

## **MARIA ANASTASOVA. STEPHEN KING: NEW REFLECTIONS AND REFRACTIONS**

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Review

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The book reviewed here, *Stephen King: New Reflections and Refractions*, is the second monograph by Maria Anastasova, literary scholar and assistant professor at the Department of Germanic and Romance Studies in the Faculty of Philology, South West University "Neofit Rilski" (Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria). At 141 pages in length, in a succinct manner it outlines and evaluates trends in Stephen King's oeuvre over the course of a decade (2011-2021). Accordingly, it offers insights on King's recent works and builds on Anastasova's expertise and previous publications on the world-famous author (see e.g. Anastasova 2016, 2019, 2021 etc.). Globally renowned as the master of suspense, Stephen King is one of the leading figures in contemporary American popular culture and the quality and quantity of his output is legendary, spanning multiple genres. In addition, the various screen adaptations of his seminal works have cemented his wide popularity across generations.

The volume opens with an Introduction (pp. 5-9), which briefly situates the novelty of the research study within the expansive literature on Stephen King and his works. Indeed, Anastasova correctly notes that the vast majority of scholarship to date has centred on aspects relating to King's most well-known books (the reader may scarcely need reminding, but these include *The Shining*, *Carrie*, *It*, *The Green Mile* etc.), the lion's share of which were typically written earlier in his literary career. In focussing squarely on ten of King's recently published novels (*11.22.63*, *Joyland*, *Doctor Sleep*, *Mr Mercedes*, *Revival*, *Finders Keepers*, *End of Watch*, *The Outsider*, *The Institute*, and *Later*), Anastasova draws attention to the creative output of what she terms as King's "fifth decade" (p. 6).

With the title of "The Literary Discussion of Stephen King", Chapter 1 (pp. 11-20) sets the scene for deeper analysis by delving into more detail regarding critical responses to King's works. It charts some trends within scholarly research which, in referring to notable influences from illustrious predecessors such as Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft among others, have sought to place the writer

within a broader American literary tradition. In this chapter, Anastasova provides a comprehensive analysis of the many different areas where research on Stephen King's works has been conducted. In addition to studies on the author's own personal life, these also include interpretations of specific historical events, feminist critiques, explorations of religious aspects, as well as the influence of contemporary issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and King's own political beliefs.

"The New Protagonists" is the title of the book's second chapter (pp. 21-70), where Anastasova observes several trends among the men, women, and children who feature in King's most recent works. The first subsection focuses on the male characters, and highlights that the principal protagonists are usually men who "are down-to-earth and realistic" (p. 25) and when compared "surely reveal certain similarities" in their social classes, marital status, family situations, and even the "problematic presence/absence of the[ir] father[s]" (p. 40). Anastasova performs detailed literary analysis of these "Average Joe[s]" (p. 22) in the analysed novels, observing that despite these specific commonalities each remains "unique and authentic" (p. 45). This presentation of the male characters is counterpointed by a subsequent discussion of female protagonists in the selected works, an aspect which Anastasova notes has "always been a debatable subject among academics and fans" (p. 48). Here, she presents the main female characters in the novels individually, observing their "predominantly supporting role" (p. 61) yet drawing specific attention to the memorable Holly Gibney in the *Mr Mercedes*, *Finders Keepers*, and *End of Watch* trilogy. In the final subsection, the focus is on to the depiction of children in the novels. Frequently endowed with supernatural beliefs or talents, Anastasova states that because of this they have traditionally appeared "as exceptional creatures that are considered superior to adults" (p. 63), an observation which still holds true in King's latest works.

The third section of the monograph (pp. 71-122) analyses the portrayals of the villains in Stephen King's recent prose. Under the chapter title of "Monsters are Real", Anastasova profiles each of the main antagonists in the selected novels, interpreting these monstrous creations through detailed literary and psychological analysis. Additionally, she situates these characters within theoretical discussions of the Gothic, noting that King typically "combine[s] reality with the supernatural and thus create[s] a unique fictional space in which to explore the different dimensions of evil" (p. 71). To this analysis are also appended some observations on the role of substance abuse in King's recent works. Here Anastasova underlines that themes relating to drug addiction and alcohol dependency still "permeate his prose" (p. 119) as the latter remains "a demon that haunts people and leads to their self-destruction" (p. 121). The monograph closes with a short Conclusion (pp. 123-131) which presents the work's findings in a concise manner and draws together the principal themes

analysed and discussed. This is followed by a full Bibliography (pp. 133-141), which complements the footnote referencing used throughout the volume.

In breaking new ground in the study and analysis of the American author's contemporary works, *Stephen King: New Reflections and Refraction* is a key asset for the scholarly community. In addition, it is also important to note that the precision, clarity, and eloquence of the text makes it an accessible read for non-academic audiences (such as interested aficionados of Stephen King and his work). Given that King's output continues to grow (at least three further novels have come out in the meantime), this study will additionally be valuable as a springboard for further investigations into the portrayal and development of the relevant topics and themes in the writer's future works. Consequently, in advancing new perspectives on the analysis of Stephen King's recent literary production, Maria Anastasova's monograph represents a clear and much-needed contribution to the research literature.

**Works cited:**

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