

Taking a look back at Stephen King movies

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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This week sees the release of “Firestarter” from Universal Pictures. The movie is a thriller that follows the struggles of a little girl dealing with the power of pyrokinesis.

Originally written in 1980 by Stephen King, it was first adapted on the big screen in 1984 with a cast including Drew Barrymore. Alas, the latest version of this tale is not being screened for critics. So instead, it might be a good opportunity to look at other remarkable King films, particularly those that may have slipped under the radar.

For those unfamiliar with the author, King became an instant sensation with “Carrie,” his first book in 1974.

Movies based on his works began arriving only a few years later and included the aforementioned book as well as “The Shining” (1980). These two titles stand as iconic horror features thanks to their performances and memorable visuals from directors Brian De Palma and Stanley Kubrick.

Other well-known efforts include the coming-of-age drama “Stand by Me” (1986) and the claustrophobic “Misery” (1990), which earned Kathy Bates an Academy Award for Best Actress.

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One of the most iconic titles based on a King property is the prison-set drama, “The Shawshank Redemption” (1994). It was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Despite these accolades and its current ranking (on IMDb) as the top-rated movie of all time, it failed to snag any Oscars.

More recently, “It” (2017) and “It Chapter 2” (2019) have been massive box office successes.

But there’s more to see than just those pictures. So, what other titles might be worth taking a peek? Here are several recommendations. Back when King was just starting to become a household name, CBS bought the rights to turn one of his books into a TV mini-series.

“Salem’s Lot” (1979) from director Tobe Hooper (“The Texas Chainsaw Massacre”) stars David Soul as a writer visiting his small hometown after many years. It isn’t long before locals begin having their blood drained and the writer must team up with a young horror reader to do battle with a vampire. While there isn’t much violence or blood, it’s chillingly rendered and delivers more chills than most King movie adaptations.

The extended running time allows for greater development of characters and the sinister Mr. Barlow, the vampire, has a truly chilling appearance. Attack scenes and the vampire’s lair finale are remarkably pulse-pounding.

When it was first released at theaters, “Christine” (1983) didn’t receive a great deal of attention. And the plot, about a killer automobile, might seem too outrageous to really work. But the movie is far stronger than it has ever been given credit for.

Director John Carpenter (“Halloween,” “The Thing”) coaxes above-average performances out of his teen cast and focuses on the awkward lead, effectively communicating his alienation and transformation into a vengeful force after taking possession of a powerful automobile.

Another great work from the very same year is “The Dead Zone” (1983) from David Cronenberg (“The Fly,” “A History of Violence,” “Eastern Promises”). Christopher Walken is exceptional as a man who awakens from a lengthy coma. Not only have those he loved moved on with their

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lives, but he finds himself plagued with the power to see brief and horrific visions of the future.

The movie builds to a powerful climax and features story elements (including a future President whose action may cause a nuclear war) that still feel eerily modern and relevant.

The anthology “Cat’s Eye” (1985) is another fun film that is often overlooked, perhaps because the stories featured aren’t overtly horror-themed.

The first segment, “Quitter’s Inc.,” stars James Woods as a man who wants to quit smoking. He finds his life and family in danger after joining a program that he discovers is run by violent mobsters who demand success from their clients.

“The Ledge” features a shady millionaire and penthouse owner who forces his wife’s lover (Robert Hays) to walk around the exterior ledge of the building. It’s incredibly tense as the figure does his best not to lose his balance and plummet to his death. One particular pigeon causes a great deal of trouble for the protagonist.

“Hearts in Atlantis” (2001) is a superb drama that took some heat from King fans when it was first released. This was because the source material contained many stories and the one adapted in the film was actually “Low Men in Yellow Coats” and not the title yarn. It is a beautifully bittersweet coming-of-age tale about a young boy (Anton Yelchin) who befriends an unusual tenant (Anthony Hopkins) in her mother’s house who may have psychic gifts. The movie wisely underplays exaggerated supernatural elements from the original story and focuses on the relationships between characters. The end result is one of the most emotional and moving translations of the author’s work.

Another forgotten gem is “Nightmares & Dreamscapes: From the Stories of Stephen King” (2006) an anthology series from TNT that aired eight episodes based on short stories by the author.

The first, “Battleground,” told the story of a hitman (William Hurt) who is assigned to eliminate a famous toy manufacturer. After returning to his lavish apartment, tiny unwelcome guests appear

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and try to take revenge.

It was a technical marvel in its day with first class visual effects (the toy POV shots are particularly amusing) and the tense and engaging program is also unique for not containing a single line of dialogue from its lead actor. The segment impressed critics too and deservedly won two Primetime Emmy Awards for its visual effects and score.

In addition to these titles, there are other lesser-known films worth your while, including the eye-popping, colorful “Creepshow” (1982) from director George A. Romero (“Night of the Living Dead,” “Dawn of the Dead”). This marked the first original screenplay written by King and involves five outrageous tales of terror inspired by EC comic books.

“The Dark Half” (1993) was another effective Romero adaptation, and “Secret Window” (2004) is an entertaining thriller featuring an unhinged and darkly humorous performance by Johnny Depp.

The grim creeper “The Mist” (2007) delivers chilling moments and a shocking finale.

Additionally, “1408” (2007) is an underrated hotel-set ghost story with a paranormal debunker (played by John Cusack) forced to rethink his views on the supernatural after squaring off against a spectral force. Much of the film is set within one room that undergoes some striking visual transformations.

So, even if the new take on “Firestarter” isn’t a classic, there are plenty of great King adaptations to track down and choose from, whether you’re looking for chills, action or even drama.

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