

2020

Stephen King's IT: Child Violence in the Horror Genre

Conor Kinney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lawcommons.luc.edu/clrj>



Part of the [Family Law Commons](#), and the [Juvenile Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Conor Kinney, *Stephen King's IT: Child Violence in the Horror Genre*, 40 CHILD. LEGAL RTS. J. 59 ().
Available at: <https://lawcommons.luc.edu/clrj/vol40/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LAW eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Children's Legal Rights Journal by an authorized editor of LAW eCommons. For more information, please contact law-library@luc.edu.

Review:

Stephen King's IT: Child Violence in the Horror Genre

By: Conor Kinney

I. INTRODUCTION

IT is a twelve-hundred-page book written by horror author Stephen King, originally published in 1986. *IT* is a tale about seven children banding together facing fears, growing up, and fighting an evil clown. The book follows these seven characters throughout the summer of 1958 at age twelve, and at the age of thirty-nine in the summer of 1985, when the fear they faced when they were young returns after twenty-seven years of rest.

This book has been a best seller for over thirty years, selling millions of copies worldwide. *IT* has been adapted for both the television screen and film throughout the years. Wildly regarded as one of King's most terrifying novels, the book centers around one of the most common themes in the horror genre: violence against children.

II. PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens in the Fall of 1957, with six-year-old Georgie Denbrough playing in the rain with a prized paper boat made by his older brother, Bill. While playing, Georgie loses his little boat when it flows down a sewer. Georgie then encounters King's villain, a clown named Pennywise. Pennywise lures Georgie with the promise of returning his paper boat but instead of returning it, he tears Georgie's arm off—killing him only a few blocks away from his home. This act sets off a string of child murders committed by IT, otherwise known as Pennywise the Dancing Clown. *IT* then follows seven main characters: Bill Denbrough, Beverly Marsh, Ben Hanscom, Richie Tozier, Stan Uris, Eddie Kasbrak, and Mike Hanlon, who dub themselves the "Losers Club." Bill, as Georgie's older brother, is determined to figure out who has been committing these heinous child-murders and put an end to them. The novel intercuts between the Losers Club's efforts to kill Pennywise during the Summer of 1958 and then as adults in 1985 when they all go back to their little town of Derry, to fight Pennywise again twenty-seven years later.

In June of 1958, each of the seven children are individually attacked and escape Pennywise, who appears as each child's worst fear. Though Pennywise can appear as anything he feels like, he takes the form of the clown for a majority of the novel. As the Losers strengthen their bonds throughout the summer, they build a dam and flood a river; they deal with the school bullies Henry Bowers, his sociopathic friend Patrick Hockstetter, and their gang of bullies; and they try to uncover the secrets about all of the child murders. Throughout the summer and their trials against Pennywise and the school bullies, the Losers realize that none of the adults in Derry can actually see Pennywise or the horrors he is committing against the children of Derry. They reach the conclusion that Pennywise has all of the adults under some sort of spell that prohibits them from seeing him. The adults of Derry are shown to be villainous in their own right as well.

The adults of Derry are shown to be true villains of the story in the same way as Pennywise. For example, Bill's parents following the death of Georgie, become withdrawn and neglect Bill.

Richie has to hide his sexuality and feelings for Eddie from everyone, while being constantly picked on by Bowers' gang. Stan's obsessive compulsive issues make him seem like the weakest member of the club and the easiest prey for any bully. Beverly's father physically abuses her while making subtle sexual advances on her when her mother is away from the house. Mr. Bowers encourages his son to attack and abuse Mike because of the color of his skin. Another harrowing example of child abuse in the novel surrounds the relationship between Eddie and his mother.

Eddie is shown to be a small, skinny, kid with severe asthma and extreme hypochondria. His mother, Sonia, is constantly doting on him and becomes exceptionally nervous if he even leaves the house. About halfway through the novel, the pharmacist that Eddie regularly visits, tells him that his mother has been tricking him for his entire life, and both the pills and inhaler he has been taking every day for years are actually placebos. As he was going to confront his mother about this revelation, bullies break his arm. He ends up confronting his mother in the hospital room, and gains his own agency back from her overbearing control.

After Eddie gets out of the hospital, the Losers continue to research and discover the origin of Pennywise and find out he lives in the massive sewer system underneath Derry. Meanwhile, Patrick, the sociopathic bully, is killed by Pennywise after sexually assaulting Henry. Henry and his remaining gang later chase the Losers into the sewers as they have fallen under the same spell as the adults of Derry.

Once in the sewers, the Losers come face to face with Pennywise. Bill and Pennywise face off in a "battle of wills" where their minds link up and fight to see whose mind is stronger. Bill, with the aid of his friends, defeat Pennywise for the first time.

After defeating Pennywise, the Losers find their bonds of friendship are broken and they are lost in the sewers underneath Derry. Beverly decides to renew their bonds by having sexual intercourse with each of the Losers. This works, and they escape the sewers and create a blood oath, swearing that they will return to Derry to fight Pennywise, if he ever comes back.

Intercut with the sections taking place in 1958 there are sections about the Losers as adults coming back to Derry to fight and finish off Pennywise once and for all. The novel also contains interludes about the history of Derry and other occurrences of "IT" throughout the past, written from Mike's point of view, who spent twenty-seven years researching in between the comings of Pennywise. Ultimately, the Losers return 27 years later to face Pennywise with adult traumas. Despite regaining some agency through the rest of his time as a child, by the time we meet adult Eddie he has reverted back to his old ways. After moving away and forgetting all about his time in Derry his mother takes hold again and is able to make him think he had diseases that were factitious. Beverly has married someone exactly like her father, and the rest face similar effects from their childhood. They manage to defeat Pennywise once and for all but Eddie is killed and most of the town is destroyed in the process. In the end, the surviving Losers leave the ruin of Derry and forget all of the time they spent there.

III. REVIEW

Stephen King has written over sixty novels since first publishing *Carrie* in 1974, most of them being best sellers. There are hundreds of adaptations of his works, but even to this day, many still only associate him with this book in particular. Although this book is often colloquially known as the “killer clown novel,” *IT* is at its heart a coming of age story about seven children each with their own flaws banding together to deal with the evils in their lives.

Bill has to deal with the grief of losing a brother and a debilitating stutter. Ben is extremely overweight and bullied mercilessly. Eddie is a hypochondriac whose mother is so controlling that her behavior has raised questions among the novel’s readers about whether Eddie suffers from Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another, more commonly known as Munchausen by Proxy. Stan is Jewish boy in a town full of Christians and has obsessive compulsive issues. Mike is one of Derry’s few black residents, and as a result is tormented by the Bowers family. Beverly lives with her abusive father who, King alludes, has sexual feelings for his daughter. Richie is the class clown who masks all of his inadequacy issues over his sexuality, which is more openly discussed in the 2019 film adaptation, a change which King himself greatly enjoyed.

The wonder of *IT* does not come from the horror elements, but instead from these children who King spends hundreds of pages developing, coming into their own to defeat their demons or die trying. King sets the stakes in the very first chapter of the novel with Georgie’s horrific death. He does not parse words but instead goes into graphic detail to describe how Pennywise bites off Georgie’s arm. This first exploitation of child violence engrosses the reader in the story because it asks the question to the reader of how there can be something so evil that feeds on such an innocent child. Georgie is not truly a character in this book. King uses him as a device much in the same way that hundreds of other horror movies have hooked their audience in the past. They show a brutal murder of an innocent victim to show just how evil their villain is. These innocent children do not deserve the horror, but time and again children are preyed upon in the most shocking and upsetting ways

Further, King’s writing evokes such intense anxiety that readers feel as if at any moment Pennywise could in fact get them. King achieved this success in the same way that thousands of movies, books, or television shows have, by using violence against children and young adults to affect the reader’s emotions. Entertainment mediums have constantly used this trope because kids are typically seen as innocent, and thus undeserving of any horror that happens upon them.

Despite the great successes, there are many flaws contained in the book’s twelve-hundred pages. The structure of this novel is frustratingly repetitive, he exploits the children to the horrors of Pennywise in their own twisted way so many times that the audience becomes eventually desensitized to the violence. Through the repetitiveness, comes a loss of gravitas in the novel—the reader knows within one-hundred pages that none of the seven Losers die as children and it becomes difficult to feel any stakes or sense of danger in the 500 pages devoted to the Losers as children.

King attempts to counter this desensitization of child violence with no stakes by adding in stories about other children in the town who are tormented and killed by both Pennywise and in one instance an alcoholic father. Adding the deaths of these children elevates the stakes of the story showing that children are still in very real danger of death, and even though the Losers aren't killed, the danger is still very real and

The biggest critique of the novel comes towards the end when the Losers have defeated Pennywise for the first time and they then become lost in the tunnels. Beverly then proposes that each of the boys has sex with her in turn to restore their bonds of friendship. This scene between the seven children is gratuitous, grotesque, and disgraceful. This detracts from the book as a whole, not just because it's become known as the book with a child orgy in it, but because it negatively impacts how the reader views the kids. The Losers are all eleven and twelve-year-old children, while most haven't even gone through puberty yet. This desensitizes the reader to the sexualization of minors, and makes it seem okay to young readers to experiment with their friends well before they have the mental capability of consent. Overall, this gross scene taints the ending of the book, and seems utterly redundant. The orgy was meant to bond them for life yet less than a chapter later, the Losers make a blood oath and swear to return if Pennywise ever starts killing again which bonds them for life for the second time in twenty pages. The blood oath scene by contrast is written beautifully, giving one last moment for the Losers to be together as kids, but the entire time the reader is still thinking of possible reasons for King to write such a grotesque scene a few pages prior.

One of the ways that King tried to keep the stakes high for the chapters focused on the Losers as children, comes from the way the regular adults treat the various children in the story. A major example of this surrounds Bev's relationship with her father, Al Marsh. Of all of the adults in Derry, the most nefarious is that of Al. He is shown to be physically and mentally abusive throughout the entire novel to Beverly, he hits her multiple times, screams at her to do chores and attacks her if they are not done properly. He forbids her to see her friends and accuses her of sleeping with them despite her young age. Throughout the novel he makes suggestive comments offhand and towards the climax he tries to sexually abuse her. This portrayal of an abusive parent-child is haunting, evocative, and all too real. King's use of this brand of real-life horror is by far the most frightening in the novel because it is so real and prevalent in real life. This isn't some scary clown that will come out of the sewers to eat you. Any parent has the potential to be secretly an Al. He is well liked by members of the community and no one ever speaks up against him until Bev takes matters into her own hands and knocks him out when he tries to sexually abuse her shortly before the Losers go into the sewers. In the 2017 adaptation, Bev's mother is not in the picture, but in the book, she is alive and well. Yet, Bev has to be her own advocate at eleven-years-old and fight back against her father, all the while the town and her mother just sit idly by and watch this abuse manifest.

Domestic abuse is all too common in the United States and this is a fair and accurate example of what might happen behind closed doors. This relationship is important to be included not only for the strong writing, but it may wake readers up to unhealthy relationships they might not have even realized could be categorized as abuse. This is one relationship that benefits by having such a relatable child character that the reader can see themselves in. Bev never really escapes that trauma; she marries a man exactly like her father. Many people are so trapped in the

cyclical nature of abuse that they don't even realize how poorly they are being treated so they can't escape. King's dedication to writing about this real-life trauma from the perspective of a child who is able to at least fight back for a time, may just give people going through that abuse the same capabilities.

The other major example of abuse by an adult comes from Eddie's overly doting mother Sonja, who has Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another. Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another is the medical term for what is commonly known as Munchausen's by Proxy. This disorder is defined by the Mayo Clinic as "a serious mental disorder in which someone deceives others by appearing sick, by purposely getting sick or by self-injury.... when family members or caregivers falsely present others, such as children, as being ill, injured or impaired."

First identified in 1977, this disease has come into popular culture relevance in the past few years through a documentary about the murder of Dee Dee Blanchard. Dee Dee convinced her daughter, Gypsy Rose, that she had various diseases, gave her medications for them, and had her go around in a wheelchair to receive charitable handouts. Gypsy, after finding out about this psychological abuse, murdered her mother and was sentenced to ten years in prison. Some studies have found that 95% percent of the individuals inflicting this psychiatric disease are married women. It is an incredibly dangerous form of abuse; studies have also shown mortality rates of 6.7% to 7.4%.

Eddie's mother in *IT* never meant to hurt Eddie. Her abusive nature instead was overprotection to the point where she made him think that he had diseases, such as asthma, to prevent him from running around with his friends. Most perpetrators of this Factitious Disorder do not mean to harm their child but do so in order to protect them from what they see as greater harms. In the book Eddie, never escapes from the abuse that his mother doled upon him. Up until the moment before he dies, he still keeps his inhaler with him just in case; and this remains true for many survivors in the real world. Children who are victims of Factitious Disorder are often found to have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other health issues later in life, which begs the question if these children would be better off being placed in foster care away from their biological family.

IV. CONCLUSION

IT is a behemoth of a book. It has many flaws, both in structure and content, but it also evokes so much emotion in its horror elements that it is impossible to not get sucked into the story. Stephen King created a world full of monsters, both human and cosmic, that still persists in the cultural zeitgeist over thirty years later. His horrific tales of child abuse highlight real world issues that courts and lawyers have to navigate through every day. He uses characters like Beverly and Eddie to highlight different types of abuse that both children and adults may be suffering from. Each of the Losers in turn shows some real-life trauma that they have to face in addition to fighting Pennywise. Whether its harassment for traits that can't be changed like ethnicity or sexuality, or cyclical abuse from loved ones, he shows that innocents have the capability to face their fears and come out on top. He goes too far at points, almost desensitizing his audience to the child violence, but his portrayal of the abuses that the children face is haunting and relevant to this very day. King chooses to make children capable of handling real adult problems and if we can see children succeed at killing a malevolent evil, maybe it will make us face our own fears a little easier.

SOURCES

E. Alex Jung, *Stephen King: 'It's Fascinating' People Are More Offended by IT's Child Orgy Than Its Child Murders*, VULTURE (Sept. 8, 2017), <https://www.vulture.com/2017/09/stephen-king-statement-on-child-sex-in-novel-it.html>.

Gregory Yates & Christopher Bass, *The perpetrators of medical child abuse (Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy) – A systematic review of 796 cases*, 72 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT. 45, 45-53 (2017).

IT (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2017).

IT: CHAPTER TWO (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2019).

JUDE DRY, *Stephen King Champions 'It Chapter Two' Gay Character Surprise: 'Kind of Genius'*, INDIEWIRE (Sept. 10, 2019, 2:36 PM), <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/09/stephen-king-it-chapter-two-gay-character-genius-1202172451/>.

Mary S. Sheridan, *The deceit continues: an updated literature review of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy*, 27 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT. 431, 431-451 (2003).

MAYO CLINIC, *Factitious Disorder* (Feb. 6, 2018), <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/factitious-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20356028>.

STEPHEN KING, IT (Signet Press, 1986).