**Nightmares and Dreamscapes—Introduction**

Stephen King

Myth, Belief, Faith, and Ripley's

Believe It or Not!

When I was a kid I believed everything I was told, everything I read, and every dispatch sent out by my own overheated imagination. This made for more than a few sleepless nights, but it also filled the world I lived in with colors and textures I would not have traded for a lifetime of restful nights. I knew even then, you see, that there were people in the world—too many of them, actually—whose imaginative senses were either numb or completely deadened, and who lived in a mental state akin to colorblindness. I always felt sorry for them, never dreaming (at least then) that many of these unimaginative types either pitied me or held me in contempt, not just because I suffered from any number of irrational fears but because I was deeply and unreservedly credulous on almost every subject. “There's a boy,” some of them must have thought (I know my mother did), “who will buy the Brooklyn Bridge not just once but over and over again, all his life.”

There was some truth to that then, I suppose, and if I am to be honest, I suppose there's some truth to it now. My wife still delights in telling people that her husband cast his first Presidential ballot, at the tender age of twenty-one, for Richard Nixon. “Nixon said he had a plan to get us out of Vietnam,” she says, usually with a gleeful gleam in her eye, “and Steve believed him!”

That's right; Steve believed him. Nor is that all Steve has believed during the often-eccentric course of his forty-five years. I was, for example, the last kid in my neighborhood to decide that all those street-corner Santas meant there was no real Santa (I still find no logical merit in the idea; it's like saying that a million disciples prove there is no master). I never questioned my Uncle Oren's assertion that you could tear off a person's shadow with a steel tent-peg (if you struck precisely at high noon, that was) or his wife's claim that every time you shivered, a goose was walking over the place where your grave would someday be. Given the course of my life, that must mean I'm slated to end up buried behind Aunt Rhody's barn out in Goose Wallow, Wyoming.

I also believed everything I was told in the schoolyard; little minnows and whale-sized whoppers went down my throat with equal ease. One kid told me with complete certainty that if you put a dime down on a railroad track, the first train to come along would be derailed by it. Another kid told me that a dime left on a railroad track would be perfectly smooshed (that was exactly how he put it —perfectly smooshed) by the next train, and what you took off the rail after the train had passed would be a flexible and nearly transparent coin the size of a silver dollar. My own belief was that both things were true: that dimes left on railroad tracks were perfectly smooshed before they derailed the trains which did the smooshing.

Other fascinating schoolyard facts which I absorbed during my years at Center School in Stratford, Connecticut, and Durham Elementary School in Durham, Maine, concerned such diverse subjects as golf-balls (poisonous and corrosive at the center), miscarriages (sometimes born alive, as malformed monsters which had to be killed by health-care individuals ominously referred to as “the special nurses'), black cats (if one crossed your path, you had to fork the sign of the evil eye at it quickly or risk almost certain death before the end of the day), and sidewalk cracks. I probably don't have to explain the potentially dangerous relationship of these latter to the spinal columns of completely innocent mothers.

My primary sources of wonderful and amazing facts in those days were the paperback compilations from Ripley's Believe It or Not! which were issued by Pocket Books. It was in Ripley's that I discovered you could make a powerful explosive by scraping the celluloid off the backs of playing cards and then tamping the stuff into a length of pipe, that you could drill a hole in your own skull and then plug it with a candle, thereby turning yourself into a kind of human night-light (why anyone would want to do such a thing was a question which never occurred to me until years later), that there were actual giants (one man well over eight feel tall), actual elves (one woman barely eleven inches tall), and actual MONSTERS TOO HORRIBLE TO DESCRIBE, except Ripley's described them all, in loving detail, and usually with a picture (if I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget the one of the guy with the candle stuck in the center of his shaved skull).

That series of paperbacks was—to me, at least—the world's most wonderful sideshow, one I could carry around in my back pocket and curl up with on rainy weekend afternoons, when there were no baseball games and everyone was tired of Monopoly. Were all of Ripley's fabulous curiosities and human monsters real? In this context that hardly seems relevant. They were real to me, and that probably is—during the years from six to eleven, crucial years in which the human imagination is largely formed, they were very real to me I believed them just as I believed you could derail a freight-train with a dime or that the drippy goop, in the center of a golf-ball would eat the hand right off your arm if you were careless and got some of it on you. It was in Ripley's Believe It or Not! that I first began to see how fine the line between the fabulous and the humdrum could sometimes be, and to understand that the juxtaposition of the two did as much to illuminate the ordinary aspects of life as it did to illuminate its occasional weird outbreaks. Remember it's belief we're talking about here, and belief is the cradle of myth. What about reality, you ask? Well, as far as I'm concerned, reality can go take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut. I've never held much of a brief for reality, at least in my written work. All too often it is to the imagination what ash stakes are to vampires.

I think that myth and imagination are, in fact, nearly interchangeable concepts, and that belief is the wellspring of both. Belief in what? I don't think it matters very much, to tell you the truth. One god or many. Or that a dime can derail a freight-train.

These beliefs of mine had nothing to do with faith; let's be very clear on that subject. I was raised Methodist and hold onto enough of the fundamentalist teachings of my childhood to believe that such a claim would be presumptuous at best and downright blasphemous at worst. I believed all that weird stuff because I was built to believe in weird stuff. Other people run races because they were built to run fast, or play basketball because God made them six-foot-ten, or solve long, complicated equations on blackboards because they were built to see the places where the numbers all lock together.

Yet faith comes into it someplace, and I think that place has to do with going back to do the same thing again and again even though you believe in your deepest, truest heart that you will never be able to do it any better than you already have, and that if you press on, there's really noplace to go but downhill. You don't have anything to lose when you take your first whack at the pinata, but to take a second one (and a third ...and a fourth .. . and a thirty-fourth) is to risk failure, depression, and, in the case of the short-story writer who works in a pretty well defined genre, self-parody. But we do go on, most of us, and that gets to be hard. I never would have believed that twenty years ago, or even ten, but it does. It gets hard. And I have days when I think this old Wang word-processor stopped running on electricity about five years ago; that from The Dark Half on, it's been running completely on faith. But that's okay; whatever gets the words across the screen, right?

The idea of each of the stories in this book came in a moment of belief and was written in a burst of faith, happiness, and optimism. Those positive feelings have their dark analogues, however, and the fear of failure is a long way from the worst of them. The worst—for me, at least—is the gnawing speculation that I may have already said everything I have to say, and am now only listening to the steady quacking of my own voice because the silence when it stops is just too spooky.

The leap of faith necessary to make the short stories happen has gotten particularly tough in the last few years; these days it seems that everything wants to be a novel, and every novel wants to be approximately four thousand pages long. A fair number of critics have mentioned this, and usually not favorably. In reviews of every long novel I have written, from The Stand to Needful Things, I have been accused of overwriting. In some cases the criticisms have merit; in others they are just the ill-tempered yappings of men and women who have accepted the literary anorexia of the last thirty years with a puzzling (to me, at least) lack of discussion and dissent. These selfappointed deacons in the Church of Latter-Day American Literature seem to regard generosity with suspicion, texture with dislike, and any broad literary stroke with outright hate. The result is a strange and and literary climate where a meaningless little fingernail-paring like Nicholson Baker's Vox becomes an object of fascinated debate and dissection, and a truly ambitious American novel like Greg Matthews's Heart of the Country is all but ignored.

But all that is by the by, not only off the subject but just a tiny bit whimpery, too—after all, was there ever a writer who didn't feel that he or she had been badly treated by the critics? All I started to say before I so rudely interrupted myself was that the act of faith which turns a moment of belief into a real object—i. e., a short story that people will actually want to read—has been a little harder for me to come by in the last few years.

“Well then, don't write them,” someone might say (only it's usually a voice I hear inside my own head, like the ones Jessie Burlingame hears in Gerald's Game). “After all, you don't need the money they bring in the way you once did.”

That's true enough. The days when a check for some four-thousand-word wonder would buy penicillin for one of the kids” ear infections or help meet the rent are long gone. But the logic is more than spurious; it's dangerous. I don't exactly need the money the novels bring in, either, you see. If it was just the money, I could hang up my jock and hit the showers ...or spend the rest of my life on some Caribbean island, catching the rays and seeing how long I could grow my fingernails.

But it isn't about the money, no matter what the glossy tabloids may say, and it's not about selling out, as the more arrogant critics really seem to believe. The fundamental things still apply as time goes by, and for me the object hasn't changed—the job is still getting to you, Constant Reader, getting you by the short hairs and, hopefully, scaring you so badly you won't be able to go to sleep without leaving the bathroom fight on. It's still about first seeing the impossible ...and then saying it. It's still about making you believe what I believe, at least for a little while.

I don't talk about this much, because it embarrasses me and it sounds pompous, but I still see stories as a great thing, something which not only enhances lives but actually saves them. Nor am I speaking metaphorically. Good writing—good stories—are the imagination's firing pin, and the purpose of the imagination, I believe, is to offer us solace and shelter from situations and life-passages which would otherwise prove unendurable. I can only speak from my own experience, of course, but for me, the imagination which so often kept me awake and in terror as a child has seen me through some terrible bouts of stark raving reality as an adult. If the stories which have resulted from that imagination have done the same for some of the people who've read them, then I am perfectly happy and perfectly satisfied—feelings which cannot, so far as I know, be purchased with rich movie deals or multi-million-dollar book contracts.

Still, the short story is a difficult and challenging literary form, and that's why I was so delighted—and so surprised—to find I had enough of them to issue a third collection. It has come at a propitious time, as well, because one of those facts of which I was so sure as a kid (I probably picked it up in Ripley's Believe It or Not!, too) was that people completely renew themselves every seven years: every tissue, every organ, every muscle replaced by entirely new cells. I am drawing Nightmares and Dreamscapes together in the summer of 1992, seven years after the publication of Skeleton Crew, my last collection of short stories, and Skeleton Crew was published seven years after Night Shift, my first collection. The greatest thing is knowing that, although the leap of faith necessary to translate an idea into reality has become harder (the jumping muscles get a little older every day, you know), it's still perfectly possible. The next greatest thing is knowing that someone still wants to read them—that's you, Constant Reader, should you wonder.

The oldest of these stories (my versions of the killer golf-ball goop, and monster miscarriages, if you will) is “It Grows on You”, originally published in a University of Maine literary magazine called Marshroots ...although it has been considerably revised for this book, so it could better be what it apparently wanted to be—a final look back at the doomed little town of Castle Rock. The most recent, “The Ten O'Clock People”, was written in three fevered days during the summer of 1992.

There are some genuine curiosities here—the first version of my only original teleplay; a Sherlock Holmes story in which Dr Watson steps forward to solve the case; a Cthulhu Mythos story set in the suburb of London where Peter Straub lived when I first met him; a hardboiled “caper” story of the Richard Bachman stripe; and a slightly different version of a story called “My Pretty Pony”, which was originally done as a limited edition from the Whitney Museum, with artwork by Barbara Kruger.

After a great deal of thought, I've also decided to include a lengthy non-fiction piece, “Head Down”, which concerns kids and baseball. It was originally published in The New Yorker, and I probably worked harder on it than anything else I've written over the last fifteen years. That doesn't make it good, of course, but I know that writing and publishing it gave me enormous satisfaction, and I'm passing it along for that reason. It doesn't really fit in a collection of stories which concern themselves mostly with suspense and the supernatural ...except somehow it does. The texture is the same. See if you don't think so.

What I've tried hardest to do is to steer clear of the old chestnuts, the trunk stories, and the bottom-of-the-drawer stuff. Since 1980 or so, some critics have been saying I could publish my laundry list and sell a million copies or so, but these are for the most part critics who think that's what I've been doing all along. The people who read my work for pleasure obviously feel differently, and I have made this book with those readers, not the critics, in the forefront of my mind. The result, I think, is an uneven Aladdin's cave of a book, one which completes a trilogy of which Night Shift and Skeleton Crew are the first two volumes. All the good short stories have now been collected; all the bad ones have been swept as far under the rug as I could get them, and there they will stay. If there is to be another collection, it will consist entirely of stories which have not as yet been written or even considered (stories which have not yet been believed, if you will), and I'd guess it will show up in a year which begins with a 2.

Meantime, there are these twenty-odd (and some, I should warn you, are very odd). Each contains something I believed for awhile, and I know that some of these things—the finger poking out of the drain, the man-eating toads, the hungry teeth—are a little frightening, but I think we'll be all right if we go together. First, repeat the catechism after me:

I believe a dime can derail a freight-train.

I believe there are alligators in the New York City sewer system, not to mention rats as big as Shetland ponies.

I believe that you can tear off someone's shadow with a steel tent-peg.

I believe that there really is a Santa Claus, and that all those red-suited guys you see at Christmastime really are his helpers.

I believe there is an unseen world all around us.

I believe that tennis balls are full of poison gas, and if you cut one in two and breathe what comes out, it'll kill you.

Most of all, I do believe in spooks, I do believe in spooks, I do believe in spooks.

Okay? Ready? Fine. Here's my hand. We're going now. I know the way. All you have to do is hold on tight ...and believe.

### Bangor, Maine November 6, 1992