Stephen King and the Power of Branding

Catie Brown
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Introduction

When Stephen King’s first novel was published in 1974, horror fiction was largely regulated to chilling folklore and the remains of the Gothic Era of literature. There was some separation of genres, as a revival of science fiction beginning in the 1940s allowed for some of the signature otherworldly concepts and heart-racing storylines to make their way into mainstream literature and film. King has stated that early science fiction was a strong influence on his first attempts at writing, but ultimately his largest contribution would be to the emerging horror genre rather than science fiction (Beahm, 86).

Nowadays, fiction is often neatly compartmentalized into genres, and the legacy of those genres often color authors’ and readers’ expectations and enforce which stories are considered relevant or appropriate in any given genre. The emergence of horror as a distinct, mainstream genre coincided with King’s rise as a prolific author in the latter half of the twentieth century, and it would be remiss to not consider how King shaped the genre for generations to come.

A large portion of King’s popularity in the 1970s and 1980s can be accredited to mechanisms of branding and marketing that were largely in place long before King published *Carrie* in 1974. In addition, these branding techniques, which will be fully elaborated on throughout this paper, turned King into a brand name himself that was undeniably linked to horror, despite having never considered himself a horror writer. In one interview, King claimed that his initial marketing as a horror writer was a matter of convenience for publishers and booksellers, and so “[he] was indeed typed as a horror writer, a tag [he has] never confirmed or denied, simply because it is irrelevant to what [he does]” (Ellis, 2020). This hesitation to fully embrace the horror label suggests that King’s personal beliefs are more aligned with a passion
for writing and storytelling rather than contributing to any particular genre. This would later set the stage for his attempts to escape being labeled solely as a horror writer, some of which would be more successful due to the shifting nature of marketing and branding in the early twenty-first century.

For most, Stephen King’s career has been defined by his eighty-seven and counting published novels, spanning nearly five decades of written works and adding classic stories to the horror genre. However, the most important aspect of King’s career is how it demonstrated the ability of good writing and relatable, heroic characters to cross genres and bring horror stories into the mainstream. This is all in combination with King’s own sense of branding and that of his publishers, which helped build his career when his first novel was published in 1974. These shifts throughout King’s career make for an interesting case study of an author who has written across genres and during transitions in technology in the last five decades. King’s career may be uniquely positioned for analysis as it grew during the age of new communication technologies in the late twentieth century, and King continues to have a strong public social media presence into the digital age. As these technological changes led to changes within the common modes of marketing and branding, King’s position as a best-selling author has remained constant. This paper will demonstrate the role changes in technology and marketing played throughout King’s career. It will also discuss the connection between King’s approach to branding and writing, and how this had led to him becoming the writer, public figure, and brand that many are familiar with.
Literature Review: The King of Branding

As King is most known for his contributions to the horror genre, scholars have often included references to horror criticism and studies when writing about King. However, criticism of horror writing often considers the genre to be inferior to others, as scholar John Edgar Browning noted in his essay investigating the history and methodology of horror criticism. Browning notes that one of the primary reasons horror literature is often dismissed by critics is because the material is often embraced by the masses, “sullied in the realm of public discourse,” before the content is considered for scholarly study (Underwood, 88). This is often the case even if horror literature contains social or political commentary that would typically warrant scholarly study. This trend also occurs despite horror stories across cultures often being used to study cultures and people. As Browning states, serious scholarly study of horror only began in the mid 1980s, whereas horror popularity began to truly rise in the 1970s with the mainstream release of many cult classic horror films and works from authors such as King.

Thus, scholarly study of Stephen King is only a fairly recent phenomenon, and a bit surprising given his immense impact on popular culture and modern literature. As film scholar Tony Magistrale explained, oftentimes this is due to “academic snobs” finding his work somehow inferior as it appeals to young readers and is linked to the horror genre (Magistrale, xiii). This can be interpreted as an unfavorable view of horror in general, but King’s immense contribution to the genre has opened up some study of King’s work, mostly in the last two decades. Throughout these studies, scholars have attempted to determine exactly what chain of events lead to King being marketed solely as a horror writer, especially in his early career. As King has publicly stated that he considers himself a writer foremost rather than solely a horror
writer, one cannot assume that it was simply due to the content of King’s novels, but rather a work of publishing and branding to create his first public image.

To determine the role of publishers and marketers in King’s branding as a horror writer, one must look to the scholars who have written on King’s early career. As biographer George Beahm illustrates in *The Stephen King Companion: Four Decades of Fear from the Master of Horror*, King’s first novel *Carrie*, published in 1974 by publishing company Doubleday, would ultimately be the catalyst for King’s career as a horror writer (Beahm, 219). *Carrie* was considered a successful novel, with Doubleday attempting to call it ‘the novel of the year’.

Drawing on the rising public image of horror books and films, Beahm maintains that King’s first four books being true horror cemented him as a horror writer, and that his reputation would be forever linked to his first published works (Beahm, 219). Those books, *Carrie*, ‘*Salem’s Lot*, *The Shining*, and a collection of short stories titled *Night Shift*, all contained multiple classic horror tropes and were marketed solely as horror stories. They were also all quickly adapted into film or television adaptations that helped King to amass dedicated fans. However, as Beahm notes, King’s later works would illustrate that he was fully capable of writing intriguing stories that were not horror. Beahm surmises that had King attempted to publish non-horror early in his career, he likely would have had a very different career path; albeit one that eventually would have incorporated the “monsters”, as Beahm puts it, suggesting that King would have ultimately turned to horror (Beahm, 220).

This sentiment has been echoed by other scholars who have researched King’s life and career, and they often also attribute King’s success to the increasing popularity of horror at the time he published his first novel. As Don Herron noted in the analytical essay “Horror Springs in the Fiction of Stephen King,” the early 1970s saw a rise in horror’s popularity with films such as
The Exorcist and Rosemary’s Baby, allowing for more input of horror into the literary market as well (Underwood, 75). Herron also speculates that this environment led to the rise of a particular type of horror fan that could easily become attached to King as a brand name. Herron claims that King’s rise in popularity was the first time a horror writer was considered mainstream, and this brought with it a recognition that many horror fans would not have been accustomed to. Herron himself admits in the essay that he would have never read a Stephen King novel if his name was not consistently on every bestseller list, demonstrating how mainstream popularity indeed results in more readers and ultimately transcends genres (Underwood, 79).

However, Herron also describes another effect of the King brand on horror fans; a sense that they had found a writer who understood them. Herron cites examples throughout King’s work where King calls back to classic scenes and tropes of horror, such as a scene in ‘Salem’s Lot where two characters construct a cross to kill a vampire, reminiscent of the original Dracula by Bram Stoker (Underwood, 81). Another example involves one of the most famous scenes from The Shining where a woman’s dead body is found in a bathtub with a shower curtain, which Herron likens to another famous scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s film Psycho. King is known for borrowing classic horror images such as these, and Herron claims this is unique to King. As a result, according to Herron, this makes King’s work primed for lovers of horror who would be familiar with these works, and as a result they would feel a kinship with this author who was also a horror fan. Herron actually states that this makes King’s novels less “serious”, as he consistently reuses these tropes to appeal to horror fans rather than being completely inventive in his early career. Herron states that ‘Salem’s Lot “is not a serious novel about vampires, rather … a horror fan’s novel about vampires”. To establish a difference between a “serious novel” and a “horror fan’s novel”, Herron compares King to fellow horror writer Anne Rice, whose debut
novel *Interview With the Vampire* was published in 1976, one year after ‘Salem’s Lot. Herron claims that because Rice does not directly use every stereotypical vampire trope, such as the disdain for crosses, *Interview With the Vampire* is a ‘serious novel’ because it acknowledges the tropes but also reinvents vampire mythology (Underwood, 86). King, on the other hand, was known to consistently reuse these tropes in their original form in his early career, establishing the difference between him and Rice.

Scholars have also often studied the impact of films adaptations of King’s novels, as these films provide at times a much more public and recognizable face for King and demonstrate his impact on popular culture. Tony Magistrale stated in *Hollywood’s Stephen King* that despite King’s contributions to modern film, the violent and scary nature of his films cause many critics who would lend King more credibility to shy away from them. Magistrale claimed this was due to the unpleasant nature of some horror films, making them difficult for critics who cannot stand such scary material. However, for those that can stomach and even enjoy these horror films, Magistrale asserts that certain elements of King’s work result in films that positively contribute to his personal brand. Magistrale believes that since King grew up in an era of “visual media”, and often cited influences such as science fiction films of the 1940s and 1950s, King is “a novelist who writes like a screenwriter,” (Magistrale, xvi). King is inherently a good storyteller, and although these stories often translate into well-loved films, King is not inherently a great screenwriter, so often he is not directly involved with film adaptations of his works. Just like in his written works, Magistrale also maintains that there is a certain archetype of a King film fan, which Magistrale quotes from another scholar as a “literary slob” (Magistrale, xvii). These “literary slobs” are a driving force in King’s brand, representing those who seek out horror for pure entertainment and do not necessarily have a refined sense of film artistry. Magistrale claims
that most people will either love horror or be repulsed by it, and that these horror fans gravitate towards King due to the inherently “American” nature of his works. Magistrale defines these “American” characteristics as “violent … and unrefined”, a common trait found among the characters in King’s stories (Magistrale, xvii). Don Herron echoes this sentiment, pointing out that King’s characters “swear” and “often act crudely [and] grossly,” (Underwood, 89). This represents how King does not shy away from difficult subjects or unlikable characters, perhaps best representing everyday people in a way that resonates with his fans.

In another sense, King’s “American” writing is also due to him being grounded in typical American life. King stated in his collection of horror essays *Danse Macabre* that horror’s purpose is to “reaffirm the virtues of the norm” by demonstrating what terror can occur when people venture away from the norm (King, 1981). *New York Times* writer Robert Harris claims that creating a norm and then perturbing it is King’s specialty. The norms he creates are so personal to his audience, as he “writes about what is dear to the hearts of Americans,” according to Harris, offering the examples of subjects such as “dogs, cats, cars and kids” (Harris, 1983). These connections to the everyday create an even greater bond between King and his readers. Harris also notes that King’s characters often act as underdogs, allowing for more sympathy from readers, and he also excels at bringing in the everyday American by expertly mentioning household brands that readers will recognize, and as a result relate to the characters in King’s novels.

Similarly, literary scholar Nasrullah Mambrol noted that King’s work seems to “draw on the collective unconscious,” establishing familiarity with readers and tapping into tropes, brands, and ideas that most common people would be familiar with (Mambrol, 2018). Mambrol cites another example of this by comparing *Carrie* to the classic fairytale *Cinderella*, but with a dark
twist. King’s writing follows some of the same narrative ideas commonly found in fairy and folk tales, as Mambrol also mentioned how King modernized vampire stories with ‘Salem’s Lot, King’s second published novel which tends to receive a lot of scholarly attention because it truly demonstrates how to reinvent a classic horror story. Mambol further makes a connection to familiar tropes and storylines, as he mentions that the two protagonists of ‘Salem’s Lot are “orphans, searching for community,” (Mambrol, 2018) This is a common theme among familiar childhood stories, with Mambrol specifically mentioning fairytales and Charles Dickens’ novels, and established King even further as an ‘everyman’s’ horror author.

Despite the use of everyday items and topics, King’s novels have an artistic nature within them that lead to them being translated very well into films, as Bill Warren notes in his essay “The Movies and Mr. King.” Warren describes King’s writing as “cinematic” in the most literal sense (Underwood, 129). Whereas Magistrale concentrated on the influences that lead to King writing novels inspired by earlier horror and science fiction films, Warren claims that King’s novels seem to be written by someone intimately familiar with the workings of film cameras and film production. For example, Warren likens King’s “fractured” descriptions of his settings to techniques film directors may use (Underwood, 131). Similarly, he claims King’s descriptions of scenes often read as if a camera is pulling away from the scene, creating an image for the readers not unlike many films. The most prominent example of King using cinematic writing is the consistent shifting of perspectives throughout his novels, and this often is more advantageous in the film adaptations of his works, most notably in The Shining, according to Warren. The Shining is at times written from the perspective of young Danny Torrance, who is supposed to be five years old during the events of the film. Warren claims that in the novel The Shining, King’s writing from Danny’s perspective is awkward and too mature for a five-year-old’s supposed
thoughts. However, in the film adaptation, Danny’s inner thoughts are not spoken aloud but instead acted out by the young actor. Warren claims this change in the dialogue is much more believable, and commends the filmmakers for choosing to have Danny be nearly mute throughout the film (Underwood, 139).

*The Shining* was one of the catalysts of King becoming a brand name, as King himself would state later in an essay that *The Shining* was his first bestselling hardcover novel and truly garnered him name recognition (Underwood, 36). This name recognition in turn has allowed him to experiment with different publishing techniques, both new and old. Publishing companies are known for their ability to market the materials they publish, but in the case of King, his works and name became so well-recognized that he could afford to be creative in this area. For instance, as Alissa Burger noted in *Teaching Stephen King*, King chose to publish his 1996 novel *The Green Mile* serially, releasing it in six separate installment before republishing it as a full novel a year later (Burger, 2379). Burger notes that while serial publishing has a long history associated with great writers such as Charles Dickens, it is a risky move in an era where consumers are accustomed to instant gratification. In this example, using a risky technique benefitted King, as readers and critics alike praised the technique as they waited in suspense at the end of each installment (Burger, 2414).

Serialization originated in the Gothic and Romantic eras of literature, and just as King reimagines creatures that became famous during these times, so too did he breathe new life into serialization. However, he has also marketed and benefitted from completely modern forms of publishing, mainly ebooks. As King had written a substantial amount of short stories and novellas, he no longer has had to solely rely on publishing them in large collections. As Burger notes, King’s novella *Riding the Bullet* was published electronically in 2000, long before ebooks
reached mass popularity and accessibility, and quite possibly as one of the first ever commercially available ebooks. While he later republished *Riding the Bullet* in a short story collection in 2002, King stated that he published it alone for “Curiosity. [He] just wanted to see what would happen,” (Burger, 2722) This is a sentiment that King expresses often, describing how he chooses to reinvigorate writing, and this new outlet provided him an opportunity to do so. Since then, King has published multiple other stories and essays exclusively for ebook publication, such as the novella *UR* which is exclusive to Amazon’s Kindle service, as well as publishing directly to his own website.

These examples demonstrate a resilience and dedication within King that has made him all the more accessible to millions of fans worldwide. However, it also demonstrates the power of the marketing and branding industry and how they channeled King’s early career into a very specific direction. In his later years he has had more control over the messages he sends with his content, but that only came after he rose to fame in the context of an impersonal form of branding in the second half of the twentieth century. Changes in his branding and publishing only occurred in the last two decades, and also coincided with technology changes that allowed King to be more directly involved with and have more control of his personal brand. Scholars have concentrated heavily on the beginning of King’s career and the literary merit of his works; but very few have addressed his active Twitter and political presence in recent years. These online actions contribute just as much to Stephen King’s brand, and will illustrate how the power dynamics of branding and marketing have shifted throughout his career.
Literature Review: The King of Writing

Scholars have attempted to determine what characteristics of King’s writing has made him a consistent bestseller. While most casual readers may only be aware of King for the horrifying scenes they witnessed in a film adaptation of his works, scholars tend to concentrate on the influence, narration, and form of storytelling in his novels. It is important to remember that King was not the first American horror writer, but certainly is one of the most prolific of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As such, one of the first questions to be addressed is where King may have drawn inspiration from.

The modern horror genre often builds upon classic horror tropes of the Gothic literature movement of the Victorian Era, however, it has been demonstrated that King is able to change these tropes so that they “resonate with contemporary audiences” (Burger, 241). For instance, as Alissa Burger notes, King takes the age-old creature of the vampire in his 1975 novel ‘Salem’s Lot and reimagines it in a contemporary American town, while still incorporating the fearsome traits of the creature that originated in Serbian folklore and older stories such as Dracula. However, King stated in an interview that one of the most crucial elements of ‘Salem’s Lot, a secret room full of vampires, was inspired by the paranoia of the 1970s, particularly the Watergate scandal and his own “disillusionment and consequent fear for the future” (Burger, 289). Burger notes that in this instance, King created twofold fear for the reader; fear from the actual bloodsucking creature, but also an internal fear that weighs heavily on the conscience of the reader.

Along with the characterizations of horror such as these monstrous creatures, King’s work has been deduced to have largely been influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, a main figurehead
in the Gothic literature movement during the late nineteenth century. As was noted by scholar Burton R. Pollin, King’s work consistently borrows ideas from Poe’s, likely as Poe’s works were considered the most widely known examples of horror fiction. In fact, Pollin notes, King’s very first published short story “The Glass Floor” appears contextually similar to “The Fall of the House of Usher”, and King’s novel Gerald’s Game has many of the same storytelling elements of Poe’s “The Tell Tale Heart”, namely a cold, calculating villain who appears to feel no remorse at harming or killing another person (Pollin, 4).

However, as Burger continues to note, 'Salem’s Lot was only the first instance of King using a vampire as an enemy within a story, as he included vampires in short stories and graphic novels later in his career. While King is certainly known as a prolific writer, having published eighty-two novels and various other collections, this reinvention of tropes illustrates an ability to change the typical appearance of fear, Burger notes (Burger, 372). This is not the only instance of King reimagining a creature not of his own invention, as Burgers elaborates on how King also uses the classic horror monsters of ghosts, werewolves and a mysterious unnamed threat. In this instance, the scholar attributes King’s success partially to his ability to revisit and reinvent classic ideas of horror for modern audiences, creating a twofold avenue to appeal to audiences by relying on well-known ideas and modernizing them at the same time.

In addition to this modernization of classic horror, King is known for other classic tropes within his stories. When considering which of King’s stories are most well received, often those are stories that explore human interaction and relations in familiar models. For example, as Burger also notes, King has written many friendship stories that have severe horror elements, such as The Body and It, but in these cases the friendship and childhood adventures remain at the core of the story. In another example, noted by James Arthur Anderson in The Linguistics of
Stephen King, King’s first novel Carrie was not only a story of terror and destruction, but one of misfits and revenge. These, as Anderson and other scholars have noted are consistent human traits that ground King’s work in everyday situations and relationships (Anderson, 14).

As stated earlier, King was able to successfully market himself as a writer who rehashed classic horror for modern fans, according to the writings of scholar Don Herron. Oftentimes this approach to rewriting classic horror monsters was successful, according to Herron, because they appreciated a writer who was also a fan of classic horror and established this affinity by including direct references to horror in his own novels (Underwood, 79). However, Herron also mentions that King’s ability to tell the stories of everyday people caught up in horrific situations also contributed to his loyal fanbase. Just as King’s fans grew attached a fellow horror-fan, they also appreciated that he wrote about characters they could relate to. Herron described this as King’s fans wanting to be scared, but also desiring “interludes” with characters that resembled them (Underwood, 81).

This leads to another frequently asked question among scholars, as they often consider what narration styles King favors and how a range in narration in his works impacts his storytelling legacy as a whole. In her essay “Horror and Humanity for our Time,” Deborah Notkin explores King’s relationship to his characters as creations, and how he uses different storytelling techniques to shape them. In one instance, Notkin describes how King shifted narration styles in his longest novel The Stand. The novel opens with a nearly one-hundred page ‘mini-novel’ that describes how a majority of the human population was decimated by a virus before switching to a much more philosophical story about a battle between good and evil among the few survivors. Notkin describes how these first one-hundred pages made readers feel as if
they “witnessed the deaths” and pulled them in, allowing for the rest of the story to flow smoothly (Underwood, 156).

The same cannot be said for some of King’s other novels, which Notkin criticizes for lacking an overarching narrative structure or switching perspectives too abruptly. Notkin points out that one of the only instances where King used a “fragmented, journalistic style” of writing was in his debut novel Carrie (Underwood, 157). Notkin claims that in Carrie, these shifts in narration ultimately did not serve the reader or the novels intended purpose. Carrie alternates between the story of Carrie White told through a third person narrator and reports, articles, and other journalistic forms of writing that tell the story from a different outside perspective. Notkin claims that this change in narration styles led to readers not connecting with Carrie as a character, nor to accept the high school bullies as the true villains of the story. It also does not allow for attachment to the characters, as supporting character Sue Snell is meant to be heralded as a hero for giving up her chance to go to prom, yet the readers have not had the opportunity to connect with Sue and thus this attempt is unsuccessful. However, Notkin believes that the final scene of the book, where Carrie and her mother both demonstrate their love for each other while attempting to kill the other, demonstrates the kind of deep connection to characters that King would later become famous for (Underwood, 158).

Carrie, as King’s debut novel, has often been subject to scrutiny and scholarship, with some disagreeing with Notkin about the disjointed narration. For instance, in The Linguistics of Stephen King, a critical linguistic analysis of some of King’s most famous works, James Arthur Anderson states that King’s use of the two narration styles is “masterful”. Anderson claims that King is intentional in shifting perspectives throughout Carrie to provide readers with the angle that will best describe the events of the story at any given point. He also asserts that adding to
Carrie’s story through the perspectives of fictional journalists, scholars, and biographers further fleshes out the story by placing it in a broader context, ultimately lending it “believability” (Anderson, 11). These two perspectives on Carrie illustrate perhaps best the difference in opinions concerning King. While he uses both well-known narratives and themes, his attempts at changing how these stories are told can either be positively or negatively received depending on the affinities of the critic.

Many of these scholars indicate a common attitude that King’s writing has consistently been seen as inferior, either to the Gothic literature of earlier decades or to contemporary literary fiction. *Los Angeles Review of Books* writer Dwight Allen has mentioned his disdain for King because Allen considers himself a “snob” (Allen, 2012). This sentiment is in accord with others who have criticized King based on the notion that popular fiction cannot simultaneously hold literary merit. While a large amount of this attitude is due to the horror genre’s reputation, it is also in part a result of King’s raw and uncensored style of writing. This approach has alienated some, but also attracted loyal fans who have found a kinship in King’s love for horror and how he writes for and about common people in an uncut manner. Perhaps one of the best assertions to King’s literary excellence was when he received the National Medal of Arts in 2014. When presenting the medal to King, President Barack Obama commented that King was “one of the most popular and prolific writers of our time [who] combines his remarkable storytelling with his sharp analysis of human nature” (Dwyer, 2015). Despite the criticism of King’s approach to storytelling, receiving the highest honor for arts in the United States demonstrates the value of King’s contribution to literature, and his public reputation may ultimately be more beneficial than the opinions of critics.
Stephen King’s career has undergone a large transformation throughout the nearly five decades he’s been a public figure. These changes in his branding and writing can be attributed not only to a change in his personal preferences, but also a matter of changes in marketing tactics and the technologies available to both him and his team of publishers and marketers. Having established what scholars have determined about King’s career and literary practice, this paper will address how King’s brand has shifted throughout the decades according to the marketing trends of the time, and the importance of King’s work to genre fiction and popular branding.
Chapter 2: Stephen King & Marketing Machines

Introduction

As the literature review illustrated, Stephen King’s career initially involved marketing that led to him being branded solely as a horror writer. However, scholarly and historical evidence demonstrates that King could have potentially had a very different career path if he and his publishers had chosen to publish non-horror novels during this crucial time in his early career. These choices were a matter of branding, but in my opinion the powers of branding funneled King in one direction in his early career, and ultimately would prove to be so strong that he was unable to escape his title as a horror writer until an industry-wide shift in marketing beginning in the 1990s and continuing through to the 2010s. These changes in approaches were accompanied by an increased use of personal technology that allowed King to become not only a well-known author, but also an active presence on social media, raising the curtain for fans and non-fans alike to understand that this “master of horror” was in fact just a talented writer who had his first successes in the horror genre.

This is not to dismiss King’s talent, but rather to demonstrate that the work of personal branding contributed to his success perhaps just as much as his literary expertise. Personal branding is often considered a relatively modern phenomenon, often linked to social media and the content users directly choose to upload, giving their audience an idea of who they are as a person. While King could not utilize personal branding in the age of mass market media when his first works were published, in recent decades he has used the technique to shift his reputation and illustrate that he does not consider himself a horror writer foremost. King’s use of branding illustrates the changes in marketing throughout the decades, and how branding machines and
mass marketing once had complete control of his reputation, until personal branding allowed him to take the reins instead.

**Part 1: Reluctantly a Horror Author**

As far as King’s personal opinion on his work and career are concerned, the closest we can come to knowing his inner thoughts are what he has expressed in interviews and personal essays. King has stated in interviews, such as in 2020 on National Public Radio show *Fresh Air*, that he is content to be considered a horror writer “as long as the checks don’t bounce”( Gross, 2020). Humor aside, this was not the first time King has demonstrated ambivalence towards his association with horror. In the same interview, King stated that writing is “a wonderful, exhilarating experience,” which demonstrates a commitment to the craft rather than a deep connection to the genre that made him famous (King, 2020).

It is important to remember that just as horror made King a commonplace name in the 1970s, so too did King contribute to horror becoming mainstream. This symbiotic relationship was also a strong reason why King was encouraged to publish his horror novels foremost, and in turn he paved the way for horror as a leading genre. Indeed, as James Arthur Anderson pointed out in *The Linguistics of Stephen King*, prior to the mid-1970s horror books were often grouped with science fiction and fantasy books. Anderson estimates that King’s popularity, as *Carrie* was considered by its publishing company Doubleday to be a “novel of the year”, allowed for horror to be exalted as a separate genre (Anderson, 12).

For context, marketing was well established by the 1970s, and distinct traits of marketing for the decade were beginning to take hold. Research scholar Rahul Nanda compiled a timeline
of the strategies most commonly used by marketers over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and then claimed that the late 1970s saw tactics such as identifying key consumers of a product or brand and creating personalized marketing strategies targeted specifically to those consumers (Nanda, 361). This is combined with the reputation of horror novels and the horror genre in the 1970s, which was not overtly positive until the release of King’s novels and other horror projects that gave the genre more positive public recognition.

King’s rise to success in the 1970s did not occur in a vacuum. As scholar Jess Nivens elaborates, the children of the 1950s and 1960s grew up with science fiction and campy horror television shows, making them the right audience to embrace much more gruesome horror in their adulthood in the 1970s. In addition, according to Nivens, the more socially relaxed culture of the 1970s and 1980s allowed up-and-coming horror writers to more easily push the boundaries of what was acceptable for the first time. Nivens specifically mentions King’s tendency to “ignore social inhibitions,” which ultimately helped define his writing as raw, violent, and glaringly truthful (Nivens, 138).

Scholar John Edgar Browning demonstrates in his essay “Horror Criticism” that horror was beginning to find its footing among commercial audiences due to an increased number of horror films being produced in the 1970s. In this way, Browning suggests, it was the initial popularity of horror films such as The Exorcist and the early works of director Wes Craven that allowed the literature genre to flourish separately. It would take nearly a decade for these films to be considered worthy of scholarly film studies, and horror is still seen as “lowbrow” by many to this day (Cardin, 97). This did not stop fans from flocking towards horror film, and adaptations of King’s work were often celebrated as well. Indeed, Jess Nevins, a scholar who has written
extensively on the histories of horror and fantasy, claims that King’s career was “the most important contribution to the [horror] boom” that emerged in the 1970s (Nevins, 141).

The first chapter of this dissertation discussed how King’s first three novels have since been considered horror classics and firmly cemented him in the genre according to scholar George Beahm. However, Beahm also noted that the media adaptations of these works, the films Carrie and The Shining, released in 1976 and 1980 respectively, and the television miniseries of King’s second book ’Salem’s Lot released in 1979, contributed significantly to the horror genre and to King’s legacy. Regrettably, this did not necessarily change the critical perception of horror, as horror films and novels often still find success among popular audiences yet are disavowed by critics. Browning points out that some have attempted to seriously study horror in recent decades, yet it is often mixed with literary studies mostly concerned with the Gothic literature of the Victorian Era. While Browning considers Gothic literature to be modern horror’s “older brother”, ultimately he claims Gothic literature’s association with the Romantic movement and the Victorian Era lends it credibility that modern horror does not possess (Cardin, 98). Regardless of the disdain from critics, horror both emerged as a separate, modern literature genre for the first time in the 1970s, and King is both partially responsible for this and can accredit his initial popularity to these shifts in popular culture.

King certainly thrived within these shifts of popular culture, namely in the books he published after Carrie. King’s opinions and personal experiences on his rise to mainstream success are perhaps best chronicled in his own essay “On Becoming a Brand Name,” which was first published in 1984. In the essay, King likened the process of becoming a brand name to “Hollywood typecasting,” (Underwood, 37). He mentions how his friend who had connections to Doubleday suggested that Carrie’s success warranted another horror novel, ’Salem’s Lot, and
that he should not have attempted to publish a non-horror novel. King stated that he resolved to write what he desired and that he would “leave it to the critics” if he would be deemed a horror writer (Underwood, 31).

Despite this seeming apathy for his public perception, King’s words suggest he was completely aware of the power of outside forces in creating his public perception, and in turn his personal brand. King’s brand would only become more important as he continued to publish more novels, as he explained that Carrie’s sales differed depending on the marketing of the book and his name association. According to King, the first edition of Carrie did not have the title of the book nor King’s name on the front cover. The cover of the book was solely a striking image of a young woman’s face. King considered this tactic a “gimmick,” but it was a consistent approach used by publishers at the time to use an eye-catching cover to help boost the sales of first-time authors who did not have a strong reputation (Underwood, 34). This anecdote illustrates the importance of brand names in the publishing world, but also how image impacts book sales. However, as King’s popularity grew, he would be able to rely less on publishing tactics to bolster sales and instead would have the ability to control his own branding.

As stated in the literature review, King rose to popularity in a time when horror was not considered mainstream. In this instance, King had to rely on the mass branding techniques and the reputation of a company such as Doubleday. One of these tactics, according to King’s essay, was to consistently publishing books to begin to create any reputation whatsoever for a new author (Underwood, 37). If an author such as King was to publish their debut novel today, they would have access to social media and could create a personal brand and market their novel exactly as they desired. In 1970s, King was encouraged to continue writing horror after his debut, and this in turn solidified his brand to his publishers and to his fans. While it is easy to
think that this was an unfortunate series of events that forced King to be marketed towards only one genre, it ultimately served him as he was able to flourish in the most common and powerful form of branding for that time period.

In the same essay, King states that he truly felt he became a “brand name” with the publication of *The Shining* in 1977. As the third King book published with Doubleday, it was able to marketed specifically as a “Stephen King novel”, fitting in nicely with *Carrie* and ‘*Salem’s Lot* in the horror section. It was also King’s first hardcover bestseller, suggesting an instant popularity, as paperback books are traditionally published months after the same book is first published as a hardcover. This was the case for King, as *Carrie* and ‘*Salem’s Lot* had more success as paperbacks than hardcovers, and in fact the paperback of both novels sold more after the publication of *The Shining*, according to King’s essay (Underwood, 40).

One must also consider how Doubleday’s efforts led to King becoming a brand name, even if he had personal objections to their strategies. Marketing scholar Nanda claims that moving into the 1980s, aggressive marketing strategies became more common, which is reflected in how King’s publishers chose to market his works. King gave some credit to Doubleday in “On Becoming a Brand Name,” as the company arranged for him to be featured in *Publisher’s Weekly* and *People* magazine after the publication of *The Shining*, directly linking his face and name to this new bestseller for the mainstream public. However, some efforts were not as well received, as Doubleday was noted for marketing King’s books with covers that “screamed ‘horror!’”, according to George Beahm (Beahm, 286) Despite this, there is also interview and archival evidence that suggests King personally may have wanted to break from the mold of being a “horror writer”, and that Doubleday became too reliant on him as a horror writer and could only think to market him that way.
The first piece of evidence concerns the publication of King’s first novel under the pen name Richard Bachman, 1977’s *Rage*. Not only was this the first book King published under the pen name, it was also the first that was published with New American Library rather than Doubleday. Biographers of King maintain that he hoped to see if one of his novels would sell well without his name attached to it, and so he also went with a different publisher to avoid the connection (Beahm, 273). The books written under his pen name were known for similarities in stylistic writing, but a shift in content. Rather than being solely horror, the Bachman books are thriller novels, notably absent of the monstrous entities most early King novels included. This was all as he was publishing horror novels with Doubleday and just as the film versions of *Carrie* and *The Shining* were released, indicating that King wanted to branch out in his creative work but felt he was not capable of doing so.

The second piece of evidence is that King was writing non-horror novels throughout his time at Doubleday, yet they were not published until years later. This could potentially be the result of a pressure put on King to produce horror novels. During this time in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he began writing novels that would later contain large universes within themselves, most notably the Dark Tower series. According to *The Complete Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of Stephen King*, King was inspired to write the Dark Tower series after reading Robert Browning’s poem “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” when he was in college, and began writing the first Dark Tower novel *The Gunslinger* in 1970 (Beahm, 370). According to this timeline, we know that King was writing this novel concurrently with *Carrie*, ‘Salem’s Lot, and *The Shining*. The Dark Tower series would end up including eight lengthy books and a multitude of storylines, and in the afterword of the fourth novel in the series, published in 1997, he stated that the world of the Dark Tower was the “Jupiter” within his “solar
system of the imagination” (Wiater, 187). He drew a direct line between the settings and characters he’s written in the past, mentioning characters from previous novels he’d published, and claimed that they were all contained within the world he’d created in the Dark Tower books. King was knowingly creating a world where all his characters and novels were connected, a marketing ploy that is much more common in today’s world compared to when King admitted to this tactic in 1997. Modern audiences are accustomed to these ‘universes’ from film franchises such as Disney’s Avengers and Star Wars films and Warner Brothers’ Harry Potter franchises, where connections between films are quite explicit. In those cases, the audience is aware that they are watching a film that continues the story of other characters they had come to know in previous films, whereas it is not so obvious with King’s work. Still, for his dedicated fans and those to come, King was introducing his audience to the worlds he had created, furthering this kinship he had already created with them, their king of horror.

King would not be deemed a “King of Horror” until he was much more established in his career, but ultimately that reputation was due in part to the marketing efforts by Doubleday early in his career. Although the restrictions may have been tiresome to King personally, he admitted at times in personal essays that it was these efforts that bolstered his career and gave him the recognition that would later allow him to experiment further with writing. King’s initial reputation and personal brand were the result of the strength in the marketing techniques of the time, which gave him the name recognition to launch his career, but also forced him to write exclusively horror longer than he may have personally wanted to do so.
Part 2: First Attempts at Shifting Brands

King’s personal essays such as “On Becoming a Brand Name” describe how at times he felt despondent over consistently being labeled a horror writer, when he seemed to truly think of himself as just a “writer”. While scholars have studied King’s work and branding, oftentimes they have coalesced all of King’s novels without considering how he attempted to break from the mold and reputation he had gained in the beginning of his career. As King published seven novels under the pen name Richard Bachman, it is easy to see this as an attempt to gain credit solely for his literary talent and avoid the horror typecasting. These seven novels would not be considered horror to the extent that some of King’s other works would be, as they do not include fictitious monsters or other remnants of Gothic literature, but are instead thriller and psychological fiction novels. Unfortunately, King’s attempts to break free from the mold he had been issued were at first unsuccessful, as his works had come to rely on his brand name, not that of Richard Bachman.

Rick Hautala, a writer contemporary to King, stated plainly in an interview that King’s current success is due to his brand name, and that if he used a pseudonym his novels would not sell. He cited the example of the seven Bachman books, none of which sold well before the public discovered that King was the true author behind them (Beahm, 135) The Bachman books, as they are often collectively called, represent a case study in a brand name author attempting to abandon his brand name.

There is evidence of the Bachman books not selling well until King’s pen name became public, as two of the books had fallen out of publication due to low sales (Beahm, 275). While King had denied he was Bachman in earlier interviews, even claiming he knew and went to school with Bachman, eagle-eyed fans were able to spot similarities between King and
Bachman’s writing, and the rumor began. King’s sister-in-law and secretary published the truth in a 1985 edition of King’s newsletter Castle Rock (Beahm, 406). This was shortly after the publication of the last Bachman book published while Bachman was still “alive”, Thinner. Thinner was first printed with 26,000 copies and was largely ignored in book expositions, where readers would have had the chance to obtain advance review copies (Beahm, 406). This was relatively successful for a Bachman book, as Steve Brown, who helped uncover the pen name for the public, claimed that Thinner was beginning to pull Bachman out of obscurity and he was beginning to amass a modest following (Brown, 1985). Brown ended up being instrumental in the public discovering the pen name, after he checked the copyrights for Bachman’s novel Rage and found that King was listed as a copyright holder. After the news broke that King was indeed Bachman, sales of Thinner advanced to 280,000 copies. According to an article Brown wrote for the Washington Post, King’s publisher at the time, New American Library, immediately shipped fliers to be included with the already-printed copies of Thinner claiming that Bachman was indeed King (Beahm, 275). Simultaneously, King’s fans launched into a “frenzy” to find old mass market paperbacks of Bachman’s earlier releases, two of which were completely out of print by that time but were later restored to print after it was discovered that Bachman was indeed King (Beahm, 273).

The Bachman books also illustrate that King may have needed a separate outlet to publish non-horror, as the content of the Bachman books is quite different from his traditional books. As The Guardian reviewer James Smythe explained, the Bachman books were absent of a “supernatural menace,” and cited the more real-world terrors King incorporated into the Bachman books, such as Roadwork’s storyline concerning cancer (Beahm, 277). Smythe noted that Roadwork was perhaps the worst of the Bachman books, as King loftily attempted to ponder
human suffering, attempting to make some scares out of that pain, which Smythe claims missed
the mark and thus made the book not scary at all.

The other Bachman books follow this pattern of diverging from King’s traditional use of
horror tropes, instead finding more similarities in genres such as science fiction or being wholly
concerned with the horrors that may be found within the human psyche. *The Running Man* is a
dystopian novel about a game show where humans are hunted by killers. *Rage* is a novel
concerning “teen angst” and how it led to a school shooting. King actually completely removed
*Rage* from publication in 1997 after it was found in the lockers of school shooters throughout the
1980s and 1990s. *The Long Walk* was first completed in 1967, seven years before King’s debut
novel was published, and is another dystopian novel where teenage boys are forced to walk
continuously across the country or risk being shot. *Roadwork* and *The Long Walk* were rejected
by publishers multiple times before they were eventually published as Bachman books;
indicating that King’s reputation ultimately helped contribute to their eventual publication.

This is all to say that King’s use of the pen name broke with tradition in the publishing
world, but King’s popularity proved to be an exception to these publishing rules. Brown claimed
in the same article that King’s fans’ demand for more books put him at odds with a common
trend in the publishing world at that time: “the more popular he becomes, the less frequently his
publishers are willing to publish him,” (Brown, 1985). This was confirmed in the article by
King’s agent, Kirby McAuley, who also stated that King produced books so quickly that he
wanted to publish for the sheer joy of it, rather than for any financial motivations. As a result,
Brown surmises, King created the persona of Richard Bachman. In this case, the article and other
interviews with King confirmed that many of the books King published under the pen name were
completed long before *Carrie* was published. So, Bachman gave King the outlet to publish the
books he had long attempted to publish before he became a household name. The exception to this rule was actually *Thinner*, as King wrote it well into his career and decided to publish it as Bachman because he had a full slate of books to be published under his own name, according to Brown’s article (Brown, 1985). However, because it was published by the time King’s style, fanbase, and brand had been established, it was much easier to identify as a King novel, compared to the four previous Bachman novels that were written decades earlier.

Another distinction, according to Tony Magistrale in *Hollywood’s Stephen King*, is an underlying pessimism in the Bachman novels that does not exist in the novels King published under his own name. This, Magistrale argues, is a result of the restriction of the publishing industry, as King needed to “release some …literary demons”, relying on the convenience of using a pseudonym and allowing King to indulge in some of the darkest moments in his bibliography (Magistrale, 157). Whereas King’s traditional novels are examples of Americanness in their uncensured, everyman struggles often mixed with monsters, Magistrale claims that Bachman’s protagonists are set apart because they are inherently victims of cruel fates. King’s novels have been identified as largely having a large amount of happy endings, but the Bachman novels have a much darker tone, in addition to the psychologically suspenseful nature of their stories (Magistrale, 157). Magistrale even suggests that as the heroes of all of the Bachman books attempt “some form of suicide,” this symbolically represents King’s failed attempts at controlling a “destiny that was clearly never his to command,” (Magistrale, 160). This dark perceptive may be quite introspective, and does not necessarily comply with King’s own statement that he published the Bachman books out of “curiosity.”

In one case, we can also investigate how a Bachman book would have been received by the public had it been originally published as a King novel. According to King biographer
George Beahm, King was writing *Misery* when his sister-in-law outed him as Richard Bachman, and *Misery* was originally intended to be a Bachman book. *Misery* tell the story of a psychotic fan who keeps her injured favorite writer captive and forces him to indulge her as he continues to write. King stated that *Misery* was “accurate in terms of emotional feeling,” citing pressures from fans and a fear of intruders breaking into their home in Maine, which the King family had combatted for years by the time the novel was published in 1987, (Beahm, 345). The psychological nature of *Misery* and the lack of supernatural terrors suggests that it would have fit nicely with the Bachman books, but ultimately King published it under his own name after his pen name was discovered.

However, the success and legacy of *Misery* is quite different from that of the Bachman books, illustrating again the power of King’s brand name. The novel reached fourth place on the 1987 bestseller list, and the 1990 film adaptation resulted in Kathy Bates winning an Academy Award for her portrayal of antagonist Annie Wilkes. A large portion of *Misery’s* success is due to the marketing that King had on hand as a brand name, which may have not been the case had the book been published as Bachman. For instance, the film adaptation had notably less depressing scenes than the original text, de-emphasizing the protagonist’s addiction to painkillers and adding two characters to lighten up some serious scenes (Magistrale, 63). However, this marketing and the team behind King’s film adaptations made the film more palatable to general audiences, likely allowing for the often abandoned horror genre to have some representation at the Academy Awards. In addition to its initial popularity, *Misery* has a strong legacy among King and horror fans, as a young Annie Wilkes was reimagined in 2019 for the second season of King-inspired anthology television series *Castle Rock*. Given this immense public approval and a public discussion spanning nearly three decades, *Misery* serves as an example of the power of
King’s brand name, and we can speculatively imagine that none of this would have occurred if King had published the book as Richard Bachman.

While the psychological thriller nature of *Misery* made it appropriate for King’s brand, despite originally being intended for Bachman’s brand, in other instances King’s personal brand as a horror writer only ended up backfiring. This was certainly the case with the film adaptation of King’s short story *The Body*, which was released as the film *Stand By Me* in 1986. According to biographers, the film’s director Rob Reiner chose to distance the film from King’s authorship, afraid that an association with King would scare away viewers (Beahm, 283). Colombia Pictures even intervened and insisted on renaming the film, believing that a title such as *The Body* was misleading, and Reiner eventually chose the title *Stand By Me* (*Stand By Me*, 2000). *The Body*, and by extension *Stand By Me*, do not fit into the horror genre in any traditional sense. While there is the potentially scary element of a dead body, the original title’s reference, overall it is a story of the friendship between the four boys who go searching for the body. Scholars such as Alissa Burger in *Teaching Stephen King* have often compared *The Body* favorably to King’s other coming-of-age stories, such as *Carrie* and *Apt Pupil*. While King has created coming-of-age stories before, there was often a strong dark element, such as Carrie White’s psychotic killing of her classmates and the teenaged protagonist of *Apt Pupil* becoming brainwashed into becoming a killer by his Nazi neighbor (Burger, 2065). *The Body*, however, has a much stronger focus on the friendship between the four boys, and Burger ultimately considers *The Body* a “successful” coming-of-age story from King because the four young protagonists go on to live healthy and productive lives, which is not the case in the other two examples (Burger, 2065).

Regardless of instances that continued to exclusively brand King as a horror writer, he published several more books with Doubleday until rival publishing company New American
Library offered King millions of dollars more than Doubleday for advances on his books (Beahm, 282). King had stated in interviews that he was content to be a horror writer “if that’s what people want” while he was at Doubleday, and so the company aggressively marketed him as a horror writer (Beahm, 282). Combined with this pointed marketing and a comment King made in a *Time* magazine cover story in 1986, claiming his novels were “the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald’s”, King became victim to a fair amount of negative critiques. As stated previously, horror criticism was only beginning to appear in the 1980s, so King’s comment was quickly interpreted as a cheapening of his work, and by extension the horror genre (Beahm, 283). King later clarified in 2006 that he regretted how that comment was interpreted, stating that meant to imply that his books are “tasty”, but it would not be advisable to “consume” them constantly (Beahm, 284). Still, this comment allowed for King’s reputation as a horror writer to be dampened with a sense that he found his own work to be disposable, and critics were eager to agree with him.

King’s shift to New American Library allowed for some shifts in marketing. As George Beahm noted, King’s new books with New American Literary had much more “mainstream” covers compared to those at Doubleday, and King expressed in an interview that he preferred New American Library’s designs (Beahm, 285). While at New American Library, King joked in a 1985 edition of his newsletter that he had become a “Bestsellasaurus Rex”, noting that his initial passion for writing had turned him into an “economic force” for the publishing company (Beahm, 279). This sentiment is similar to other statements King has made throughout his career, often expressing a passion for writing before any commitment to a brand, genre, or publisher. This love of writing as a craft, in my opinion, would carry King forward as he was finally able to
Part 3: Shifting Successfully

There was certainly evidence that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, King wanted to branch out past the horror brand he had established for himself, yet faced hurdles from traditional marketers and publishers. This is all to say that King was admittedly content with writing horror, “as long as the checks don’t bounce”, but that he was certainly capable and willing to write in multiple other genres (Gross, 2020). While King is currently still most famous for his contribution to the horror genre, he ultimately had some success in shifting his brand beginning in the late 1990s and continuing to today. This is in part due to changing theories and ideals concerning branding, but also due to the new, more personalized technologies and outreach methods that have been a mainstay of most personal brands since the early-to-mid 2010s.

Just as King had rose to a comfortable popularity and well-known brand, horror had also been established as relatively mainstream by this time. While horror found its initial rise to popularity in the 1970s and early 1980s, Jess Nivens claims that the “horror bubble burst” in the early 1990s (Nivens, 138). This was in part due to a change in the publication system, as horror writers began flocking to smaller presses rather than publishing houses, although such a change would not affect a writer as successful as King. Also, Nivens claims, the end of the Cold War made the unease and uncertainty of horror feel less personal for many consumers, and so many abandoned the genre (Nivens, 138). These situations would ultimately help create an apt time for King to attempt to shift his brand.
According to one perceptive, offered by *Vox* writer Aja Romano and seconded by George Beahm, King’s first transition to being marketed as literary fiction began in 1998 with the publication of *Bag of Bones*. Romano states this example because King admitted in an interview about his ten longest novels, *Bag of Bones* being the tenth on that list, that he was “squeezed out” from New American Library because fellow bestselling writer Tom Clancy joined the company after a merger with another publisher (Romano, 2020). According to King, New American Library could not support two bestselling writers and King was forced out. This resulted in, according to George Beahm, something of a publishing war due to the fanbase and brand that accompanied King at whatever publishing company he chose to work with. King’s brand at this point carried him any direction he desired, as every major publishing company in the United States felt that King was “risk-free”, according to Beahm (Beahm, 282). King stated as well that the new publisher, Scribner, “rehabilitated [his] reputation” by marketing *Bag of Bones* equally as horror and literary fiction (Beahm, 597) This is also an example of King beginning to emerge from the strongholds of being branded as a horror writer. *Bag of Bones*, while a traditional ghost story, contains “monsters both human and supernatural,” reflecting an initial turning point, as King would later go on to focus on humans rather than monsters (Beahm, 601).

King published one more novel with Scribner, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, before he experienced a life-changing event in June of 1999. King was hit by a car while taking a morning walk, which he described as “a turning point in his life, (Beahm, 611). Coincidentally, this occurred during a phase that would ultimately be a turning point in his career. According to George Beahm, King left the hospital with a renewed determination to celebrate life and his love for writing and “get what [he wants] done”, (Beahm, 611).
This final and current phase of King’s career would be defined not only by the different approaches in marketing, but also in regards to publishing. As was stated in the literature review, King adapted to the changing trends that gave rise to the popularity of ebooks and e-readers such as Amazon’s Kindle. Indeed, he was one of the earliest authors to embrace this new model of publishing, as he sold his first ebook in the year 2000, long before devices such as the Kindle made reading ebooks as mainstream as it is today. King claimed in an introduction to his collection of short stories *Everything’s Eventual* that he looks for opportunities to interact with the “craft of writing in different ways, thereby refreshing the process,” (King, 2018). However, that is not to say that all attempts at publishing ebooks were instantly successful for King. Also in 2000, according to Burger, King started publishing a serial ebook, *The Plant*, to this website. According to Anderson, King requested an “honor system” for readers to pay one dollar per installment, but King ultimately stopped publishing it after the sixth chapter (Burger, 2751). King hasn’t completely abandoned the idea of returning to the project, according to Burger. Between these efforts and King’s Kindle original novel *UR*, it is fairly obvious that King has fully incorporated modern techniques to keep his brand alive, even as his rise to popularity occurred in a completely different branding and marketing system. This sense of resilience and creativity would ultimately coincide well with a digital revolution in branding.

Another new publishing technique that King has more recently embraced is that of graphic novels, republishing King’s stories in the form of a long comic-style story. This new format is particularly beneficial for hesitant readers and those who prefer a more visual approach to learnings, according to Robert G. Weiner and Carrye Kay Syma in *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom*, whom Alissa Burger cited in *Teaching Stephen King*. Burger also notes that scholars have linked the style of graphic novels to twenty-first century communication
techniques, stating that people need to be able to “interpret and write visually rich communications,” (Burger, 3035). Given this, King began publishing his Dark Tower series, a long and complex science fiction series, in graphic novel form in collaboration with Marvel Comics. In particular, this series divulged from the storylines within the Dark Tower books, allowing for more information and connection with the protagonist as the graphic novels depicted never-before-seen parts of his life. In other graphic novels, King’s work harkened back to his original hallmarks as a storyteller while also maintaining a fresh appeal for new audiences. For example, when King’s short story *The Little Green God of Agony* was turned into a graphic novel, the artist intentionally chose to use a style of art that was reminiscent of Universal Studio’s classic monster movies from the 1930s and 1940s (Burger, 3209). This is another instance of King demonstrating that he is a horror fan and that his brand is built around the horror stories that fellow horror fans have come to know and love, offering further kinship with readers.

Just as the film adaptations of King’s first novels were instrumental in beginning to establish his brand, more recent film adaptations have been equally important in maintaining and slightly shifting it. It should be stated that this can create some conflict in the nature of King’s brand, as filmmakers have access to both his oldest works for the sake remaking adaptations that had already been created decades prior, as well as his more recent stories that may be adapted for the first time. Perhaps one of the best cases of this phenomenon are the films *It* and *It: Chapter 2*, which were released in 2017 and 2019, respectively. The novel *It* was first adapted into a two-part miniseries that aired in 1990 on ABC, and was a commercial success despite the need to censor many elements of the original text to suit television rating standards. The film series was considered a major risk for ABC, as horror was not widely accepted and it would be a challenge
to play the film series on what was considered a ‘family-friendly’ channel during the 1990s “horror boom bust”. When the novel was re-adapted into two movies released in 2017 and 2019, horror had not only become more accepted into the mainstream, but had found a strong niche of supporters that maintain the steadily high ROI numbers for most commercial horror films (Kennedy, 2020). As such, the 2017 and 2019 films are considered much scarier than their predecessors, because the horror market for R-Rated movies was much more widely accepted.

King’s brand, although shifting further towards more psychological thriller and literary fiction, would still be associated with the horror movies that bared his name due to the flexible nature of Hollywood and a new desire for remakes of films. This is further evidenced by other film remakes of King’s classic novels in recent decades, such as 2013’s adaptation of Carrie and 2019’s Pet Semetary, both of which were originally adapted into films only a few years after their literary release.

On the other hand, other adaptations of King’s work have allowed this shift in brand occur rather than seemingly fighting against it. While It had to be adapted twice to be considered an appropriate adaptation of its gruesome source material, King’s 2018 novel The Outsider was adapted straight to a miniseries on HBO, which released in early 2020. King stated on Twitter that the miniseries was, “one of the best adaptations of [his] work,” and this could be due to the shifts in audience preference and the rating standards that accompanied it. As HBO is known for not editing sensitive material from its films and television series, this allowed for a straight shoot to an accurate, gritty portrayal of The Outsider, compared to the hurdle It experienced in earlier decades. These different approaches to adapting King’s work illustrate how the shifts in branding and marketing extended to film and television. Whereas the 1980s and 1990s’ era of consumer choice allowed for an increased number of television networks for viewers, the 2010s’ era of
interaction resulted in King commenting on adaptations of his work on Twitter, and an overarching interaction with audience members that would not have been present decades earlier.

Another instance of an accurate, modern adaptation of King’s work that contributes to a slight shift in branding is the film adaptation of *Gerald’s Game*, which was released in 2017 by Netflix. Much like the adaption of *The Outsider*, this controversial novel found a platform that has a reputation for not censoring explicit material. As the director of the film Mike Flanagan stated in an interview, *Gerald’s Game* was considered to be “unfilmable” for nearly two decades, as the majority of the story uses stream-of-conscious writing while a woman is handcuffed to a bed in agony (Shepherd, 2017). This storytelling technique was considered difficult to translate as a film, which would require dialogue and action, and there was a limited amount in this novel.

Just as these new film adaptations would allow for a subtle change in King’s brand, his online presence has certainly increased and allowed for a very public change in his brand. This is largely reflective of how the nature of personal branding has shifted, as it has become all the more important for business owners and creative professionals in the age of the Internet and social media. As stated by the Journal of Interactive Marketing, personal brands are often “purposefully crafted and posted,” which is most commonly seen in an age of Internet influencers (Labrecque, 37). However, with King’s social media presence, it may be fairer to say that he is not so much being deliberative about his posts than he is simply sharing his thoughts and authentic personality online. I would argue this candid sharing, most commonly originating from his Twitter account, actually contributes to the non-horror aspects of his brand, as he is seen as the down-to-earth, “classically American” writer that he has always been, but often masked behind the terrors.
When it comes to Twitter and publishing, a recent study found that the most successful cases of marketing books or authors over Twitter occurs when the writer is already established, compared to an up-and-coming writer who may have a very small following (Criswell, 352). This phenomenon has been linked to the decline of brick and mortar booksellers in the last decade by the researchers. In any case, this makes social media marketing an ideal fit for King, who already had nearly four decades to accumulate a following before he took his marketing over to Twitter. His Twitter, incidentally, is an extension of the shifting brand, as King’s fans now have the chance to see who he is apart from his brand name. One of his most common recurring posts are pictures of King’s dog Molly, who he has affectionately nicknamed “The Thing of Evil”. These posts, although not to be taken too seriously, perhaps illustrate exactly who King is when he’s not writing: he’s the same horror fan who doesn’t take his work too seriously that he had always been, evidenced through these lighthearted posts of a goofy dog with a horror-themed nickname.

King’s “Thing of Evil” pictures also contribute to another defining force of his Twitter presence: his political stances. There is little documentation of King’s political beliefs before the 2010s, but as his Twitter presence became more profound, King took on a stronger role of political activism. This can be seen in his Twitter battles with Congressman Steve King from Iowa, who became the subject of public shaming online for racist remarks. Due to the similarities of their names, the two have often been mistaken for one another in online commentary, particularly on Twitter. This led to Stephen King publicly Tweeting his disdain for Steve King’s political beliefs and remarks, with Tweets such as, “Let’s get one thing straight: I’m not THAT Steve King,” and “Iowans, for personal reasons I hope you’ll vote Steve King out. I’m tired of being confused with this racist dumbbell,” (Haysom, 2019). Along with these Twitter debates,
King has used his dog Molly to contribute to his politics as well, often in a light-hearted way. For instance, he posted a picture of Molly standing by a Biden-Harris 2020 sign with the caption, “Molly, aka the Thing of Evil, has decided that Trump is just a bit TOO evil. She is supporting Joe Biden. Because, she barks, "He's the lesser of two evils, and at debate time I expect him to BITE Trump.” This Tweet is pictured in Figure 1. In a similar vein, during the COVID-19 pandemic he posted a picture of Molly with the caption, “Molly, aka the Thing of Evil, threatens to bite me if I go to the grocery store without my mask.”

![Figure 1](image)

To be certain, these messages align with King’s direct political work, as he has publicly endorsed progressive candidates in his home state of Maine and nationwide since at least 2013
(King, 2014). He has been a vocal critic of Donald Trump, and even sent campaign emails to the supporters of Maine’s Democratic Sara Gideon during the 2020 election. These clever retorts and pictures of his dog have followed his new brand ever since he became more open about his life and opinions on social media. This expansion of his brand is only possible due to the new technologies now available to users, but it only expands upon the person and brand King began cultivating in the 1990s. In many ways, his Twitter remarks keep him linked to his past but also refresh his brand. Oftentimes King will comment on other writers or his past works, which is particularly notable when his older works are made or remade into new films. At the same time, he is keeping his brand modern by commenting on topical political issues and on new adaptations of his work, as well as his own newer publications as well, all while maintaining the persona of a likable man who happens to write some scary novels. One user commented “Can I adopt him as my grandpa?” on a video of King participating in the “Ice Bucket Challenge” that experienced viral popularity in 2014 (King, 2014). Whereas King had once been exclusively known for his horror, now his public presence as the man behind the scary novels so many people grew up with has allowed his brand to shift dramatically. Throughout King’s career a direct connection to technological advances was not always distinctly apparent, but in the case of his Twitter and social media presence, there is a direct correlation between his brand and the technologies that were available to him.
Chapter 3: The Written Art of Stephen King

**Introduction**

Despite the strong influence of marketing in King’s career, it would be remiss to place an exorbitant amount of credit to marketing and dismiss King’s talent as a writer. Both of these factors contributed to King’s success and place in literary history, as the content and stylistic choices within his novels captivated readers worldwide. As there are several elements that contribute to good storytelling, King has made some changes throughout his career that have altered the content and style within his works. With all of these shifts in mind, it becomes clear that King has always incorporated elements from multiple genres of literature, and that the overall combination demonstrates his talent and ability to be such a successful writer even as he shifted his marketing approach.

**Part 1: Content**

King’s work has always been incredibly character-driven. Of his first three novels, which established him firmly as a horror writer to many scholars, two are based on the psychotic break of the main character. As stated previously, however, the narration and styles King used in these novels, *Carrie* and *The Shining*, may have not allowed the reader to become firmly attached to his characters. This was recognized as a common trend in King’s early work, when he was establishing himself as a horror writer and frequently relying on horror tropes, but would begin to shift later in his career. This shift from classic horror to psychological thriller and literary
fiction involved changes in King’s marketing, but this chapter will concentrate more heavily on the content of his novels and how specific dimensions have changed throughout his career.

As was stated in the previous chapter, oftentimes the realistic yet dark characters King creates helped forge a connection to his readers early on, as the characters often resembled everyday Americans. In addition, King’s writing of specific types of characters suggests a shift in his approach to writing and his brand. Children are often featured heavily in King’s work, either as independent characters or when they act more symbolically in the text, such as the case of Danny Torrance in *The Shining*. One scholar, Leonard Heldreth, makes a connection between these symbolic children and a statement King made in an interview. In the interview, King claimed that adults have no memory of the motivations or beliefs they held as children, and that he often wrote with this assumption in mind. This, Heldreth asserts, creates a world where “individuals are menaced as much by their previous selves and actions as they are by external evils,” (Heldreth, 6). This creates a distinction between the “past selves”, referring to the younger versions of adult characters, and the adult characters themselves. This is a reoccurring theme in King’s work, such as in how an adult Gordon narrates the story of his childhood in *The Body* and how *It* contains two stories within it, that of the Loser’s Club as children and that of them returning to their childhood home as adults. With all of this in mind, King’s work creates two worlds within his childhood characters, all while exploring how experiences in childhood shape people as they grow.

Tony Magistrale affirms that King’s work demonstrates a well-rounded view of children from all walks of life, and that they often “test the moral capacities” of older protagonists (Magistrale, 23). Magistrale also claims that oftentimes the children in King’s novels represent the “hope” that may remain at the end of the novel. This can be seen clearly in stories such as *It*,


The Shining, and The Body, but there are a few exceptions. The most notable exception is that of Carrie White from King’s debut novel. Although Carrie’s story has quite a tragic ending compared to that of the other youths in King’s stories, King perhaps inadvertently began a legacy of adolescent tropes with Carrie. According to Magistrale, the film adaptation of Carrie included one of the first instances of high-school movie tropes where a drab girl is bullied for her looks and encouraged to try to “fit in” and change her appearance. This scene was present in the novel as well, but as a film this scene gained popularity with a much broader audience than the novel would have. This would later be replicated throughout teenage-centered films beginning in the 1980s, emphasizing the desirability of popularity among teenagers. At the same time, Magistrale believes that the novel and films also began a trend of horror films centered around teenagers that also continued into the following decades with films such as Halloween and A Nightmare on Elm Street. This pattern of isolating and then making an antagonist out of child characters is repeated in King’s 1980 novel Firestarter, where the young girl protagonist has pyro-kinetic powers that are difficult to control.

King frequently shifts his perspective on writing about children to create some of his most memorable stories. As Magistrale notes, both Carrie from Carrie and Charlie from Firestarter were isolated from their peers, making them more susceptible to outside forces that turned them into monsters in their own right. By contrast, when King writes about children connecting and forming bonds, the outcome is nearly the exact opposite, and he creates memorable friendship stories. One of the best examples of this can be seen in The Body, a short story that is best known as the basis for the film Stand By Me. Although the main plot of the story involves four young boys traveling to find a dead body, scholars such as Magistrale maintain that the friendship between the youngsters is the highlight of the story. There are also
sharp contrasts to the way King writes about the children’s bodies and emerging adulthood compared to *Carrie* and *Firestarter*. Magistrale notes that in *The Body*, the young boy’s bodies are put “under attack” as they attempt to survive their journey and are chased by an angry neighbor, which is gruesome yet still not comparable to the humiliation Carrie White faced from her peers (Magistrale, 40). Magistrale claims that because the boys reflect on themselves and the poor conditions of their town and become determined to leave it behind, there is a note of positivity in this adolescent anguish. This echoes Alissa Burger’s thoughts on this “successful” coming-of-age story from King. Burger defined “successful” coming-of-age stories as those that allowed the characters to grow and achieve healthy lives, in a sharp contrast to *Carrie* and *Firestarter* (Burger, 2081). It is telling that one of King’s most famous friendship stories is a successful one that is supposedly based on his real life, as King has stated in interviews that the main plot of *The Body* originated from his childhood experience (Beahm, 47). There is a common thread of strong friendship in several other of his stories such as *It* and *The Talisman*, and it seems to make up for the “unsuccessful” story of *Carrie* that originally started his career, while also demonstrating the range of his content.

The children in King’s stories also have a deeper meaning in King’s world, where dark forces are often at play. In an interview, King discussed a “white force”, referring to an overall positivity that prevails in his works despite the evil that he often writes about. In the interview, King stated that children part of this “White force” and that he chooses not to “focus on the Black.” (Magistrale, 49). This statement illustrates King’s greatest concerns when depicting young characters; that they ultimately have a connection to the goodness of humanity rather than any evil he may concoct. Magistrale pointed out that King has created memorable adult characters who contain a sense of “childhood loyalties and a simple faith in the imaginative life,”
and as such also contain the “White force,” (Magistrale, 49). Magistrale cites the adult version of the Loser’s Club in *It*, who maintain their childhood joy at being reunited, and the hope that carries Andy Dufrense in *The Shawshank Redemption*. In this instance, Magistrale also claims that this hope is inherently an innocent, childlike quality. This also suggests that King’s “white force” characters do not need to exclusively be children, but rather that like children, they have a preoccupation with goodness that the enemy does not.

King’s preoccupation with the “white force”, the goodness and the heroes of his stories, suggests that perhaps this persistent thread of positivity has been a part of King’s brand all along. Horror intrinsically needs a goodness to exist, a base of normalcy that the horror can then infiltrate on. Although the scariest scenes of King’s novels may be the most memorable, overall they end on a somewhat happy note most often. This is also a point that distinguished King’s brand from Bachman’s, according to scholars such as Magistrale. Magistrale pointed out that many of the Bachman books have a much more depressing ending compared to several of the books King published in his own name. This sentiment was seconded by Anderson in *The Linguistics of Stephen King*, where he emphasized how the Bachman pen name allowed King to utilize a much darker tone. Anderson also cited an interview with King where King claimed that writing as Bachman allowed King to take on the persona of “someone who is a little bit different,” (Anderson 66).

This analysis suggests that King’s content has been overall laced with somewhat of a positive message, whereas Bachman’s content was lacking that positivity. Given these comments and King’s own comments on the “white force,” it would seem that a shift in content to more human-centered stories, rather than horror fiction that contains fictitious monsters as a main character, is in accord with these statements. As King adjusted to his shift in brand and content,
his inclusion of children as recurring characters or symbols became more prominent to represent his “white force”.

However, we cannot forget that King’s work still has a large amount of negative forces at play as well. Oftentimes King’s most memorable characters are the villains he creates, whether they be classical vampires, unnamed monsters such as “It”, or enemies that are very human in every sense of the word. I previously embellished on the importance of the novel Misery and how it represents King’s desires to write content that did not traditionally fit into the horror genre. The novel was originally intended to be published under the Bachman pen name and branded as a thriller like the other Bachman books. Misery also represents this shift in King’s content in another way, as it was published after one of his most universally disliked novels, 1984’s Eyes of the Dragon. This novel was a traditional fantasy novel akin to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, and although critics were favorable towards it, it was not as welcomed by King’s fans who were accustomed to his horror novels. In addition, Eyes of the Dragon was written primarily for children, unlike his other works, and it was printed in limited capacity independently, so many fans felt as if they had missed an opportunity for a new King novel (Beahm, 421). King’s next novel after this disappointment was Misery, and according to Anderson, it was inspired by his fan’s disappointment and a “metaphor of being imprisoned by the horror genre” (Anderson 54). There certainly are parallels between King’s life and Misery, which tells the story of an acclaimed author who is held prisoner and forced to consume drugs by a crazed fan named Annie Wilkes. King admitted in the same interview cited by Anderson that he incorporated his own experience with drug addiction into this novel, but there is also a strong symbolism in the character of Annie Wilkes herself.
Annie Wilkes represents how King strategically uses his characters and a changing nature of his work in the more recent decades. King may be most known for the horrifying stories concerning monsters he wrote at the beginning of his career, but beginning in the 1990s, much of his stories became centered around people and internal human struggles rather than an external monster. That’s not to say King never incorporated the classic horror tropes again, as exemplified in his 2017 novel *Sleeping Beauties* and 2014 novel *Revival*, but psychological terror became much more prominent in King’s work beginning in the 1990s. *Misery* offers a prime example of this phenomenon. A recent article from *Rolling Stone* celebrating the twenty-fifth year since *Misery*’s release claimed that Annie Wilkes was a metaphor for drug addiction, inspired by King’s own struggles. The same article claimed that in the 1990s, femme fatale movies were growing in popularity, where women stalkers were seen as alluring before they committed a heinous crime. *Rolling Stone* analyzed *Misery* as a change of pace for this trend by presenting Annie Wilkes as a “small town Americana sweetness.” (Cils, 2018). Annie Wilkes does not use sexuality as a weapon like most femme fatales, but instead weaponizes her sweet, inviting nature and then uses it to her benefit.

The combination of features that make up Annie Wilkes excellently illustrates how King’s writing has changed, and also how other aspects of his writing have remained the same. As was stated in the literature review, according to scholar Don Herron, King’s use of everyday situations and people established a connection for common readers. Herron also stated that these horror fans desired to feel this connection to the everyday along with the thrills of being scared. The same down-home, everyman elements that initially allowed readers to connect with King are still present, but are turned on their head to create the psychological horror that has been a more recent development in his works. Annie Wilkes is the terror is disguise for most of the novel, a
drastic turn from earlier King novels such as ‘Salem’s Lot where the small town characters were fighting a very visible, clearly monstrous threat of a vampire. In this way, King brings his monsters more clearly into our world, illustrating the potential threats in everyday life rather than those that originate from folklore or fantasy. The shifts in King’s content over the four decades of his career have allowed him to both scare and invite people in to his works with villains who may be more relatable to readers.

More recent analysis suggests that King may be diverging even more from the small-town American landscape that attracted his early fans, and successfully so. Scholarly study of King tends to concentrate on his early works and his novels published before 2000, but literary articles can provide nuanced analysis on King’s more recent titles. A recent article remarked how modern horror has taken a despairing, nihilistic turn, and King’s more recent works seem to be a quirky turn away from this trend. The author, longtime Stephen King fan Joshua Rothman, remarked that while King helped invent the initial darkness of modern horror, he now has so much freedom and flexibility in his work that he can transcend genres and escape the darkness of traditional horror. Rothman offered several examples of how King’s current work has a more campy, fantastical tone compared to the dead-end feeling of small-town America that was captured in King’s earlier novels. For instance, in 2013 King released a sequel novel to The Shining, entitled Doctor Sleep. However, as Rothman notes, while Doctor Sleep tells the story of an adult Danny Torrance, its content and tone is drastically different from its predecessor. Whereas The Shining is associated with familial abuse and mental breakdowns, Rothman cites Doctor Sleep as containing, “thrilling gunfights, absurd satanic rituals, and wildly entertaining telepathic showdowns,” (Rothman, 2013). This trend continues, as Rothman mentions some of King’s other recent works that may be considered nonsensical compared to the “true horror” he
wrote in his earlier years, such as King’s 2009 novel *Under the Dome* and his 2005 mystery novel *The Colorado Kid*. In both of these novels, themes that would normally be considered frightening such as a murder mystery and feelings of entrapment are combined with absurd situations that would never occurs in our real world. According to Rothman, this newer trend among King’s content is a welcome respite to the “despairing and nihilistic pseudo-realism” that has become common in modern horror (Rothman, 2013). King’s work, then, still has elements of realism and realistic characters, but this welcome change allows for a more playful approach to horror.

This absurd tone is also captured in King’s works that are distinctly not in the horror genre, such as his contributions to science fiction and mystery. As Rothman puts it, “critics and writers, in embracing King, have often done so by ignoring his otherworldliness and lauding his realism,” (Rothman, 2013). It is certainly true that King’s earlier works were grounded in realism, as it helped his fans connect with his works early on. However, now with a fresher brand and the popularity to write whatever he pleases, King’s content has increasingly become more “otherworldly”, as Rothman puts it. One of the clearest instances of this otherworldliness is in how King literally crafts his literary worlds, using science fiction jargon to connect all of his stories by a common thread. As was stated in the previous chapter, King began blending the locations of his stories early in his career. He has constantly revisited locations throughout his stories such as the town of Derry, Maine, which was the source of the creature known as It in *It*, but was also included as a minor location in stories such as *The Shining* and Bachman’s *The Running Man*. A similar pattern can be seen involving the towns of Castle Rock, Maine, and Jerusalem’s Lot, Maine. Likewise, his Dark Tower series spans eight books in a Western and science-fiction inspired world that often involved characters and locations in his previous books.
King’s content has largely been linked and driven together by these overlaps, demonstrating that all of his works are part of an ever-expanding literary world. King’s content has often been attributed to nothing more than scary monsters, but analysis such as this offers a perspective that focuses on the elaborate worlds he creates and characters that inhabit them, including enemies and those who are part of the “white force”. King’s content is guided by this universe he has imagined, and the legacy of new projects and reinterpretations of his work fosters this universe and allows it grow even larger.

Overall, King’s content can be analyzed based on how it has changed in the appeal to readers and how horror was incorporated into his works. His early career was marked by a focus on small-town America facing an evil threat, which appealed to readers as his heroes often resembled everyday people. Eventually, this concentration on the everyday allowed King to develop his “white force”, emphasizing the goodness that can be found in humanity even if people were tried by an evil monster. Then, as he attempted to shift his brand and write some of his darker stories, often in the forms of the Bachman books, the evil instead was lurking inside the minds of everyday citizens. This took the form either as a representation for real-life struggles such as substance abuse or psychopathy, such as in the novel Misery. In the last two decades, however, King has seemed to combine the down-home, everyman’s characters with fantastical situation that breathe new life into his works. In earlier decades he had to reinvent horror tropes as a villain or create monsters out of humans by emphasizing the darkness that exists within them. Now, he experiments with interrupting the everyday with situations that are inherently fantastical or horrifying, rather than just creating a direct villain for his Average Joe hero. At the same time, King’s brand shifted so that he is no longer exclusively associated with horror. He shifted his brand just as his novels began to take this more unexpected, sometimes
nonsensical turn. This could suggest a changing approach to King in general; just as he had always wanted, he is being considered a writer foremost rather than solely a horror novelist.

**Part 2: Style**

As was stated previously in the literature review, King began amassing fans early in his career largely due to the content of his novels. However, his use of words and stylistic choices have also shifted across his career, often changing with the course of technological standards that impacted many authors’ writing practices, such as a shift from typewriters to personal computers to digital interactions. King’s career may be uniquely positioned for analysis as it grew during the age of new communication technologies in the late twentieth century, and King continues to have a strong public social media presence into the digital age. To demonstrate if these technological changes had any impact on his writing, I will compare the text of King’s novels using the software Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a NLP software. I will then analyze these findings by drawing comparisons between King’s works and the known history of writing practice and engagement with technology to determine if any loose correlations can be found between his use of language and the technologies available to him throughout different parts of his career. Once overall patterns have been established, I will concentrate my data on the 1980s, the peak of King’s early career, and the 2010s, a time when he became known for his connections with fans and social technologies may have influenced his writing.

LIWC’s NLP software is particularly helpful in analyzing language for the approach an author may take to their audience. The software analyzes texts for elements such as clout,
emotional openness, and authenticity. These elements may be especially noteworthy given the change in approaches King has had to his audience throughout his career. While he stated early in his career that he preferred to write to what her preferred rather than water down his work to cater to the masses, in more recent years he has become more open on social media and as a result, more accessible to the masses. I ran the first chapter of every novel King has published since 1974 through the NLP to determine this data. I chose to use the first chapter of each novel as this portion of every book was commercially available in the necessary format, and offered a relatively similar proportion of each book to be used in the NLP. I included all the novels King wrote under the pseudonym Richard Bachman. However, I did not include his memoir, *On Writing*, or his collections of short stories, as these were not written as traditional novels and may have skewed the data. One notable book I could not include is 1977’s *Rage*. As the novel describes a school shooting, King chose to remove the book from publication in 1997 after it was found in the lockers of several school shooters throughout the 1980s and 1990s (King, 1999). As such, out-of-print copies of the book now sell for thousands of dollars, and it does not exist in any digital format that would allow me to utilize computational language analysis.

I found computational language analysis across all of King’s available novels, organized by the decade in which they were first published, and then found the average per value per decade to create an overall image of King’s writing, demonstrated in Figure 1. King’s work seems relatively consistent over time with a few exceptions. The first variable LIWC analyzes is emotional tone, of which all of King’s values fall short of the average values for commercial writing. This is also the case for the value of authenticity, as illustrated in Figure 1 with an orange line representing the change in levels of authenticity across the decades. These lower-than-average numbers could result from two potential causes. First, King typically writes in
third-person, and so an omniscient narrator tends to have less emotion and authenticity than a personal one. Second, these variables could result from King’s use of mystery and symbolism, which may lead to some concealment of information from the reader, causing the low authenticity variable. Another variable lower than the commercial average is analytic writing; however, this is not quite as surprising as King writes fiction and thus, analytic writing would not be common in his novels.

One notable deviation within King’s trends throughout the last five decades is his use of clout. In each decade, King’s average use of clout his writing exceeded the commercial average.
Clout measures the amount of “social status, confidence, or leadership” that a writer inputs in their language choices, according to LIWC. King’s level of clout was at its highest in the 1970s, when King’s novels were first published. Although he had written and published short stories before the publication of his first novel, Carrie, in 1974, he wrote with the highest levels of clout in the 1970s. While this may be interpreted as a case of over-confidence for the emerging author, it can also be interpreted as a change in subject among King’s novels. Three of King’s most famous novels, Carrie, ‘Salem’s Lot, and The Shining were published in the 1970s, and these three novels demonstrate his use of a wide variety of subject matter, from teenage bullies to vampires and mental breakdowns. All three of them are also written from the third-person omniscient perspective, in which an all-knowing narrator tells the story with a certain level of authority. While King is known for writing in this perspective, he would later go on to write a few novels in third-person limited or first-person perspectives, but this high rate of third-person omniscient perspective in the 1970s could account for this high rate of clout.

For King fans, the 1980s are often considered the pinnacle of his career, as he was beginning to enjoy mainstream popularity and published more books than in any other decade with sixteen new additions to his repertoire. As stated earlier, this was the time when King jokingly called himself a “Bestsellasaurus Rex,” but before his brand shifted to more literary and psychological fiction. This was also a time when he was fully branded as a horror writer, and well into the time when horror was considered mainstream enough to warrant some scholarly study. This also resulted in many brands, or personal brands such as King’s, identifying their niches to stand out in the mass production, and King’s brand came to be known by his audaciousness, use of horror and classic storytelling elements, and tendency towards reclusiveness in a way that differentiated him from other celebrity authors. This was the era in
which personal branding first became relevant for innovators and consumers, and the contributions since then led to branding being often associated with storytelling, as a person or product is literally trying to develop a personal story surrounding the product.

As for the data regarding King’s use of language in the 1980s, noted in Figure 2, there are analytical observations that reflect some of these values. Given that King tends to write books in the third person limited or third person omniscient perspective, it is not surprising that there is a small value of ‘I-words’. Throughout the decade, King wrote only one novel in the first-person perspective, 1983’s *Christine*, which could contribute to this small percentage. While King’s use of social words is quite higher than the commercial average, his use of emotional words paints a picture of what sets King apart. King is known as the ‘master of horror’ for good reason, as he often describes people’s deepest fears in both a supernatural and real-life sense. As such, it is not surprising that King’s use of positive emotions is less than the commercial average, while his use
of negative emotion words exceeds it by far. In fact, in 1986’s It, King’s use of positive emotion words was less than half the commercial average, while his use of negative emotion words was twenty times the commercial average. Perhaps the most drastic difference between King’s language and the commercial average is the emotional tone, which at a rate of 21.6 for the 1980s is less than half the commercial average. This could potentially reflect the lack of accessibility of authors to their audiences in a time of limited mass media technologies, or be a result of King attempting to create a darker, more stringent environment in his writing by limiting the emotionality.

By contrast, the marketplace and technology that authors constantly interacted with had experienced massive changes by the 2010s. Whereas the early decades were marked by a massive amount of consumer choice, the social media era is indicative of consumer interaction. Social media has allowed for consumers to be directly involved in their chosen brands in a manner they have not had access to before, and Stephen King’s active Twitter presence is a key example of this within his brand. As stated earlier, King began to rebrand himself in the late 1990s, paving the way for him to be more active online to continue this rebranding from the reclusive horror writer to the sarcastic and comedic author with a strong Twitter presence. While it would be another decade before he joined Twitter, these changes in consumers’ desires and technologies allowed him to be more active in his personal branding.

Additionally, I believe that these shifts in King’s brand are somewhat related to the technologies he would have had access to at the time. Whereas in the 1980s it is quite possible that King and other writers practiced their craft in more of a vacuum, as the only technology that directly applied to them were basic word processors, now social media allows for writers to engage with their audiences and fellow writers almost instantaneously. King has also
demonstrated this engagement with audience, as he has an active presence on Twitter and is constantly interacting with fans, politicians, and other writers. This effect is of course not exclusive to King, as many modern brands rely on social media to have a direct link to their consumers constantly, and so there is much less of an isolation between the creators and the consumers compared to past generations.

As such, it is not entirely surprising that there are some differences between King’s writing styles in the 1980s and 2010s, as evidenced by the text analysis of the 2010s in Figure 3. King’s use of clout and analytic writing decreased from the 1980s to the 2010s. While King had a high amount of clout in the 1980s average, by the 2010s the rating of clout was much closer to the commercial average. This may be a bit surprising, given that the 1980s were the decade where King was establishing himself as the prolific author he is today, and so one would expect

![Stephen King Language Analysis: 1980s vs 2010s](image)

Figure 3

As such, it is not entirely surprising that there are some differences between King’s writing styles in the 1980s and 2010s, as evidenced by the text analysis of the 2010s in Figure 3. King’s use of clout and analytic writing decreased from the 1980s to the 2010s. While King had a high amount of clout in the 1980s average, by the 2010s the rating of clout was much closer to the commercial average. This may be a bit surprising, given that the 1980s were the decade where King was establishing himself as the prolific author he is today, and so one would expect
the level of clout to be lower in the 1980s than the commercial average. However, it is important to remember that as the content of each book changes, so may an author’s approach. Novels published in the 1980s such as *It* and the first two novels of the Dark Tower series carry with them an air of authority, as they are written from the perspective of all-knowing beings in certain potions of the book. By contrast, in the 2010s many of King’s novels had more pedestrian characters and concentrate on small-town crime rather than an all-knowing supernatural force, such as in *The Outsider* and *Mr. Mercedes*. This shift in subjects is also exemplary of King’s changes in branding and marketing, and reflects his increased accessibility to the masses online.

To understand King’s use of I-words and analytic text in the 1980s compared to the 2010s, we will look in-depth at two books: 1986’s *It* and 2018’s *The Outsider*. *It* had an I-word value of 0.1, an analytic score of 96.2, and a use of cognitive words of 5.3. *The Outsider*’s variables were 3.1 for I-words, 51.2 for analytic writing, and 8.2 for cognitive writing. King’s use of I-Words in *The Outsider* is a bit surprising, given that the text is written in third-person. However, compared to *It*, *The Outsider* deals more specifically with person-to-person disputes, whereas a large portion of *It* describes the creation of the monster known as ‘It’, and thus has a lot more content that contains science fiction philosophy that would not contain ‘I-words’. This would also explain why *It* had a rating for analytic language near the commercial average of 97.77, and *The Outsider* has nearly a third the rating of analytic language compared to the commercial average. The increased focus on personal relations in *The Outsider* could also account for the slightly higher than average rating of cognitive processes and social words as well.
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<td>I-Words</td>
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<td>Social Words</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<td>Negative Emotionality</td>
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<td>5.3</td>
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<td>Analytic Words</td>
<td>96.2</td>
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<td>Emotional Tone</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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The differences in these figures could suggest a change in King’s approach to writing in the decades between the release of *It* and *The Outsider*, which may have been a result of technological changes. By the time King would have begun writing *The Outsider*, social media had become a profound force in the world of marketing, branding, and writing. King had previously been known to be quite hidden from the world of celebrity, but since joining social media, particularly Twitter in 2013, his public presence and interactions with fans have played stronger roles in his literary career. In addition, the social technologies of 2010s have allowed for this input, and as a result branding has become a ubiquitous feature of social media and consumers have more direct control than ever in how they respond to and interact with brands. Insofar as King’s personal brand is concerned, these elevated levels of authenticity and emotional tone reflect this change, as these values correlate to an increased ability to interact with fans and other social media users. While this represents a basic correlation rather than an in-depth study to determine causation, it illustrates some of the possible causes for these changes while also highlighting the changes in technology available to King.
One aspect of King’s writing style that cannot be determined by this data is the sheer volume of words he uses. The software analyzes based on percentages rather than sole word count, so I chose to instead use a similar percentage of each of King’s published novels. Jess Nivens has called King “verbose, sometimes to the point of interfering with the enjoyment of the story”. This data collection analyzed a relatively similar portion of each of King’s commercially available novels, but did not address the excessive amount of words he at times uses when performing such an analytical composition. This wordiness is a common criticism of King, and one I personally agree with. However, Nivens acknowledges that King has “reined himself in” as time has passed, without compromising the value and the scares that come with his work. This can certainly be acknowledged analytically as well, as King’s two longest novels, *It* and *The Stand*, were written in the first decade of his career.

Just as King changed his content throughout his career, sometimes slightly and other times quite drastically, his choice of writing style and tone changed as well. This is to be expected given the number of works King has penned, but also reflects that his language may have shifted in accordance to the approach he had to his craft or the changing relationship with his readers due to an increase in personal technology and social media. King’s works were originally in line with much of everyday America, as he featured common protagonists who would be mixed up in horrific situations. This linguistic analysis would suggest that there was a correlation between King’s change in content to become less exclusively horror focused and his ratings for certain variables. As King’s levels of emotional tone and authenticity began to increase in the 1990s and 2000s, it is likely correlated to his shift in more personal, psychological horror rather than the traditional horror of his earlier career. The changes throughout King’s
writing style are indeed correlated to his changes in content, reflecting an increased openness and affinity for the quotidian horrors rather than classic horror tropes.

Chapter 4: Final Thoughts on King’s Career and Legacy

Introduction

As stated previously, Stephen King’s career was uniquely positioned to demonstrate many phenomena in the branding, marketing, and publishing industries. While most common readers and casual fans may only associate King with horror, this paper has demonstrated that his contributions extend beyond the one genre. The span of his career allows for study in changes in marketing, technologies, and genre fiction over half a century, with the common factor of King’s involvement. This lengthy career also has allowed him to have an incredible impact on literature, genre fiction, and the way brand such as authors market themselves in the digital sphere.

Importance of Marketing

King’s career demonstrates the value and power of marketing to completely control a public brand, and also illustrates how marketing has changed over time with changes to technology and the dispersion of power in branding. When King’s works were first published, his brand was largely in control of publishers and how they chose to market his books. In this era
of large corporation marketing, King himself did not have a direct outlet to contribute to his brand as he does now in the digital age, save for the one example of a newsletter that he was more directly involved with. Still, this first era of his works demonstrates the experience of an author in a time when individual creators had no choice but to rely on the financial and power resources that large publishers and other corporations held.

It was the shift in technology and shifts in approaches that allowed for a more personal brand to King to develop beginning in the late 1990s and continuing until the present day. Increased personal technology and social media usage has allowed King to develop a personal brand that is much more aligned with sentiments he expressed in earlier decades, such as in various interviews where he stated that he considered himself to be a writer foremost rather than a horror writer. The changing nature of King’s brand offers an example of not only how technology influences branding, but also how the nature of branding itself has shifted throughout the decades to eventually become the individual-focused personal brand many are accustomed to today.

I would argue that King’s personal brand has also highly contributed to the notion of a popular author in the modern age. A recurring theme among scholars who have studied King is the notion that they are breaking new ground, as King’s work was long considered to be too plebeian and violent for most critics, and thus he was deemed simply a “popular” author. While the term “popular” is being used in its most literal sense in this case, it truly reflects who King has always been. His content has always been centered on typical Americans and their encounters with the supernatural, often using quite grisly language and violent themes, and thus it is reflective of his typical readers. This down-home persuasion is also a main reason why King’s work has constantly also been “popular” in the more colloquial sense. As Alissa Burger
noted, as of 2015 every single one of the fifty books King had published up until that point had been on the bestseller list (Burger, 69). While these trends were in place before King began using Twitter as a more public location for his personal brand, the rise of personal brands and social media in the 2010s allowed him to become more present and personable for his fans, modifying his brand even further to reflect his merits in literary fiction and his ties to his everyday American readers.

As George Beahm noted, King is in a place in his career where he could comfortably retire, but he possesses a “compulsion to entertain” that keeps him writing all sorts of material (Beahm, 17). This is another component of King’s career and brand that has made him the literary monarch he is; King represents how an author has the ability to reinvent one’s self when necessary or desired. I have referenced personal essays and interviews where King stated his opinion on being typecast as a horror author, but his digital reinvention through the use of social media in the 2010s demonstrates a newfound freedom for King, where he has been able to demonstrate who he is without the horror titles associated with him. In this way, he has also comes to represent a modern popular author. In the broadest sense, King has proven himself to be an author for everyday people.

King’s fans have always been considered “slobs”, whereas literary critics were considered “snobs,” to borrow language used by several scholars I’ve previously quoted. This imagery of a King fan, while not broadcast publicly to mock his fans, highlights perhaps why he was so warmly received by the masses; he represented everyday people without any attempts at sanitizing his work in an era when social inhibitions were being loosened. This disdain from critics did not dissuade King’s earliest fans, as the essay of John Browning suggests that they
were indeed searching for an author who seemed to understand their love of horror and their desire to see themselves reflected in literary works.

**Importance of Horror and Genre Fiction**

King’s rise to popularity occurred at the same time as horror’s acceptance into the mainstream, but I would argue that this was not a matter of congruent timing but rather that King actively contributed to the horror genre’s mainstream success throughout the decades. In turn, this rise of the horror genre has become quite ingrained in Western film and literature, and potentially helped garner the rise of genre fiction overall by providing a neat category for works such as King’s.

While certain horror classics, particularly films, were developed in the decades before King’s first book was published, many scholars such as George Beahm and Jess Nivens conclude that his earliest works were instrumental in the genre’s development over the following decades. Scholars have mentioned how King borrowed tropes from classic Gothic literature, but I would argue that King was fundamental to the concept of modern horror in his reclamation of these tropes for modern audiences. While some have criticized King for simply rehashing tropes early in his career, ultimately he made these tropes approachable for his audience by directly connecting him to the “everyday American” that was often his protagonist in his first works.

In more recent years, King has had more flexibility in what he writes due to his success, and so he now takes his everyman protagonist into more bizarre or fantastical situations. Most of these newer novels still have an element of horror or thriller despite the atypical themes or situations, and so they illustrate a changing nature to genre fiction. King rose to fame just as
genre fiction was beginning to be highly consolidated; namely, the helped contribute to the horror genre so greatly that it was able to find a footing in an early marketplace. Now, however, King’s changing works represent more flexibility within the genre. As he is still largely considered a horror writer, then his newer works demonstrate how broad a genre can be, and why genres may need to be reevaluated in the future.

**King’s Legacy**

As of 2006, it was estimated that King had sold over 350 million copies of his works (Morgan, 2006). In the last fifteen years, one can estimate that he has already added a significant number to that count. The sheer volume of work King has created lends credence to his title as a “king of horror”. Scholars have stated that King is largely responsible for the rise of the horror genre, if not synonymous with most forms of horror. Even without scholarly analysis, the amount of recognition King has received from the public would attest to his status as a king of horror. His works have largely made horror mainstream and commercially acceptable, and now the horror film business is a multibillion dollar industry, likely in part to his influence (Kennedy, 2020).

King’s work has largely been parodied, recreated, and referenced throughout pop culture, from *Saturday Night Live* to *The Simpsons*. He is assuredly a household name, and even in cases where a media outlet is creating an outright parody, his works are referenced in somewhat common phrases such as, “You made me feel like Carrie at the prom.” As another example, the phrase “Here’s Johnny!” has become a common tactic of scaring people due to the popularity of the film adaptation of *The Shining*. Although often these parodies and references are remarking
upon his earlier works, which have had decades to become entrenched in the media ecosystem, King still is an active member of the literary and social media communities. This is an interesting situation, as it is not always the case where the inventor of a clear trope or trend is alive to potentially interact with those who remark upon his works, and it is a mark of true celebrity.

In addition to normalizing horror, King’s popularity has allowed the literary world to embrace the tone and style he uses in his writing. As Magistrale described, King’s writing has long been considered “aggressive and violent, vital and unrefined,” (Magistrale, xvii). Earlier examples of mainstream horror in the 1940s and 1950s was often campy and somewhat unserious, such as in the case of Universal Studio’s classic horror films or television shows such as *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*. King’s works have allowed horror to be truly gruesome, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in the genre, and these earlier examples helped prime an adult audience for his works. This raw, unrefined horror is now considered the norm in most horror films, although as the genre has been able to flourish, subsets of the genre are beginning to emerge. Comedy-horror has been wildly successful in the last several years, often using raunchy humor rather than joking camp compared to previous generations. This can even be seen in how King’s works are being reimagined, as the 2017 and 2019 film adaptions of *It* were widely lauded for their use of humor. In addition, psychological horror has been spreading as a subset of traditional horror, often with influences from King novels such as *Misery*. As King was able to give the horror genre greater credit, it is now able to spread beyond the original scope, partly due to his popularity.

While King’s nonfiction writing may be less commercially successful than his fiction, he has offered great insights into the craft of writing as well. His memoir *On Writing* was first published in 2000, and although it is partly an autobiography, it also includes his personal advice
concerning writing. When addressing the question of what writing truly is, he answered, “Telepathy, of course,” (King, 103). He views writing as a matter of transmitting thoughts, and as such, as he stated later in *On Writing*, he feels it is important for readers to connect with the characters to encourage this telepathy. While King is certainly not the first author to remark upon the importance of readers’ connection to characters, he may be one of the first to do so in such a guttural manner. King’s novels capture the good, the bad, and the ugly of the human experience, which often interacts with horrors or may be the terror itself. He is refreshingly honest in his work, which perhaps may be why his works continue to scare so many.

Given King’s longstanding status as a prolific and extraordinary author, there has been time to establish his legacy within individual families or groups as well. George Beahm noted how a large amount of King’s younger fans began to read his works due to encouragement from their parents, and that many have now grown up with King’s works since they have existed prior to their birth (Beahm, 17). This affinity for King can even intercede past Stephen himself, as his entire family is quite literary. His wife Tabitha is a trained poet, and his oldest son Joe is a writer who is also making his mark on the literary world. Joe chose to begin his career under the pseudonym Joe Hill to attempt to succeed on his own merit rather than his father’s reputation, but now he is contributing to the literary world and other communities cropping up online with his own works and commentary on true crime (Beahm, 189).

All of this establishes the influence King, and to a lesser extent his family, has had on the generations that have grown up with his work. King is largely responsible for horror becoming a part of many people’s media ecosystem, and in turn that normalization has allowed for different forms of horror and multiple creators to expand upon the work he started nearly five decades ago. Despite a pushback from the powers of marketing and branding, King has become much
freer from the label as a “King of Horror”, but his influence has truly opened the doors for horror throughout the literary and entertainment industries.
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