

Carrie

USA | 1976 | 98 minutes

Credits

Director	Brian De Palma
Screenplay	Lawrence D. Cohen (based on the novel by Stephen King)
Photography	Mario Tosi
Music	Pino Donaggio

Cast

Carrie White	Sissy Spacek
Margaret White	Piper Laurie
Sue Snell	Amy Irving
Tommy Ross	William Katt
Chris Hargensen	Nancy Allen

In Brief

... All the kids think I'm funny, and I don't wanna be. I wanna be normal, I wanna start to try me, a whole person, before it's too late for me...

If you thought your teenage years were bad... Carrie White is an awkward social outcast with the local religious nutter for a mother who doesn't seem to take parental lessons from the new testament. When puberty hits, she is anxious completely unprepared and new gifts start to manifest.

What elevates this film above the usual teen horror fare is the performance of Sissy Spacek as the eponymous character perfectly capturing the vulnerability and confusion of a young friendless abused girl. Piper Laurie is terrifying as the mother, whose favourite punishment is locking her daughter in a cupboard to pray with the goriest statue of Saint Sebastian ever, which in hind sight was possibly not the best choice of Catholic martyrs.

Werewolves, vampires, zombies and a plethora of other supernatural beings are often the antagonistic creature to be feared in a horror film. While thoughts of the supernatural can be frightening, Carrie knows there is something far scarier than any supernatural being: the high school girl. Among the cruelest and craftiest creatures known to man these packs of roaming adolescence have a knack for severe mental trauma to their hapless victims.

Among these victims is Carrie White, a homely girl who becomes the brunt of all the other high school girl's hatred and rage. So great is their venom that the girls gang up on her in the shower, absolutely breaking her already devastated spirit. And even worse is when her own mother rebukes her. A Bible thumping fundamentalist, Margaret White roams around the town condemning the sin and debauchery of the younger generation. Even the tiniest little hints of sexuality or secularization and she releases a sharp blow and a quick reprimand on Carrie.

The horror that plagues Carrie's life is not supernatural but all too familiar. Bullying is a truly harrowing horror among humans, one that is still prevalent throughout the world. Carrie is bullied physically, spiritually, psychologically and ideologically. It's easy to write off the horrors of the supernatural but when confronted with real world horrors the scenes are often terrifying. Based on the novel by Stephen King and adapted to the screen by Lawrence D. Cohen, Carrie is filled with a deep understanding of the horror genre and an interesting self-examination.

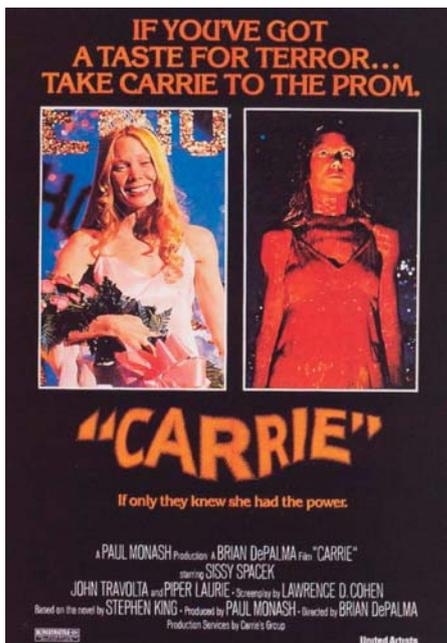
Margaret White is not just another crazy religious woman, but a representation a real fear among the Christian world, the fear of the world. Outside the walls of her home she speaks of a world of sin in the clutches of Satan. Therefore, when Carrie, against all odds, gets a date for the prom her mother refuses. It's homogenous to sexual immorality as she is sure the boy is a lustful creature. This couldn't be farther from the truth as the young man in question, Tommy Ross, is a true gentlemen and one of the small handful of decent people in the film.

What Margaret fails to realize is that the horror is not "out there" but insider herself and every other human being. It's humanity's potential to be cruel and harsh to each other, as Margaret is to her daughter, that is the true horror. Even the woman who comes to Carrie's aid after all the girls gang up on her is a bit of a monster herself. Miss Collins decides that the punishment for the girls should be a rough hour of physical exercise.

She hasts them out on the field, running in place, doing jumping jacks and straining to complete a single pushup. She's harsh and cruel to them, yelling insult and showing not the least shred of mercy. Maybe they deserve it, but she returns their cruelty with an equal force of cruelty. It's a curious scene because director Brian De Palma creates a lengthy montage out of it with a series of panning shots. At first it seems gratuitously long until one picks up on the fact that bit by bit, shot by shot, note by note, the scene is winding down as the strength of these girls dissipates.

There are a number of similar scenes that at first seem self-indulgent until De Palma finally shows his hand. Another similar scene is of Carrie showering in the locker room. The room is steamy and Carrie relishes in the hot water as she slowly and erotically feels over every inch of her body, the camera sparing few details. It plays out like an R-rated soap commercial until the twist comes. Carrie stops and then the scene makes perfect sense as both the audience and Carrie come to the same horrific realization.





And the film has another of similar scenes where De Palma meticulously constructs a scene to a specific payoff. Each detail, each shot has a finely crafted touch that give an intentional effect while seamlessly flowing from scene to scene. There are few directors who can work scenes like De Palma can and get such spectacular results. Each frame is milked to its maximum potential and there's not a wasted moment or unnecessary shot throughout.

While it's meticulously crafted as a horror film, there's also something beautiful about it. That feeling of carefree youth and young whimsy is captured here. A lot of credit must be given to Sissy Spacek who plays the role with such a timidity and innocence while also being forced to go through an entire spectrum of emotions. Her ability to hook us in early and win our sensibilities goes a long way in making the last act of the film as emotional for her as it is for the audience.

Carrie is one of the most terrifying, masterful and emotional horror films ever made. Stephen King's knowledge of the horror genre shines through in creative and masterful ways. Brian De Palma takes that knowledge and combines it with his own knowledge of film and meticulously crafts one of the masterworks of the horror genre. Carrie is at the pinnacle of the genre, showing all that horror can be just as serious, relevant, artistic and emotional as any other genre. Those who take horror lightly, or avoid it altogether, would do well to watch Carrie and realize the true power of the genre.

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All Hail The King

Though primarily a literary figure, Stephen King has enjoyed one of the most successful symbioses between publishing and Hollywood of any popular author, if not in box office and critical respect, certainly in terms of sheer quantity.

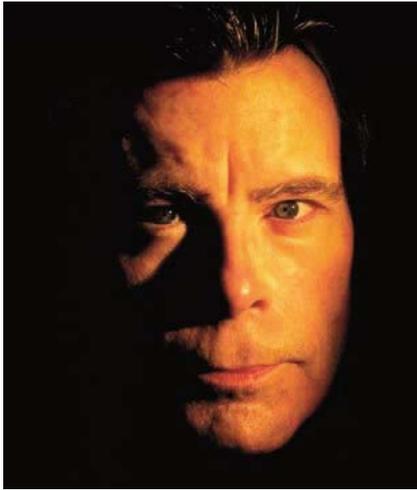
King's first novel, *Carrie*, was published in 1974, and the breakout success of *Salem's Lot*, published two years later – the same year the movie version of *Carrie* was released – elevated him into the major commercial publishing ranks and ignited a revived interest in literary horror fiction as a whole. King's ascension to bestseller status roughly coincided with a surge in Hollywood horror fare (this was, after all, the era of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [1974], *Halloween* [1978], *The Exorcist* [1973], *The Omen* [1976], just to name a very few), and his early-won, long-held prominence in both print and film – with each venue reinforcing King's status in the other – quickly combined to cement his reputation as one of modern horror's leading lights.

Since the screen adaptation of *Carrie*, King-based horror movies have been so much a regular feature of studio slates it wouldn't be unfair to consider the King-inspired creep fest as a genre unto itself. Since 1980, hardly a year has gone by without a theatrical release or TV project connected to the author. According to the Internet Movie Data Base, as of this writing there have been some 120 theatrical releases, shorts, TV movies, series and mini-series – including sequels and remakes – built around King's novels, novellas, short works, and original screenplays, beginning with *Carrie* and up to and including over a half-dozen projects currently in various stages of development or production including adaptations of his most recent novels, *Cell* and *Under the Dome*, both tentatively scheduled for a 2011 release. "Stephen King" is considered such a branded commodity among the major studios that the novelist's name is not infrequently incorporated into the titles of screen adaptations and originals as a marquee draw i.e. *Stephen King's Graveyard Shift* (1990), *Stephen King's Silver Bullet* (1985), *Stephen King's The Green Mile* (1999), etc.

What makes King so representative of movie horror over the last 35 years is that the extensive canon of King screen adaptations and originals encompasses nearly every approach, trend, and permutation of horror cinema the studios have explored over that period, from the industry's 1960s/1970s surge in elegant, adult-oriented horror (*The Shining*, 1980) to the 1980s tidal wave of more modestly-produced shockers (*Pet Sematary*, 1989), and so on. Stephen King thriller movies range from the insipid (*Graveyard Shift* [1990] – giant rat preys on mill workers; *Maximum Overdrive* [1986] – alien force takes over the world's trucks) to the intentionally kitschy (*Creepshow* [1982] – anthology salute to the horror comics of the 1950s and 1960s) to the intellectually intriguing (*Apt Pupil* [1998] – disaffected teen becomes interested in elderly neighborhood man who might be a Nazi war criminal). There have been King thrillers which were exhausted rehashes of the familiar (werewolf tale *Silver Bullet*, 1985), while others were refreshingly novel (*Carrie* and its portrait of adolescent frustration manifesting as telekinetic catharsis). Some stories have been all "hook," hung on a promotable premise but little else (*Thinner* [1996] – nasty lawyer is cursed by a gypsy to become thinner and thinner) while others have been so effectively drama-driven one is loathe to even consider them thrillers (*Dolores Claiborne* [1995] and its front story of a fractured mother/daughter relationship).

Productions have been similarly variegated. Some King features have been prestige productions helmed by the strongest directors in the horror genre (*Creepshow's* George Romero; *Christine's* [1983] John Carpenter; *The Dead Zone's* [1983] David Cronenberg), as well as some of the most notable directors in the commercial mainstream (*Carrie's* Brian DePalma; *The Shining's* Stanley Kubrick; *Misery's* [1990] Rob Reiner).

Hollywood's consistent interest in the "Stephen King" genre is understandable beyond the obvious hope the brand will bring a built-in fan base to movie houses. King's stories are mainstream-friendly as they are often clearly-defined morality tales with boldfaced



villains and Everyman heroes who find some deep, inner, uplifting resource to take them to an ultimate triumph. As well, by King's own admission, many of his horror stories provide just the kind of grotesqueries – "... the gross-out" — which appeals to the horror genre's youthful fan base and its appetite for visual shocks.

Also appealing to Hollywood in much of King's work is his ability to take bankably familiar horror icons – vampires (*Salem's Lot*, 1979), werewolves (*Silver Bullet*), the undead (*Pet Sematary*), hauntings (*The Shining*, *Christine*, *Rose Madder* [2002]), paranormal powers (*Carrie*, *The Shining*, *The Dead Zone*, *Firestarter* [1984], *The Green Mile*), hexes and curses (*Thinner*), Jaws-like monster tales (*Cujo* [1983], *Graveyard Shift*), and revive them by marrying them firmly to recognizably everyday milieus.

King has a penchant for returning to certain story ideas and elements and reworking them into new but familiar shapes. Thus, the homicidal blocked aspiring writer of *The Shining* becomes the homicidal blocked established writer of *Secret Window* (2004); the haunted hotel corrupting its caretaker in *The Shining* becomes the haunted vintage sedan corrupting its owner in *Christine*; *The Faustian Needful Things* (1993) becomes the *Faustian Storm of the Century*

(1999); the relationship between a young boy and old hotel cook with whom he shares a special psychic connection in *The Shining* becomes the relationship between a young boy and middle-aged boarder with whom he shares a special psychic connection in *Hearts in Atlantis* (2001); childhood bullies are faced down tragically in *Carrie* and *Christine*, more triumphantly in *Sometimes They Come Back* (1991) and *Hearts in Atlantis*; in *Salem's Lot*, a fatigued novelist returns to his sleepy town to find it plagued by vampirism, while in *The Tommyknockers* (1993), an alcoholic poet discovers his sleepy town is plagued by an alien force. Such recyclings have only attracted a Hollywood enamored of sequels, remakes and knockoffs, and which often seems less interested in forging iconoclastic successes than in cloning past ones.

Hollywood execs have no doubt also been attracted to the fact that most King theatricals have been produced for moderate budgets. Up until *The Green Mile* (\$60 million budget), the average budget for a King theatrical over a 20-year period stood at a little over \$11 million. Subtract the few top-of-the-line King adaptations from the roster – *The Shining*, *The Running Man* (1987), *Misery* (1990), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) – and the average budget over the same period drops to a lean \$8.7 million.

While these elements go a long way toward explaining Hollywood's ceaseless mining of King's material, there remains something paradoxical about the major studios' fealty to the brand; a fact which, in itself, reveals something indicative about today's Hollywood mindset.

King's literary success has never found parity on the big screen. While, as an author, he has been a consistent bestseller for decades, the canon of King screen works can boast only very few major box office success. Of 41 Stephen King theatrical movies released between 1976-2007 (including non-thrillers like the elegiac boyhood tale *Stand By Me* [1986], and prison drama *The Shawshank Redemption*), 19 either fell short of breakeven on their domestic release or were outright flops. Most of the remainder were modest or mid-range performers with the average box office for those same 41 releases standing at a little over \$30 million domestic gross per. Only four Stephen King adaptations over that same period grossed more than \$60 million: *The Shining* (\$65 million), *Misery* (\$61.3 million), *The Green Mile* (\$136 million – best performance of a Stephen King movie to date), and *1408* (\$72 million). The record becomes even more uninspiring the more parsed it gets: only seven of these 41 features have grossed more than \$40 million domestic; 18 grossed less than \$20 million; seven earned less than \$10 million. The most recent big screen King feature: 2007's *The Mist*, adapted and helmed by Frank Darabont (who had previously adapted/directed *Shawshank* and *Green Mile*), turning in a disappointing \$25.6 million box office on a budget of \$18 million (Hollywood rule of thumb: a movie typically has to gross at least twice its budget to achieve breakeven).

To be fair, this performance rate may say more about Hollywood thriller-making than King's material. Many King adaptations pare down the pop culture texture and character drama which have helped the author connect so widely with readers, and, instead, emphasize the horror and gross-out aspects of his work. Going one step further, some projects seemed to have been picked primarily for their quotient of bizarreness and the grotesque (*Silver Bullet*, *Graveyard Shift*, and *Thinner* offering prime examples), rather than their ability to sustain a movie feature.

Still, despite a box office record which could only be described as erratic, Hollywood's devotion to Stephen King as a brand name franchise has been unflagging and surprisingly consistent over the last thirty-odd years, regardless of whether the industry has just experienced a King triumph or a string of King disappointments. In this, Stephen King movies are a testament to an industry dedication to the concept of the brand name franchise bordering on religious fanaticism. Particularly as time has gone by, the major studios have seemed less concerned about selecting just the right Stephen King property and matching it with just the right cast and director, then they have been in getting anything on a cinema marquee which begins with the descriptive, Stephen King's....

- Bill Mesce

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