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## A horror story for an elite: Stephen King takes prize

By **Christina McCarroll and Ron Charles** | Staff writers of The Christian Science Monitor

Whether you've read the novel or not, you know the spine-tingling story: A perfectly normal man in a remote old house starts hearing voices, slips into insanity, and kills his family.

"The Shining"? You're off by 200 years. It's America's first novel, "Wieland," written by Charles Brockden Brown in 1798.

Of course Stephen King, with 300 million copies of his books in print, sells better than his Revolutionary forefather, now relegated to the footnotes of American literary history. But the reigning master of horror is still battling the forces of snobbery. Wednesday, as he receives the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, he's also at the center of a debate over what, exactly, is "literature."

The lifetime achievement award has gone to the likes of John Updike, Philip Roth, and Eudora Welty, and the announcement that King was next in line drew roars of protest and fears of an imploding Western canon from literary critic Harold Bloom and a host of others who deride King's work as "penny dreadfuls" - and dismiss the horror genre as pure pulp. For literary lions and fervent fans, such tirades probe the line between highbrow and lowbrow - and raise some eyebrows, too.

"These lines between popular and elite have always been very fluid in American culture," says Dana Heller, an English professor and director of the Humanities Institute at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va. "A lot of that [fluidity] has to do with how we understand the term 'popular' itself. It could be base and vulgar, the lowest common denominator. But there's also a definition of popular that arises with democratic movements - that what people at large like must be good."

King has been compared to Edgar Allan Poe and William Shakespeare - and derided by Mr. Bloom as "an immensely inadequate writer." Like Charles Dickens, King's published his work in serial form to great commercial success. Critics quibble over which parallel is best: J.K. Rowling, John Milton, Dean Koontz, Danielle Steel, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

But those comparisons, cautions Alan Cheuse, book commentator on NPR's "All Things Considered," go only so far: "The material is not central to the culture in the way that Dickens's material was. Dickens was writing about the very serious core of British society - life in the big city, distinctions of life among the various social classes - and King's material is really much more peripheral. He's telling ghost stories, basically."

King's real gift, says Mr. Cheuse, is his broad appeal. "Even Shakespeare's most serious plays had sections that appealed to groundlings - the lowest audience - and King manages to bring in those serious readers and the lowest common denominator."

## A far-ranging oeuvre

King himself has made sure to defy categorization. He writes of blood and gore and cyborgs, a rabid St. Bernard hurling himself against a broken-down Ford Pinto, and dead pets who return to seek revenge. Yet he quotes the Greek poet and essayist George Seferis. He includes Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice Cream" in his vampire novel "Salem's Lot." He wrote a novella imitating Jorge Luis Borges. And he's written "The Shawshank Redemption" and "The Green Mile."

To some, that straddling of popular and elite literary worlds, and of the human and uncanny, is his greatest gift. "It speaks to something very profound going on in our culture, and the way we understand our own humanness," says Professor Heller. "As our sense of being human changes in a high-tech global environment, our literature is going to have to be attuned to those changes as well. And literature once associated with machines or with the nonhuman is going to seem more humanized and take on more value."

Jim Farrelly - along with dozens of students from his "Stephen King on Film" and occult-literature classes at Ohio's University of Dayton - doesn't hesitate to see King as a cultural emissary. "Some people at the university think I'm crazy when I compare something of Stephen King's to Shakespeare," he says. "But it's a wonder to see how his texts stand up to scrutiny." One student linked evil and fury in King's "The Shining" to Shakespeare's "Othello." There's fodder for Milton fans, too: "You get mentions of 'Paradise Lost,' the fallen angels, the temptations of Jesus, the temptations of Adam and Eve, the resentment and jealousy that leads angels to challenge God."

Mr. Farrelly is used to the criticism that his curriculum is "The Mary Poppins solution" - a spoonful of sugar to help literature go down. But he insists King has a place in the canon - or at least in the classroom. "What Faulkner did for his community in the South, Stephen King is doing for his community in Maine and New England. You get a feel for the origins of the American country."

Indeed, King's website has a map of Maine charting the small-town settings - an online version of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. And there's another parallel, points out Cecelia Tichi, a professor of English at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.: Faulkner, too, was derided in his time, dismissed as "degenerate, a sexual pervert, an alcoholic, thought to be worse than Poe." Then he won the Nobel Prize.

And the King-Faulkner pair is in good company: Mark Twain, too, was derided as "a children's writer," Professor Tichi says. "He was popular - and then despised. No polite, educated, middle-class family would have his books in their home." "Crossover problems" have plagued novelist Joyce Carol Oates as well. "If you look at her career, you see much the same thing - hostility, suspicion, 'who does she think she is, aspiring to be one of 'us,' a literary elite?' " says Tichi.

## Other honorees

King is not the first sci-fi king or commercial figure to wear the literary laurels. The National Book Foundation award went to Ray Bradbury in 2000. The year before, Oprah Winfrey won it for her quest to popularize the novel. But King's nomination has touched a literary nerve - mostly, say experts, because of genre, productivity, and his wild success.

To many, science fiction simply isn't viable literature - no matter the cultural import or literary ancestry. Tony Ruggiero, a science-fiction and horror writer and King fan in Suffolk, Va., knows that bias well: "Someone will walk up to the table [at a book signing] and say, 'Oh, you're a writer; what do you write?' Either word - science fiction or horror - and you see the eyebrows raise. You've got to work twice as hard because there's a stigma attached."

And while King's commercial success has been manna for the publishing world, it garners resentment, too.

King "could write a laundry list and people would buy it," says George Beahm, a Williamsburg, Va., author who's written eight books on King.

That mass appeal, says Cheuse, the NPR critic, is a legacy in itself. Nobody sees the award as putting King in the leagues of Arthur Miller, Toni Morrison, and other recipients, he says. "It's just that he's been a major factor in drawing people in to read the fiction.... The way to use him is as a kind of Judas goat to lead people into the reading of something more serious."

But if King is a Judas goat, he has an eager herd of millions. And a gaggle of defenders, too. Tichi, for one, has no use for the cabal of King detractors who anoint themselves the "real" literati: "To say that somehow his readers aren't the best readers or the real readers - for [the 'literary' writers] to say that only they and their readers matter or should be listened to - is just lunacy."

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