



Landscape of Fear: Stephen King's American Gothic

Tony Magistrale

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One of the very first books to take Stephen King seriously, *Landscape of Fear* (originally published in 1988) reveals the source of King's horror in the sociopolitical anxieties of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era. In this groundbreaking study, Tony Magistrale shows how King's fiction transcends the escapism typical of its genre to tap into our deepest cultural fears: "that the government we have installed through the democratic process is not only corrupt but actively pursuing our destruction, that our technologies have progressed to the point at which the individual has now become expendable, and that our fundamental social institutions-school, marriage, workplace, and the church-have, beneath their veneers of respectability, evolved into perverse manifestations of narcissism, greed, and violence."

Tracing King's moralist vision to the likes of Twain, Hawthorne, and Melville, *Landscape of Fear* establishes the place of this popular writer within the grand tradition of American literature. Like his literary forbears, King gives us characters that have the capacity to make ethical choices in an imperfect, often evil world. Yet he inscribes that conflict within unmistakably modern settings. From the industrial nightmare of "Graveyard Shift" to the breakdown of the domestic sphere in *The Shining*, from the techno-horrors of *The Stand* to the religious fanaticism and adolescent cruelty depicted in *Carrie*, Magistrale charts the contours of King's fictional landscape in its first decade.

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