

New King real wing-ding

Lloyd Wasser

Danse Macabre by Stephen King. Everest House. 400 p.p., \$18.75.

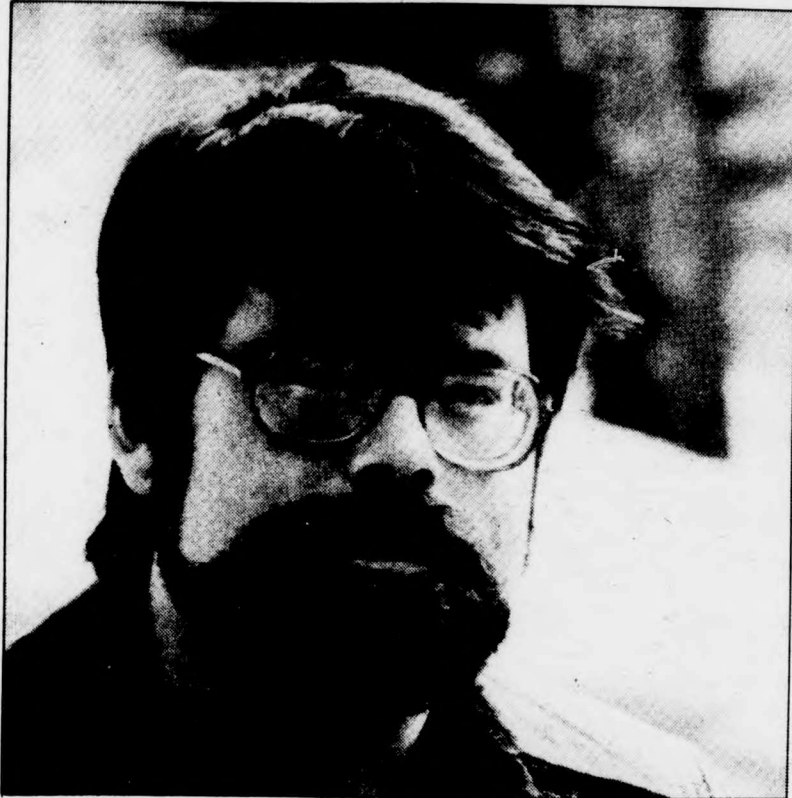
"The danse macabre is a waltz with death. This is a truth we cannot afford to shy away from. Like the rides in the amusement park which mimic violent death, the tale of horror is a chance to examine what's going on behind locked doors which we usually keep double-locked. Yet the human imagination is not content with locked doors. Somewhere there is another dancing partner, the imagination whispers in the night — a partner in a rotting ball gown, a partner with empty eye sockets, green mold growing on her elbow-length gloves, maggots squirming in the thin remains of her hair. To hold such a creature in our arms? Who, you ask me, would be so mad? Well...?"

So writes Stephen King — certified master of the modern horror novel, creator of *The Shining*, *The Dead Zone*, *Firestarter* and others — in the epilogue to his first non-fiction book, *Danse Macabre*, a serious, thoughtful journey down the hallowed (and thickly cobwebbed) halls of horror.

The book was written in response to: "Why do you write that stuff?" and is an attempt at summing up the state of the genre in the last three decades. King mixes myth with fact, philosophy with pathology, and terror with trivia to produce an intriguing, informative view of horror in our culture.

He delves into horror's influence on many cultural levels, including radio, television, American film and fiction. Interwoven through all of this are King's frequent autobiographical pauses and engaging anecdotes.

Danse Macabre works most effectively when King discusses the area he knows best: the



One of King's most horrific creations.

horror story. Besides being the longest chapter in the book, it is also the most sharply-focused, and serves as a critical and psychological examination of this popular (but often maligned) literary genre.

Novels such as Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* and Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* are expertly analyzed and dissected (King was once an English teacher) with a scholarly flair that is lacking throughout the rest of the book. King speaks of the books and their authors—Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, Charles L. Grant—with love and respect, citing both their triumphs and failures in honest concrete terms.

It is in this examination of the horror tale that *Danse Macabre* really succeeds. The loosely-styled, anecdote-smattered

chapters which precede this section are easily forgotten as King earnestly delves into the tangled heart of a literary field rarely unravelled before.

Equally successful is his analysis of the American horror film, both as an examination of current horror trends (splatter films, werewolf movies) and as a vivid playback of childhood years when the big thrill was staying up late to watch *The Horror of Party Beach* in the dark on a black and white portable.

For those who revel in the stimulation of a good scare, screaming in delight from beneath theatre seats, *Danse Macabre* is highly recommended. It's a creative work for imaginative readers — a pleasing mixture of fact and fiction that's sure to delight any real fan of the Bogeyman.

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