

STEPHEN KING

BAG OF BONES

ABOUT THE BOOK

IN BRIEF:

Mike Noonan is a bestselling writer who has never had any problem producing books quickly enough to keep his publishers - and the reading public - interested. But when his wife dies of a brain aneurysm on her way back from the drugstore, it prompts the worst attack of writer's block he's ever experienced. The only way out of it is to head to his summer home, a beautiful lakeside retreat named Sara Laughs. But what he discovers there is more than a plot for a new novel, it's a whole new life.

IN DETAIL:

Stephen King has written many novels about writers and the torments they face, whether it's pseudonyms who come to life (*The Dark Half*) or obsessive fans (*Misery*). One subject that has continued to interest him from *The Shining* to *Bag of Bones*, is the fear of writer's block.

At the centre of *Bag of Bones* is a sensitive and literary depiction of this condition, looking at classic writers who have experienced a block or artistic exhaustion, such as Harper Lee, Thomas Hardy and Herman Melville.

But this is not just a book about writer's block. At the heart of Mike's anxieties is - how can he survive without his wife? And yet he knows he must, and that's why he heads off to Sara Laughs, where he finds the town surrounding his beloved holiday home in the tyrannical grip of Max Devore. Devore is a millionaire who has lost his son, and is intent on getting custody of his granddaughter from his son's widow, Mattie.

Mike soon becomes involved with Mattie and feels eager to protect her and her son Kyra from Devore. But it's not just Devore that they have to worry about. There are more sinister forces at work at Sara Laughs, a ghostly presence desperate to communicate with them, using any means possible.

QUOTES:

'Splendid entertainment...Stephen King is one of those natural storytellers...getting hooked is easy'
Frances Fyfield, *Express*

'Fans of King will find themselves on pleasingly familiar ground here; newcomers (if there are still any left) will find *Bag of Bones* as good a place to start as any' *The Sunday Times*

'A sophisticated literary craftsman . . . his work anatomises, with folksy charm, the social fabric of small-town American life. It also plumbs, with unnerving accuracy, the hopes and fears of an entire nation' *Observer*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:

Stephen King has said that part of the inspiration for *Bag of Bones* came from hearing a rumour that Danielle Steel was writing three books a year and publishing two, and how if this was the case she must have a lot of books stacked up. He is also, of course, having fun with his own reputation as a prolific writer, something that he challenges in *On Writing*, pointing out that there are plenty of writers who've published many more books than he has.

The title of *Bag of Bones* comes from Thomas Hardy. As King's narrator Mike Noonan, points out Hardy supposedly said that the most brilliantly drawn character in a novel is but a bag of bones and stopped writing novels after finishing *Jude the Obscure* while he was at the height of his narrative genius. He went on writing poetry for another twenty years, and when asked why he'd stopped writing novels, he is reported to have replied that he couldn't understand why he had continued writing fiction for so long in the first place.

Noonan agrees with Hardy about the limitations of fiction, but King does not. King has mentioned that he found *Jude the Obscure* too tragic and not completely convincing. While Hardy is sometimes spoken of as an author whose interests in darker, tragic narratives ultimately led him to abandon the novel, King continues to revitalise the form in new and exciting ways.

Herman Melville, another classic writer who ended up unable to write novels, only in his case for commercial reasons, is another ghost behind these pages, and the way King uses these literary references in a popular tale makes this one of his most sophisticated novels.

STARTING POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What is the significance of the epigraphs in this novel?
2. How does King handle the subject of writer's block?
3. What does King say about marriage in this novel?
4. If you've read any other King novels that feature writers as protagonists, how does this compare?
5. What kind of writer is Mike Noonan?
6. How does King bring Sara Laughs to life?
7. King's horror is often domestic. How does he make fridge magnets seem frightening?
8. What is the significance of Thomas Hardy and Herman Melville to this novel?
9. Do you feel any sympathy for Max Devore?
10. Noonan says 'I believe even make-believe murders should be taken seriously.' What does this mean, and do you agree?
11. Noonan writes that readers have a loyalty that cannot be matched anywhere else in the creative arts. Is this true?
12. In a TV interview, King described *Bag of Bones* as his take on *Rebecca*, which he describes as a fictional indictment of British reticence. If you've read *Rebecca*, how does it compare to King's novel, and what elements differ in the British and American approach to this subject?
13. King is sometimes branded as a 'horror' novelist, yet *Bag of Bones* is in some ways more of a 'romance'. Discuss the elements that would classify *Bag of Bones* in this genre.
14. Describe how the choice of music (in *Bag of Bones* there are references to Don Henley, John Mellencamp and Vanilla Ice) helps create a sense of character, time and place? How important is the choice of song? Does it awaken your auditory sense when reading?

READ EXTRACT:

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.

If there is any more beautiful and haunting first line in English fiction, I've never read it. And it was a line I had cause to think of a lot during the fall of 1997, and the winter of 1998. I didn't dream of Manderley, of course, but of Sara Laughs, which Jo sometimes called 'the hideout.' A fair enough description, I guess, for a place so far up in the western Maine woods that it's not really even in a town at all, but in an unincorporated area designated on state maps as TR-90.

The last of these dreams was a nightmare, but until that one they had a kind of surreal simplicity. They were dreams I'd awake from wanting to turn on the bedroom light so I could reconfirm my place in reality before going back to sleep. You know how the air feels before a thunderstorm, how everything gets still and colors seem to stand out with the brilliance of things seen during a high fever? My winter dreams of Sara Laughs were like that, each leaving me with a feeling that was not quite sickness. *I've dreamt again of Manderley*, I would think sometimes, and sometimes I would lie in bed with the light on, listening to the wind outside, looking into the bedroom's shadowy corners, and thinking that Rebecca de Winter hadn't drowned in a bay but in Dark Score Lake. That she had gone down, gurgling and flailing, her strange black eyes full of water, while the loons cried out indifferently in the twilight. Sometimes I would get up and drink a glass of water. Sometimes I just turned off the light after I was once more sure of where I was, rolled over on my side again, and went back to sleep.

In the daytime I rarely thought of Sara Laughs at all, and it was only much later that I realized something is badly out of whack when there is such a dichotomy between a person's waking and sleeping lives.

IF YOU LIKE *BAG OF BONES*, YOU'LL LIKE:

Hearts in Atlantis
Lisey's Story
The Dark Half
Duma Key

OTHER BOOKS BY STEPHEN KING:

FICTION:

Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
Night Shift
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo
Different Seasons
Cycle of the Werewolf
Christine
The Talisman (with Peter Straub)
Pet Sematary
It
Skeleton Crew

The Eyes of the Dragon
Misery
The Tommyknockers
Four Past Midnight
Needful Things
Gerald's Game
Dolores Claiborne
Nightmares and Dreamscapes
Insomnia
Rose Madder
Desperation
Bag of Bones
The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon
Dreamcatcher
Everything's Eventual
From a Buick 8
Cell
The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger
The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three
The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands
The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass
The Dark Tower V: Wolves of the Calla
The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah
The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower

By Stephen King as Richard Bachman
Thinner
The Running Man
The Bachman Books
The Regulators
Blaze

NON-FICTION:
Danse Macabre
On Writing (A Memoir of the Craft)

WEBSITE LINKS:

www.stephenking.co.uk
www.stephenking.com