

STEPHEN KING

Pet Sematary

SCRIBNER

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For Kirby McCauley

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Special thanks are in order to Russ Dorr and Steve Wentworth of Bridgeton, Maine. Russ provided medical information and Steve provided information on American funeral and burial customs and some insight into the nature of grief.

Here are some people who have written books, telling what they did and why they did those things:

John Dean. Henry Kissinger. Adolph Hitler. Caryl Chessman. Jeb Magruder. Napoleon. Talleyrand. Disraeli. Robert Zimmerman, also known as Bob Dylan. Locke. Charlton Heston. Errol Flynn. The Ayatollah Khomeini. Gandhi. Charles Olson. Charles Colson. A Victorian Gentleman. Dr. X.

Most people also believe that God has written a Book, or Books, telling what He did and why—at least to a degree—He did those things, and since most of these people also believe that humans were made in the image of God, then He also may be regarded as a person . . . or, more properly, as a Person.

Here are some people who have not written books, telling what they did . . . and what they saw:

The man who buried Hitler. The man who performed the autopsy on John Wilkes Booth. The man who embalmed Elvis Presley. The man who embalmed—badly, most undertakers say—Pope John XXIII. The twoscore undertakers who cleaned up Jonestown, carrying body bags, spearing paper cups with those spikes custodians carry in city parks, waving away the flies. The man who cremated William Holden. The man who encased the body of Alexander the Great in gold so it would not rot. The men who mummified the Pharaohs.

Death is a mystery, and burial is a secret.

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Introduction

STEPHEN KING

When I'm asked (as I frequently am) what I consider to be the most frightening book I've ever written, the answer I give comes easily and with no hesitation: *Pet Sematary*. It may not be the one that scares readers the most—based on the mail, I'd guess the one that does that is probably *The Shining*—but the fearbone, like the funnybone, is located in different places on different people. All I know is that *Pet Sematary* is the one I put away in a drawer, thinking I had finally gone too far. Time suggests that I had not, at least in terms of what the public would accept, but certainly I had gone too far in terms of my own personal feelings. Put simply, I was horrified by what I had written, and the conclusions I'd drawn. I've told the story of how the book came to be written before, but I guess I can tell it one more time: last time pays for all.

In the late seventies, I was invited to spend a year at my alma mater, the University of Maine, as the writer in residence, and also teach a class in the literature of the fantastic (my lecture notes for that course formed the spine of *Danse Macabre*, which was published a year or two later). My wife and I rented a house in Orrington, about twelve miles from the campus. It was a wonderful house in a wonderful rural Maine town. The only problem was the road we lived on. It was very busy, a lot of the traffic consisting of heavy tanker trucks from the chemical plant down the road.

Julio DeSanctis, who owned the store across the road from us, told me early on that my wife and I wanted to keep a close watch on our children, and on any pets our children might have. "That road has used up a lot of animals," Julio said, a phrase that made its way into the story. And the proof of how many animals the road had used up was in the woods, beyond our rented house. A path led up through the neighboring field to a little pet cemetery in the woods . . . only the sign on the tree just outside this charming little makeshift graveyard read PET SEMATARY. This phrase did more than just make it into the book; it became the title. There were dogs and cats buried up there, a few birds, even a goat.

Our daughter, who was eight or so at the time, had a cat named Smucky, and not long after we moved into the Orrington house, I found Smucky dead on the lawn of a house across the road. The newest animal Route 5 had used up, it seemed, was my daughter's beloved pet. We buried Smucky in the pet sematary. My daughter made the grave marker, which read SMUCKY: HE WAS OBEDIANT. (Smucky wasn't in the least obedient, of course; he was a cat, for heaven's sake.)

All seemed to be well until that night, when I heard a thumping from the garage, accompanied by weeping and popping sounds like small firecrackers. I went out to investigate and found my daughter, furious and beautiful in her grief. She had found several sheets of that blistered packing material in which fragile objects are sometimes shipped. She was jumping up and down on this, popping the blisters, and yelling, "He was *my* cat!" Let God have his own cat! Smucky was *my* cat!" Such anger, I think, is the sanest first response to grief that a thinking, feeling human being can have, and I've always loved her for that defiant cry: *Let God have his own cat!* Right on, beautiful; right on.

Our youngest son, then less than two years old, had only learned to walk, but already he was practicing his running skills. On a day not long after Smucky's demise, while we were out in the neighboring yard fooling around with a kite, our toddler took it into his head to go running toward the road. I ran after him, and damned if I couldn't hear one of those Cianbro trucks coming (Orinco, in the novel). Either I caught him and pulled him down, or he tripped on his own; to this day, I'm not entirely sure which. When you're really scared, your memory often blanks out. All I know for sure is that he is still fine and well and in his young manhood. But a part of my mind has never escaped from that gruesome *what if*: Suppose I hadn't caught him? Or suppose he had fallen in the middle of the road instead of on the edge of it?

I think you can see why I found the book which rose out of these incidents so distressing. I simply took existing elements and threw in that one terrible what if. Put another way, I found myself not just thinking the unthinkable, but writing it down.

There was no writing space in the Orrington house, but there was an empty room in Julio's store, and it was there that I wrote *Pet Sematary*. On a day by day basis, I enjoyed the work, and I knew I was telling a "hot" story, one that engaged my attention and would engage the attention of readers, but when you're working day by day, you're not seeing the forest; you're only counting trees. When I finished, I let the book rest six weeks, which is my way of working, and then read it over. I found the result so startling and so gruesome that I put the book in a drawer, thinking it would never be published. Not in my lifetime, anyway.

That it was published was a case of mere circumstance. I had ended my relationship with Doubleday, the publisher of my early books, but I owed them a final novel before accounts could be closed completely. I only had one in hand that wasn't spoken for, and that one was *Pet Sematary*. I talked it over with my wife, who is my best counselor when I'm not sure how to proceed, and she told me that I should go ahead and publish the book. She thought it was good. Awful, but too good not to be read.

My early editor at Doubleday, Bill Thompson, had moved on by then (to Everest House, as a matter of fact; it was Bill who first suggested, then edited and published *Danse Macabre*), so I sent the book to Sam Vaughn, who was one of the editorial giants of the time. It was Sam who made the final decision—he wanted to do the book. He edited it himself, giving particular attention to the book's conclusion, and his input turned a good book into an even better one. I've always been grateful to him for his inspired blue pencil, and I've never been sorry that I did the book, although in many ways I still find it distressing and problematic.

I'm particularly uneasy about the book's most resonant line, spoken by Louis Creed's elderly neighbor, Jud. "Sometimes, Louis," Jud says, "dead is better." I hope with all my heart that that is not true, and yet within the nightmarish context of *Pet Sematary*, it seems to be. And it may be okay. Perhaps "sometimes dead is better" is grief's last lesson, the one we get to when we finally tire of jumping up and down on the plastic blisters and crying out for God to get his own cat (or his own child) and leave ours alone. That lesson suggests that in the end, we can only find peace in our human lives by accepting the will of the universe. That may sound like corny, new-age crap, but the alternative looks to me like a darkness too awful for such mortal creatures as us to bear.

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PART ONE

The Pet Sematary

Jesus said to them, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go, that I may awake him out of his sleep.”

Then the disciples looked at each other, and some smiled because they did not know Jesus had spoken in a figure. “Lord, if he sleeps, he shall do well.”

So then Jesus spoke to them more plainly, “Lazarus is dead, yes . . . nevertheless let us go to him.”

—JOHN’S GOSPEL (paraphrase)

Louis Creed, who had lost his father at three and who had never known a grandfather, never expected to find a father as he entered his middle age, but that was exactly what happened . . . although he called this man a friend, as a grown man must do when he finds the man who should have been his father relatively late in life. He met this man on the evening he and his wife and his two children moved into the big white frame house in Ludlow. Winston Churchill moved in with them. Church was his daughter Eileen's cat.

The search committee at the university had moved slowly, the hunt for a house within commuting distance of the university had been hair-raising, and by the time they neared the place where he believed the house to be—*all the landmarks are right . . . like the astrological signs the night before Caesar was assassinated*, Louis thought morbidly—they were all tired and tense and on edge. Gage was cutting teeth and fussed almost ceaselessly. He would not sleep, no matter how much Rachel sang to him. She offered him the breast even though it was off his schedule. Gage knew his dining schedule as well as she—better, maybe—and he promptly bit her with his new teeth. Rachel, still not entirely sure about this move to Maine from Chicago, where she had lived her whole life, burst into tears. Eileen promptly joined her. In the back of the station wagon, Church continued to pace restlessly as he had done for the last three days it had taken them to drive here from Chicago. His yowling from the cat kennel had been bad, but his restless pacing after they finally gave up and set him free in the car had been almost as unnerving.

Louis himself felt a little like crying. A wild but not unattractive idea suddenly came to him: He would suggest that they go back to Bangor for something to eat while they waited for the moving van, and when his three hostages to fortune got out, he would floor the accelerator and drive away without so much as a look back, foot to the mat, the wagon's huge four-barrel carburetor gobbling expensive gasoline. He would drive south, all the way to Orlando, Florida, where he would get a job at Disney World as a medic, under a new name. But before he hit the turnpike—big old 95 southbound—he would stop by the side of the road and put the fucking cat out too.

Then they rounded a final curve, and there was the house that only he had seen up until now. He had flown out and looked at each of the seven possibles they had picked from photos once the position at the University of Maine was solidly his, and this was the one he had chosen: a big old New England colonial (but newly sided and insulated; the heating costs, while horrible enough, were not out of line in terms of consumption), three big rooms downstairs, four more up, a long shed that might be converted to more rooms later on—all of it surrounded by a luxuriant sprawl of lawn, lushly green even in this August heat.

Beyond the house was a large field for the children to play in, and beyond the field were woods that went on damn near forever. The property abutted state lands, the realtor had explained, and there would be no development in the foreseeable future. The remains of the Micmac Indian tribe had laid claim to nearly eight thousand acres in Ludlow and in the towns east of Ludlow, and the complicated