Face it: You're codependent.

SO NOW there's a new book. *Rose Madder* is comparatively brief at 420 pages, an easy three-day read. It's about Rose, a bruised and beaten 32-year-old wife who decides to leave her sadistic husband after 14 nightmare years of pain and fear.

Tremulously, Rose finds her way to a bus station, to a new town, to a battered-women's shelter and begins a new life, gradually gaining confidence and finding friends. King handles all this marvelously. He opens the novel with Rose's miscar-



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Stephen King

riage, induced by Norman's fists, and we feel her agony. We understand why Rose stayed with Norman for 14 years, and why she finally leaves.

King then steers the story in two problematic directions.

Norman decides he cannot let his wife get away with the affronts of, first, withdrawing \$350 with his bank card and, second, leaving him. He sets out with the feral instincts that have made him a case-cracking cop.

Films and local news have made this scenario all too familiar. By page 31, we suspect what's going to happen, and by page 54, we know: Norman will get closer and closer to Rose, cutting a bloody swath through those near her, before the final confrontation.

Now, for a stalking story to be gripping, the pursuer really must be either an unknowable, unstoppable force, like the Terminator, or a relentless mastermind. And here King fails: Yes, we get right inside Norman's head — only to find a villain so despicable he's ridiculous, a simple laundry list of prejudices and psychopathic tics. Norman hates women. He hates gays and liberals. He hates blacks and Latinos and Jews. Violence is his only mode of self-expression and includes ugly sexual stuff and biting. He strangles prostitutes. He abuses his police privileges. He smokes. He hates the Beatles.

There isn't an ounce of cleverness or charm or humor to Norman. His thoughts are rarely more refined than "TLL KILL YOU, YOU BITCH!"

This story so far is as conventional and topical as King ever gets, and we know it's only a matter of time

before something *unexplainable* appears, to lead us down the path to weirdness. Since *Misery* he has used the supernatural as a crutch; it's as if he's lost confidence in his ability to scare readers without it, as if a crazed husband's pursuit of his wife were insufficiently horrifying to keep his readers turning pages.

Sure enough, Rose, drawn to an oil painting in a pawnshop, buys it, and it's not long before strange things begin to happen; soon we find ourselves in a magical world of women and rage that seems clumsily spliced in from some other tale. Eventually King's topical and fantasy storylines merge, gracelessly, leaving us with a sense of completion but not of satisfaction.

CERTAIN ELEMENTS in *Rose Madder* veer dangerously close to self-plagiarism. *Insomnia*, published just eight months ago, also features a woman who flees her husband for a battered-women shelter. More troubling, King developed a plot with a woman pursued across state lines by a viciously abusive husband nearly a decade ago in *It*.

All this is not to say that *Rose Madder* isn't compulsively readable; even King's worst prose will keep your bitty book light on late, and there's far less sludge in this novel than in *The Tommyknockers*, *Needful Things* or the *Dark Tower* trilogy.

But it's nowhere near his best — and it should have been. And while I'd love to assume his next effort will be better, I honestly can't. No one who's spent the last decade with Stephen King could.

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