

Stephen King's Not So Scary Novels

Dennis May, Kirkland Town Library Staff

Happy October or - if you're so inclined - "Spooky Season!" It's the time of the year when Spirit of Halloween shops open up out of nowhere, candy and chocolate are abundant, and the movie theaters and television channels are flooded with horror movies. If any holiday can give Christmas a run for its money based on celebratory spirit, it's Halloween. My month of October, leading up to the 31st, is filled with candy corn, pumpkin carving, a house decked out in black and orange decorations, and pumpkin-shaped chocolates.

Naturally, scary and scary-adjacent movies also play a huge part in my celebration of Spooky Season. Growing up my dad and I would watch old horror classics such as *The Mummy* (1932), and *The Werewolf* (1956). We even watched the great Bela Lugosi ham it up as that notorious vampire in *Dracula* (1931). But even then I didn't really understand the appeal of the horror genre. After all, those movies that seemed so terrifying to my younger self, are the epitome of camp and over-the-top melodrama in my adult eyes - not exactly the "jump out of your seat" scares that I remember. It wasn't until I was much older until I found a true appreciation of the horror genre, but it didn't come to me in the form of cinema. My senior year of high school I discovered the King of Horror: Stephen King.

The first King novel I ever read was *The Shining*, which hooked me from the very first page on the suspense, creepiness, and thrills of Jack Torrance's descent into madness. After that, I read *Pet Semetary*, another classic that oozes with creepiness and jump scares. Since this first foray into King's gigantic resume, I've read several other of his horror classics -- *Carrie*, *IT*, and *The Outsider* -- and I have only just scratched the surface. While you would be hard pressed to find another author as synonymous with the horror genre as Stephen King there's a twist: his non-horror books are just as good and prolific. If you don't want to fill October with screams and bad dreams, but want to immerse yourself in the writings of the horror master, perhaps you'll enjoy one of these titles:

11/22/63 (2011) is a masterclass in historical fiction. If you love history, thrillers, romance, and existential crises, this book is for you! We follow joyless and miserable high school English teacher Jake Epping as he travels back in time to prevent the assassination of John F. Kennedy. As he prepares for that tragic day in November, he settles into the era, gets a job at a school, and falls in love. Epping finally finds what gives his life purpose, but, as time runs out, he must choose between his own happiness or the fate of the entire world. As tragic as the plot may be, there is not a single ounce of horror. The monsters in this tale are time and the burning question: what would happen if you can change your own destiny?

The Green Mile (1996) was originally released as a series of books detailing Paul Edgecombe's time as a death row supervisor, and his encounter with inmate John Coffey in 1932. Coffey, a big burly black man, awaits his execution for murdering two white girls. Shortly after he arrives on the "mile" it is discovered that he possesses strong healing powers and can feel other people's pain. The heart of the story is John Coffey and his interactions with the prison guards and his fellow inmates, as each of them comes to terms with the gentle giant's abilities and how fate drew them together. The monsters in this story are the misconceptions we often have of each other, and the inability to see the good in a bleak world.

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The Stand (1978) is definitely the most disturbing of these three, but it's not a novel nestled in the horror genre. King's epic begins during the early stages of a global pandemic as a weaponized strain of influenza wreaks havoc. After the pandemic kills off almost an entire population, the few survivors gather into factions to try to rebuild society. One of these groups is led by a messiah-like being, possessing supernatural abilities, named Randall Flagg. This tale is a dark and twisted battle between good and evil, and is as gut wrenching as it is fantastical. The only monster in this one is the uncontrollable desire for power as a whole world burns.

There is nothing wrong with enjoying the Halloween season without the pressure to indulge in scary things. Stories about ghosts, goblins, guts and gore are not for everyone. I mean, my house might look ready for the frights and thrills of the spooky season, but I don't want to spend the entire month being afraid to turn off the lights. I save the Stephen King novels for the spring and summer months when everything is brighter and less gloomy.