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GENRE BENDER

TODAY EXCLUSIVE

Stephen King — award-winning author, master of horror-thriller page-turners ... and romance novelist?!

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STEPHEN King's latest novel is a love story? Now that's a scary thought. But it's true. The bestselling American author, who has sent shivers down the spines of millions of readers with page-turners such as *Carrie*, *The Shining* and *Pet Sematary*, has admittedly adopted a more light-hearted writing style of late.

For proof, King's fans need look no further than the book jacket of his latest offering, *Lisey's Story*, which is now out in Singapore.

"The book is a beautifully textured suspense narrative about the well-springs of creativity, temptations and the secret language of love," it reads. Indeed, readers could be forgiven for thinking they're diving into a Danielle Steel tale.

But for book junkies who suspect that the so-called King of Horror is turning into a romance novelist, King has a warning — your emotions will be "attacked".

"Yes, *Lisey's Story* is a book about marriage. But it wouldn't be a Stephen King novel if it didn't have twists and turns," the 59-year-old writer said during a press briefing in London last Thursday.

"It's a book of contrasts that is designed to shock, thrill and enthrall you. In the end, I write what works for me personally.

He added with a wink: "That is why I am a doctor of the emotions."

HIS BEST WORK YET?

Twists and turns it may have, but no wizards, ghosts or vampires appear in *Lisey's Story*, a book King nonetheless described as "the best thing I've ever written".

The novel revolves around the titular Lisey, the widow of bestselling novelist Scott Landon.

Still in mourning two years after her husband's death, she starts cleaning out his study only to unleash long repressed memories.

Lisey learns that there was a place Scott went — a place that terrified and healed him, and that could eat him alive or give him the ideas he needed

in order to live.

Soon, it is Lisey's turn to face Scott's past.

"It's so different from anything I've written so far," said King, the author of about 60 novels, short story collections and screenplays in a span of almost four decades. "The novel starts out in a light-hearted fashion and sometimes it's almost funny.

"But every day I sat down to write the novel, the language became more powerful. That's how it goes — the more you care for a book, the harder it is to write. So, it feels special."

Despite some fans pointing out that the two main characters in *Lisey's Story* bear a striking resemblance to King and his wife Tabitha, the author insisted that the novel was neither semi-autobiographical nor a clandestine love letter to her.

"The only thing I transported from my world to Scott's was his study, which is an exact replica of mine back home in Maine. The resemblances end there," he said.

MY WIFE, MY CRITIC

While the fright master's better half doesn't figure in *Lisey's Story*, Tabitha does feature prominently in King's day-to-day life.

As King put it: "She is my first critic, the person who has had the most influence on my work and my lucky charm."

In fact, back in the early 70s, when King was writing his first novel *Carrie*, he became discouraged and binned the project.

It was Tabitha who fished it out of the trash and insisted that King — who was toiling at the time as high school English teacher — complete the novel and send it to a publisher.

The story's paperback rights were eventually sold for US\$400,000 (\$625,000) and King proceeded to become one of America's biggest selling authors.

"In a way, my wife and I have formed the most unlikely mutual admiration society," King said of Tabitha, who has six novels to her credit.

"She's a no-bulls*** lady who knows when to give strong critique and when to be all hearts and flowers."

Even without a wife who doubles

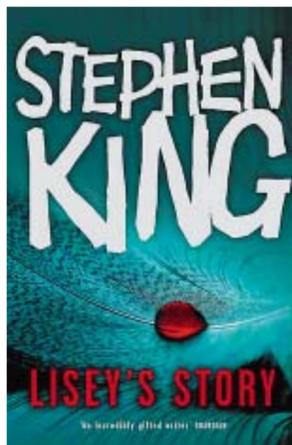
as his No 1 fan, King would suffer from no shortage of admirers.

Fans of the author — or "Constant Readers" as he refers to them — are renowned for their devotion and have turned virtually everything he has written into an instant bestseller.

Though critics have been less kind, King's reputation has grown to the extent that he was honoured for lifetime achievement by the National Book Awards in 2003.

Not bad for an author whose work has often been panned as throwaway entertainment.

"The interesting thing about being named a horror writer is that you become like a stealth jet. Under that title,



you can fly anywhere you want," said King, who started writing at age 12 when he and his older brother, David, decided to publish their own local newspaper dubbed *Dave's Rag*.

"It makes me happy to make my readers laugh, to frighten them and to gross them out. I enjoy attacking all their emotions. That's how I believe reading should be — it need not always be an intellectual affair."

REEL THRILLER? UMM ...

With so many of King's books such as *The Green Mile* and *Dolores Claiborne* going on to become blockbuster films, King is past the point where he looks forward to adaptations of his work.

"The thing about Hollywood is that whenever a producer or director reads my book, they go: 'Oh my God, this book is great. I mean, phenomenal. Only *The Bible* is better than this!'"

"Oh, wait. Actually, this is even better than *The Bible*! Just a few notes I had about it ..."

"And those few notes extend over eight pages!" King said with a laugh. "So yes, it can be quite frustrating."

As for what scares the living day-lights out of the King of Horror, it's none other than George W Bush — or "Dublya" as King likes to refer to the United States President.

"George Bush is the scariest thing in the world," he said.

"I was the most relieved man in Britain when I heard the Democrats had sealed Senate victory in the US mid-term elections," he said emphatically.

"I do not feel comfortable with Dublya's childish sense of entitlement to war. He makes me nervous and I didn't think the American people were doing much to stop him."

Judging by past experience, there's not much that can stop King either — though in this case, that probably qualifies as a good thing.

Seriously injured when he was hit by a car while walking along a roadside in 1999, the author briefly flirted with the idea of abandoning his craft.

Fortunately for fans, their idol — and America's most financially successful novelist with annual earnings of about US\$40 million — soon resumed writing and in the years since has been as prolific as ever.

Not that he has ever bought into his own hype.

"I am just another writing guy," said King. "But I must confess that, of late, I have been witnessing crowds that are apt for rock acts, not my book signing sessions."

Ultimately, his true joy lies in "mugging and assaulting people emotionally".

"Every time you burn your dinner because you are lost in my book, I score. If you're reading my book when you are alone at home and are too afraid to look under the bed, that's great ... I win."



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UNEXPECTED TALES

The King of Horror may have taken a detour into romance territory with his latest novel *Lisey's Story*, but it's not the first time the bestselling author has strayed outside the genre that made his name. ROSS WALLACE takes a look.

THE RUNNING MAN (1977)

RATING: +
The fourth of King's six novels written under the pen name Richard Bachman, this science fiction tale about a contestant in what amounts to a deadly TV reality show seems prescient in the era of *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*. Violent and cartoonish, this half-baked book still deserved (slightly) better than its cinematic mangling in 1987 at the hands of Arnie the Governor. "Killian! I'll be back!" God, we hope not.

DIFFERENT SEASONS (1982)

RATING: +++
Ironically, the only one of the four novellas here that has yet to become a film is horror tale *The Breathing Method*. While the adaptation of *Apt Pupil* is C-grade, the movie versions of *The Body* (filmed as *Stand By Me*) and *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* (shortened for the film) achieved the rare feat of outdoing the origi-

nals. That said, King did some of his best writing with this book. It deserves classic status for *The Body's* "Lardass" tale alone.

DOLORES CLAIBORNE (1993)

RATING: ++++
Hands down one of King's best three novels (along with *It* and *The Stand*, if you must know), *Dolores Claiborne* chronicles the police investigation into the death of an elderly rich woman under the title character's care. Dolores claims to have had no role in her employer's demise but she can't (and doesn't) say the same about her abusive husband's murder 30 years before. Her confession sets this riveting tale in motion.

HEARTS IN ATLANTIS (1999)

RATING: +++
A collection of five novellas, the first of which was adapted into the film of the same name, *Hearts in Atlantis* may hold the promise of disembodied organs in a mythical undersea kingdom (wishful thinking based on the title) but it's really about ... shudder! ... Baby Boomers coping with life crises. Horrifying as it may sound, this uneven work has its moments, even for Boomer-baiting Gen Xers.

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