

# STEPHEN KING

## MISERY

### ABOUT THE BOOK

#### IN BRIEF:

Paul Sheldon is a bestselling novelist, but his success has not made him happy. After writing four historical bestsellers about Misery Chastain set in the 1870s, he has begun to feel trapped, typecast as a commercial writer and unable to publish the sort of books he wants to write. But now he has a new book that he thinks might make his name as a serious writer. That's when the car accident happens and he wakes up in terrible pain in a strange bed, with no idea how much trouble he's in, at least until he meets Annie Wilkes, his demented number one fan.

#### IN DETAIL:

Stephen King has written several novels about writers (including '*Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, *The Dark Half*, *Bag of Bones* and *Lisey's Story*) and many critics believe these are among his best works. *Misery* is undoubtedly one of his greatest achievements: a horror story, a black comedy and a terrifying meditation on the relationship between a writer and one reader.

After his accident, Paul Sheldon has the good fortune to be rescued by a nurse with access to pain-killers. That she is a fan of his fiction might seem even luckier, but Annie Wilkes is not just an ordinary admirer. She is his number one fan, the most passionate among the many women who have written to Sheldon to tell him how much they love the *Misery* novels.

It should be easy for Paul. All he has to do is explain to Annie how he has moved on, that Misery is dead and he is now writing a different sort of fiction. At first he tries, and waits to see how Annie will respond to his new novel. Unfortunately she hates it, so much so that she burns his only copy.

Paul soon realises that he can't rationalise with Annie. She has a childlike belligerence and only one ambition: to persuade Paul to reverse the conclusion of his last *Misery* novel and bring his heroine back to life for another novel. And if he fails to satisfy her, the consequences could be fatal.

#### QUOTES:

'This novel is more than just a splendid exercise in horror. Its subject is not merely torture, but the torture of being a writer. *Misery* is one of Mr. King's best. All things considered, it's a winner' *New York Times*

'Terrifying . . . In addition to being able to scare the reader breathless, King says a tremendous amount about writing itself. We delight in his virtuosity' *Washington Post*

'King's best . . . genuinely scary' *USA Today*

'Classic King . . . full of twists and turns and mounting suspense' *Boston Globe*

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:

Stephen King has written and spoken about *Misery* in interviews more than some of his other books. It is one of the few novels that gets considerable coverage in his excellent guide *On Writing*, and the story of how he came up with the idea for *Misery* is almost as legendary as how King got his start in writing, after his wife rescued abandoned pages from *Carrie* from the trash.

In the early 80s, King was on a flight to London when he fell asleep and had a dream about a popular author who fell into the clutches of a psychotic fan. He made notes on an American Airlines napkin and unable to sleep during his first night at Brown's hotel in London, he asked the concierge if there was a desk where he could write. The concierge showed him to Rudyard Kipling's old desk, where he wrote the beginning of a story that later became the novel.

King observes in *On Writing* that it would be fair to ask whether Paul Sheldon is an autobiographical creation. He explains that parts of Paul are him, but that's true of every character he's ever created, and it was more fun imagining himself as poor, paranoid Annie Wilkes.

## STARTING POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What is the significance of the two words on the opening page: 'goddess Africa?'
2. How does King build up atmosphere and mood in the early chapters of *Misery*?
3. How does Stephen King show us, rather than tell us, that Annie Wilkes has mood swings, is depressed yet is perfectly sane to herself? Is Annie Wilkes a sympathetic character?
4. Why does she find profanity so disturbing?
5. King includes sections from Sheldon's novel *Misery's Return* in *Misery*. What is the purpose of these sections?
6. What is *Fast Cars*?
7. How does Stephen King use humour in *Misery*?
8. King has claimed that parts of him are similar to Paul Sheldon. What might these parts be?
9. Is Paul a good writer? What makes a good writer?
10. Have you read any other Stephen King novels that have writers as protagonists? If so, how do they compare to *Misery*?
11. Sheldon writes that *The World According to Garp* made him cry. Have any books effected you emotionally, and if so, what does it take from a book to move you in this way?
12. What role does music play in *Misery*?

Bonus question:

Have you seen the film of *Misery*? If so, did you see it before you read the book or after?  
How does it compare? Were the characters as you envisaged them?

## ABOUT THE FILM:

The 1990 film of *Misery* is one of the most prestigious Stephen King adaptations. Directed by Rob Reiner, who was responsible for the acclaimed *Stand by Me*, it has a script by Oscar winner and Hollywood screenwriting legend William Goldman, who later adapted King's *Hearts in Atlantis*, and starred James Caan and Kathy Bates. Bates won a Best Actress Oscar for her performance.

## READ EXTRACT:

*Why aren't I in hospital?* This was clearly the question that wanted asking, but he wasn't sure it was a question either of them wanted asked. Not yet, anyway.

'When I got to the feed store, Tony Roberts told me I better step on it if I was going to get back here before the storm hit, and I said –'

'How far *are* we from the town?' he asked.

'A ways,' she said vaguely, looking off towards the window.

There was a queer interval of silence, and Paul was frightened by what he saw on her face, because what he saw was nothing; the black nothing of a *crevasse* folded into an alpine meadow, a blackness where no flowers grew and into which the drop might be long. It was the face of a woman who has come momentarily untethered from all the vital positions and landmarks of her life, a woman who has forgotten not only the memory she was in the process of recounting but memory itself. He had once toured a mental asylum – this was years ago, when he had been researching *Misery*, the first of the four books which had been his main source of income over the last eight years – and he had seen this look . . . or, more precisely, this unlook. The word which defined it was *catatonia*, but what frightened him had no such precise word – it was, rather, a vague comparison: in that moment he thought that her thoughts had become much as he had imagined her physical self: solid, fibrous, unchannelled, with no place of hiatus.

Then, slowly, her face cleared. Thoughts seemed to flow back into it. Then he realized *flowing* was just a tiny bit wrong. She wasn't filling up, like a pond or a tidal pool; she was *warming up*. *Yes . . . she is warming up, like a small electrical gadget. A toaster, or maybe a heating pad.*

'I said to Tony, "That storm is going south."' She spoke slowly at first, almost groggily, but then her words began to catch up to normal cadence and to fill with normal conversational brightness. But now he was alerted. *Everything* she said was a little strange, a little offbeat. Listening to Annie was like listening to a song played in the wrong key.

'But he said, "It changed its mind."

"Oh poop!" I said. "I better get on my horse and ride."

"I'd stay in town if you can, Miz Wilkes," he said. "Now they're saying on the radio that it's going to be a proper jeezer and nobody is prepared."

'But of course I *had* to get back – there's no one to feed the animals but me. The nearest people are the Roydmans, and they are miles from here. Besides, the Roydmans don't like me.'

She cast an eye shrewdly on him as she said this last, and when he didn't reply she tapped the spoon against the rim of the bowl in peremptory fashion.

'Done?'

'Yes, I'm full, thanks. It was very good. Do you have a lot of livestock?'

*Because, he was already thinking, if you do, that means you've got to have some help. A hired man, at least.* 'Help' was the operant word. Already that seemed like the operant word, and he had seen she wore no wedding ring.

'Not very much,' she said. 'Half a dozen laying hens. Two cows. And Misery.'

He blinked.

She laughed. 'You won't think I'm very nice, naming a sow after the brave and beautiful woman you made up. But that's her name, and I meant no disrespect.' After a moment's thought she added: 'She's very friendly.' The woman wrinkled up her nose and for a moment *became* a sow, even down to the few bristly whiskers that grew on her chin. She made a pig-sound: *'Whoink! Whoink! Whuh-Whuh-*

*WHOINK!*

Paul looked at her wide-eyed.

She did not notice; she had gone away again, her gaze dim and musing. Her eyes held no reflection but the lamp on the bed-table, twice reflected, dwelling faintly in each.

At last she gave a faint start and said: 'I got about five miles and then the snow started. It came fast – once it starts up here, it always does. I came creeping along, with my lights on, and then I saw your car off the road, overturned.' She looked at him disapprovingly. 'You didn't have *your* lights on.'

'It took me by surprise,' he said, remembering only at that moment how he had been taken by surprise. He did not yet remember that he had also been quite drunk.

'I stopped,' she said. 'If it had been on an upgrade, I might not have. Not very Christian, I know, but there were three inches on the road already, and even with a four-wheel drive you can't be sure of getting going again once you lose your forward motion. It's easier just to say to yourself, "Oh, they probably got out, caught a ride," et cetera, et cetera. But it was on top of the third big hill past the Roydmans', and it's flat there for awhile. So I pulled over, and as soon as I got out I heard groaning. That was *you*, Paul.'

She gave him a strange maternal grin.

For the first time, clearly, the thought surfaced in Paul Sheldon's mind: *I am in trouble here. This woman is not right.*

## **IF YOU LIKE *MISERY*, YOU'LL LIKE:**

*The Dark Half*  
*Dolores Claiborne*  
*Gerald's Game*  
*Bag of Bones*

## **OTHER BOOKS BY STEPHEN KING:**

FICTION:

*Carrie*  
*'Salem's Lot*  
*The Shining*  
*Night Shift*  
*The Stand*  
*The Dead Zone*  
*Firestarter*  
*Cujo*  
*Different Seasons*  
*Cycle of the Werewolf*  
*Christine*  
*The Talisman* (with Peter Straub)  
*Pet Sematary*  
*It*  
*Skeleton Crew*  
*The Eyes of the Dragon*  
*Misery*  
*The Tommyknockers*  
*Four Past Midnight*  
*Needful Things*

*Nightmares and Dreamscapes*  
*Insomnia*  
*Rose Madder*  
*Desperation*  
*The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*  
*Hearts in Atlantis*  
*Dreamcatcher*  
*Everything's Eventual*  
*From a Buick 8*  
*Cell*  
*Lisey's Story*  
*Duma Key*  
*The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*  
*The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three*  
*The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands*  
*The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass*  
*The Dark Tower V: Wolves of the Calla*  
*The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah*  
*The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower*

By Stephen King as Richard Bachman

*Thinner*  
*The Running Man*  
*The Bachman Books*  
*The Regulators*  
*Blaze*

NON-FICTION:

*Danse Macabre*  
*On Writing (A Memoir of the Craft)*

## **WEBSITE LINKS:**

[www.stephenking.co.uk](http://www.stephenking.co.uk)  
[www.stephenking.com](http://www.stephenking.com)