

Interviews

Poor Stephen King *by Richard Warren*

All those thousands of his "greatest" fans pestering him for autographs. All those media types hounding him with personal questions. All those gazillions of dollars.

Still, when the mega-popular horror writer came to Columbus last weekend, you couldn't help but get a small glimpse of what hell popularity can be. Even at the press conference he held at Little Professor Bookstore on Sawmill Road, an event that was kept fairly quiet and low-key, a couple dozen diehard fans still managed to find him and dog his steps through the bookstore all the way out to the parking lot, where they shouted questions and even photographed him as he studiously ignored them and got on his Harley Davidson and drove away. Even the *Dispatch* photographer couldn't resist the impulse to record the momentous event on film. If your every trivial movement becomes sensational in the eye of the public, you may understand why King fights to keep what little privacy he still has.

And, when asked, King admits all the attention is overwhelming, that he has practically "no private life anymore." "Writers are like undercover agents," he said. "We're supposed to be out there observing you people. I'm supposed to be looking at you and trying to figure out why you are what you are," not be gawked at by hero-worshipping members of the public. The whole situation in King's eyes is "perverted," but hey, that's what the American celebrity machine is all about, he said.

Still, at the evening reading, in front of 2000 noisily devoted fans who rose as one and gave him a standing ovation as he walked onstage, King seemed personable, at ease, and even enjoying his celebrity status. Although genuinely charming and quite funny, he didn't need to work too hard to please his audience. Every passing reference to one of his books excited furious applause. After a while, King abandoned saying anything *about* the books. He would just mention a book's name, and some subset of the cultists in attendance would clap their fool hands off. That's power, and at least part of King seems to be reveling in it.

When King really livens up, though, is when people ask him about what makes him tick as a writer. Although he's undoubtedly been asked a million times "What scares Stephen King?" he seems to whip up genuine enthusiasm when answering. "On a human level, my fears are everybody else's fears, and that explains why my books are so popular," he said. "I'm afraid of losing my kids. I'm afraid of losing my life. I'm afraid of waking up in the middle of the night with something furry on my face. I'm afraid of going into a dark room and feeling for the light switch and having something put its hand over mine."

King explained that writing his imaginative epics is a way of coping with the horror of the world, of exorcising it. Writing horror is "like squeezing pus from a blister," he explained. "It's not that I'm creating fears for myself so much as I'm channeling out fears that I have."



Many of his own fears, and much of his personal experience, make their way into his writing. *Pet Sematary*, for example, comes from his family's once residing near such a cemetery, and a real-life near-miss between a semi truck and one of King's children provided the creative impetus for part of the book.

What may strike some fans as a little macabre is how much hilarity King seems to find in his horror. He finds a close connection between the "gross out" elements in humor and in horror and admits to little restraint in fighting back the impulse to luxuriate in the nauseating. "Sometimes there'll be a little voice that'll say 'This is too much,' but not very often," King admitted. Once when a copy editor penciled into the margin of King's text "Oh no. Please don't say this," King's response was, "But I'm going to say it, and I'm going to say it even more!"

It was early in King's life that he learned the love of grossing people out. He was always the one who loved to play the "Do you like sea food?" game at the dinner table. And he relishes a childhood story of his mother's about how a moth got stuck in her chewing gum she had stuck on her bedpost when she was just a little girl. The next morning when she reached for the gum, well...you guessed it. His mother's lurid details of how the moth was still alive when she bit into it and of which moth parts got enmeshed

in which teeth may account for much of how young Stephen turned out. "When people ask me 'What were you like as a kid?' what they really want to know is 'What fucked you up?'" King said, laughing. "I don't know. It just happened."

With success can come arrogance, but King comes across as quite humble, considering himself very fortunate and even lucky. He gets a little defensive, however, of hearing how he's a wonderful storyteller but not a very good writer. "There are a lot of people, despite what the critics say, that I think I write better than," he said. "I don't think I'm a terrible writer, and I think I've been spanked with that a lot because critics are very leery of writers who sell millions and millions of copies. There's an unstated assumption that once you sell enough copies you must be schlock because that's the level most read. I reject that idea."

When asked if he ever sees himself (to the horror of his fans) retiring, King seems genuinely taken aback—as if it's something that's never occurred to him before. "I guess I think writers go on and on until they're used up, and then they spend five or six years parodying themselves and then quit and fall silent," he said. "It's a cycle I see a lot of writers go through, and I'm terrified of that moment of self-parody." With great sincerity and with a perfectly straight face, King said he no longer writes for remuneration. "I'm not doing it anymore for the money, but I hope if it gets to the point where I'm not enjoying it, I'll stop."

King constantly strives to bombard himself with new stimuli to keep his imagination fertile and replenished. That's a big deal of the reason he is crossing the country on his Harley doing readings from his new novel *Insomnia*. Part of the reason is a mission of showing support for the independent bookstores who nurtured King as a young writer and who have now fallen on hard times with competition from mall bookstores and bookstore superchains. But for King, aside from the non-altruistic reason of selling a few books, a big impulse for the tour is to open himself to new experiences. "Basically I'm going along day to day with my air scoop open, only it isn't air it's scooping—it's feelings and sensations," he explained. Who knows? Maybe someday, somewhere, some experience King scooped up in Columbus will get transformed into some incident in one of his books. If, that is, we managed to sufficiently horrify the master horror-teller.

I Interviewed Howie *by David Bushey*

"Who?"

Howie Mandel. The comedian. You know who he is; he was on "St. Elsewhere," he does that "Bobby's World" cartoon...

"You mean the guy who puts a rubber glove on his head?"

Yes, that's the one: Howie Mandel. The guy who puts a rubber glove on his head.

Known to many people as Dr. Wayne Fiscus from the 1980s television series *St. Elsewhere*, Howie Mandel is still in the entertainment business. He's done countless comedy specials for HBO and Showtime since his stint on *St. Elsewhere*, and continues to perform stand-up routines in concert, averaging 200 dates a year. He's also the co-creator and executive producer of the Fox network's highly



Budweiser

BOO
BALL
IN THE HALL

9pm-1am

Saturday, October 29, 1994

Hall C-Columbus Convention Center

Put Your Best Face Forward
For The Ultimate
Costume Contest 11:30-12:15
You Could Win The Grand Prize...
an all-inclusive trip for two to see
The Rolling Stones.
2nd Prize \$1000
3rd Prize \$500

Get Started on your costume now!
Halloween... It's Not Just For Kids Anymore!

Party with the Menus!

TICKETS ONLY \$6 AT THE DOOR

FM 96.3
Rock & Roll

WCMH 4
COLUMBUS