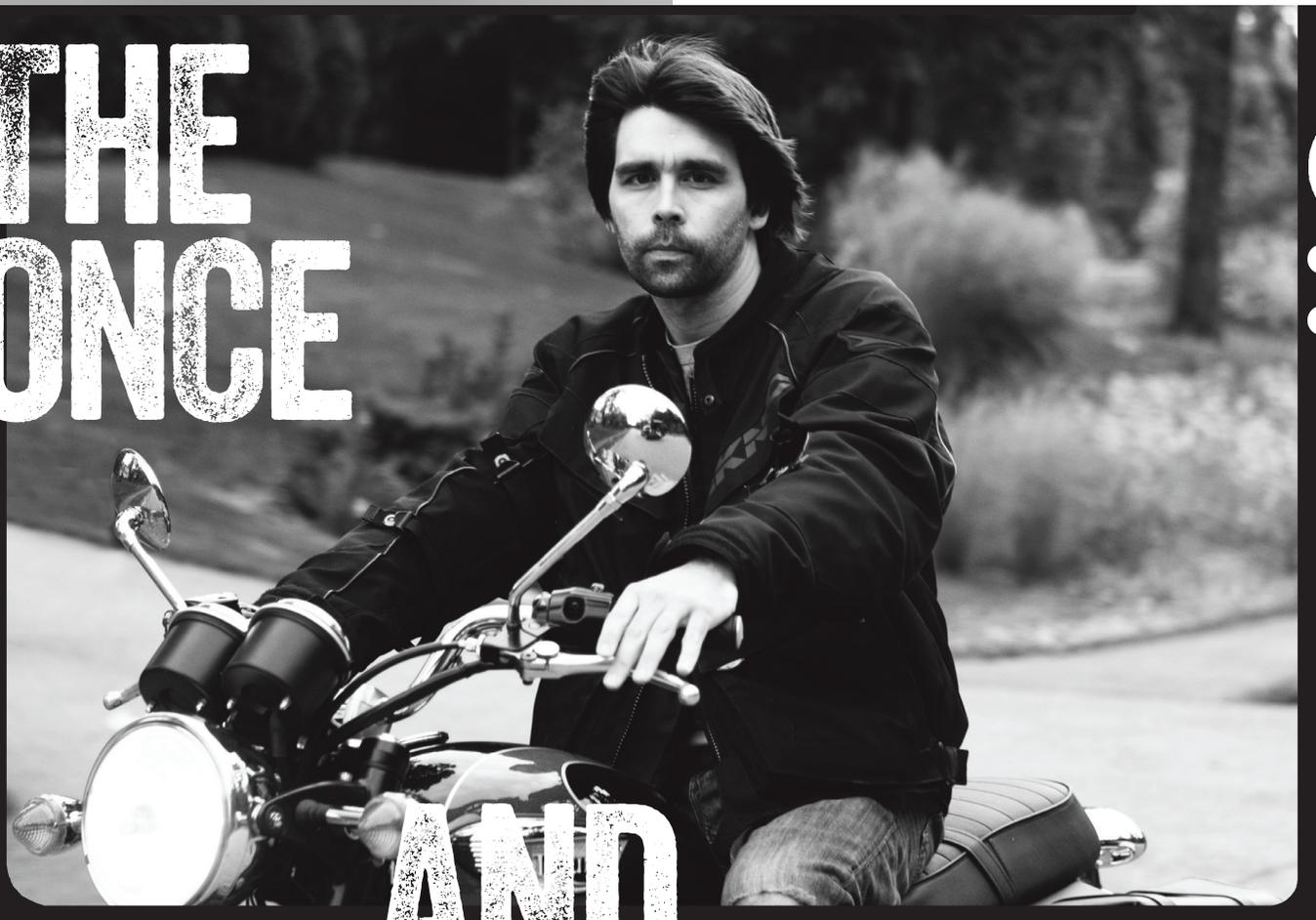


THE ONCE



AND FUTURE KING

Joe Hill set out to prove that you don't have to be the son of the most famous writer on the planet to be heir to the horror throne. But it just so happens he's both.

BY ZACHARY PETIT



ONE DAY, A FUNNY THING happened: An unknown, frustrated writer named Joe Hill got an envelope in the mail.

A small one.

He'd been sending his short stories to *The Atlantic* for a while now, and thought he was getting close to breaking in. The rejection letters usually came in big envelopes containing his manuscript, but this one was different: It was small. *Like, say, something you'd mail a check in.*

Hill was married at the time, and he ducked into a pay phone to call his wife.

"I said, 'I'm so excited, I'm so excited, I think I just sold a story to *The Atlantic*—I'm going to rip the letter open and I'm going to read it to you right now—'"

She said she was so proud, so excited, it was wonderful—

"—And I ripped the letter open, and it was a form rejection," he says. "And scribbled on the bottom was, 'Sorry, we lost your manuscript.'"

Hill erupts in a laugh.

"I was like, *What the hell am I doing this for? I'm so sick of it.*"

Hill had been keeping a secret for years: He'd been writing under a pen name. His surname is actually *King*.

And his father, Stephen, is widely considered to be the most well-known writer alive.

Creative types sometimes wax and wane about whether writers are made or born.

Sometimes, it would seem, they're both.



JOE HILL WAS BORN Joseph Hillstrom King in 1972, two years before his father released his first book, *Carrie*, and nine years before his mother, Tabitha King, released her debut novel, *Small World*. He'd come home from school to find his dad working in his office, and his mom banging away on her IBM typewriter.

"It just kind of seemed like the most natural thing in the world to go up to my room and play make-believe for an hour on the assumption that eventually you'd get paid for it," he says.

As a kid, alongside his older sister, Naomi King (now a Unitarian Universalist minister), and his younger brother, Owen King (now a literary writer whose debut novel, *Double Feature*, came out in March), he *lived* storytelling.

"It sounds really Victorian, but when we sat around the dinner table, our conversation was all about books," Hill says. "After dinner we would go into the living room, and then instead of turning on the TV, we would pass a book around and read it."

After all, he adds, this was Bangor, Maine—there were only three TV channels.

It was natural, then, that Hill started writing on a steady basis when he was 12. He estimates that by the time he was 14, he'd set a daily goal of seven pages, which he could sometimes pull off in 45 minutes. At 14 (!) he wrote his first novel, *Midnight Eats*—a story about a school with a satanic dean ... and a cafeteria that (literally) serves up students who'd found him out. Even as a high-school freshman, Hill says he had a feel for his future genre of choice.

But in his mind, that genre already belonged to his by-then famous father. So when Hill entered the writing program at Vassar College, he made two decisions: to avoid the horror and fantasy genres, and to drop his last name from his byline. His reasoning for the latter was this: He was "deeply afraid" that a publisher would see a way to make a quick buck off of him, and it would result in a bad book with his name on it. He wanted a career of doing what he loved, not a fling.

"[Readers] may buy your first book because you're the son of someone who's famous," he says, "but if the book's no good, they won't buy the second one."

So Joseph Hillstrom King became Joe Hill. And in time, the pen name gave Hill an essential dose of freedom. He realized he could play in whatever genre he wanted. Under his real name, he says he might have been judged harshly for writing horror and fantasy, stories sometimes not far off from the sort of stuff his dad wrote—but as it stood, no one knew who Joe Hill was. No one cared.

He produced *a lot* of stories. Around 1995, he queried literary agent Mickey Choate with a novel Choate describes as short and very dark, "but more literary than horror or dark fantasy." Choate took a chance on him without knowing his true identity, and the two never met in person—which was probably a good thing, given that Hill is a dead ringer for a young Stephen King (they even *sound* remarkably alike).

But ultimately, publishers far and wide rejected Hill's manuscripts. When his agent couldn't sell a certain fantasy novel Hill was fond of, Hill was heartbroken—"but in retrospect, [it] seems like it was a case of the pen name doing good work, because it wasn't good enough to sell on its own merits, and so better it didn't sell at all."

Hill's anonymous approach was not without exception in other arenas, though: After all, he says he needed to make a living, and so he *did* collaborate on a pair of screenplays with his brother under his real name. They sold one, but ultimately it wasn't produced.

As Hill was beginning to think that maybe he just didn't have a novel in him, he had a breakthrough in another realm: comic books. Marvel bought a Spider-Man story he'd written. (Had his fiction career not worked out, he says he'd have been happy as a staff writer at a comic book publisher.) He'd also been having some success publishing short stories. Hill would keep half a dozen in the mail at once so that when a rejection came through, it seemed as if he'd been only one-sixth rejected.

"I got to a point where I kind of felt like I'd rather sink with the ship than drop the pen name," he says. "I wanted to be able to say to my kid that I had a passion for something, I had a dream for something, and I stuck with it on my terms and made it work."

Eventually, his persistence paid off: A small publisher in England bought his short-story collection *20th Century Ghosts*, and released it in 2005. After almost a decade, Hill finally revealed his identity to his agent, and went on tour to support the book.

And as soon as he stepped foot onto the promotion circuit, people started to put it all together. The cat was beginning to creep out of the bag—but by then it didn't matter. The writing had come first. The pen name had done its job.



WHEN YOU'RE WRITING about Joe Hill, a part of you longs to be able to relegate all mentions of Stephen King to a passing footnote. Here's why: Joe Hill can terrify. He can humor. He can sadden. He can shock. His characters are deep and vibrant, his plots mesmerizing, his prose genuine. Simply put, he's a damn good writer, and you feel like you're selling him short.

After *20th Century Ghosts*—which won several awards, including a Stoker for Best Fiction Collection—Hill released his first novel, *The New York Times* bestseller *Heart-Shaped Box*, in 2007. The tale earned Hill another Stoker, this time for Best First Novel. He followed it up with the popular Eisner Award-winning comic book series *Locke & Key*, and *Horns*, a 2010 horror novel with a romance component (which has been adapted into an upcoming film starring Daniel Radcliffe). His latest book, *NOS4A2* (sound it out), is a 700-page supernatural thriller about a mother, her son, and a man who abducts children and takes them to a terrifying place called “Christmasland.” It was released in April to enthusiastic early reviews, and has been dubbed by Hill as his “Master’s Thesis in Horror Writing.”

For *NOS4A2*, Hill says he wanted to go big. He wanted to write something that spans many years, something with a lot of characters and subplots, and something truly scary. When he was younger, he says, he read a lot of great books in that vein—among them, his father’s unforgettable clown classic, *It*.

“In some ways, *NOS4A2* is my rewrite of *It*,” he says, laughing. “That kind of goes back to where we started this conversation, because I feel like most of the stories I write are partially a conversation with my dad, and my mom, and my brother and sister—that we’re still having that same conversation we had around the dinner table.”

As for being able to execute a novel of *NOS4A2*’s magnitude—or any great horror story, really—Hill says the genre is all about making readers care about someone, giving them a character they can root for, and then putting that person through the worst. He adds that when a piece of horror writing fails, it’s often because the characters have

“One of these lines you hear a lot is, *Live like it’s your last day on earth!* That’s a really terrible piece of advice for a writer. You kind of have to live instead like you’re immortal.”

transgressed into slasher-movie cutouts—characters you actually *want* Freddy Krueger to kill.

“If one of my characters is in danger, I want the reader to *feel* it and to *care* about what happens, not be hoping someone’s head gets sliced off,” he says. “I mean, I can match gore with the best of them ... but I do want the characters to be all there.”

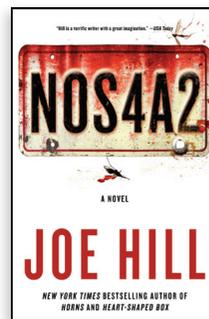
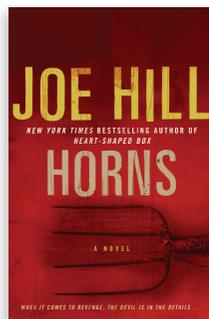
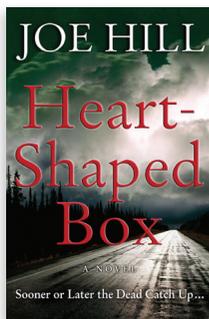
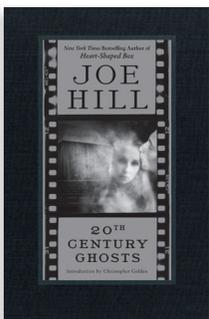
Moreover, he says bad genre writing too often involves characters acting out the expected emotional response: Something bad happens, someone cries. Something scary happens, someone runs.

“I don’t think real people are actually like that,” he says. “Sometimes something awful and sad happens to you and you feel blanked. It doesn’t hit you until three days later.”

Another way Hill suggests keeping a piece of fiction fresh: Drop the bear. Hill did a comic book adaptation of his story “The Cape” with his friend Jason Ciaramella. In the second

issue, some police officers think a character murdered his girlfriend (which he did). The character, who has a cape that allows him to fly, soars to a zoo and gets a bear cub. The cops are in a convertible. He drops it in on them. Mayhem ensues.

“Since then, I’ve sort of joked that in every story, there has to



be a moment where you drop the bear,” he says. “It’s sort of like the opposite of jumping the shark. You’re looking for that moment where the readers’ eyes pop a little, and you hit them with the punch they didn’t see coming.”

While Hill may keep his stories free of formula and cliché, he doesn’t hide from genre labels. He’s one of those refreshingly candid writers who calls it like it is, identifying his horror novels as, well, horror novels. (“It would make me crazy when I’d be reading an interview with some director who’d say, ‘I don’t really think of myself as a horror director.’ And the movie he just directed is *Sorority Slasher Babes 7*. And I’m like, dude, no offense, you ain’t [f-ing] Fellini.”)

Hill doesn’t see genre writers as a totally different species than “literary” writers. After all, he says, everything an author such as Neil Gaiman does with imaginative prose is at its core literary. On the flip side, he adds that many contemporary writers commonly thought of as “literary”—Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, Karen Russell—are incorporating genre techniques into their work in wonderful ways, too.

“They’re opening up the genre toolbox and playing with everything in it,” he says. “It sort of returns genre to the larger literary family. It has helped make genre respectable again.”



GIVEN THAT HIS PARENTS are who they are, you may be wondering: What’s the best piece of writing advice they’ve ever given him? Hill says it’s this: *Finish the book. Finish the book, regardless of how bad it is. You can make it better in a rewrite.*

To that end, Hill describes himself as a big believer in habit. He usually begins his day by tapping in changes to the previous day’s work, then writes five new pages, reads those pages over, and makes notes for the next day. Like his father, he works every day (weekends included) and writes organically—no outline. Which, seemingly, would be a good thing for father and son to have in common, given that they recently collaborated for the first time in print, co-authoring a couple of novellas. Readers of both father and son also will have undoubtedly noticed Hill’s allusions to King’s work in his own books—to the fictional town of Derry in *Horns*, to “the Pennywise Circus” in *NOS4A2*—tiny Easter eggs for the “Constant Reader” that Hill says he’s more comfortable featuring now than he would have been earlier.



HILL’S CLIMB TO THE TOP

For more from Joe Hill—including more writing advice from his parents, and what it’s like to write horror with his father—visit writersdigest.com/aug-13.

Given that his parents are who they are, you may also be wondering: Which of Hill’s books is their favorite? Well, he says, always the most recent one, of course.

“They offer good advice, they have interesting things to say about [mine and Owen’s] stories, but you have to remember that they’re also parents. And so to a degree it’s kind of like when your third-grader brings you a picture of an elephant, and [you] say, ‘It’s the best elephant ever!’”

As for what’s next on Hill’s plate, he’s releasing new issues of *Locke & Key*, working on a novel titled *The Fireman*, and planning a TV pilot. He also still reads a lot—“I am like a 72-year-old man in a 40-year-old’s body”—and spends a lot of time with his three sons.

When asked about what he wants to accomplish in his career before all is said and done, he pauses for a moment. Ultimately, the job of the day, he says, is to just write one solid scene. When you have one, you write another. When you have a stack, you have a short story or novel.

“I think for now I’m just paying attention to what I can see in my headlights. I’m not worrying about what’s beyond them. One of these lines you hear a lot is, *Live like it’s your last day on earth!* That’s a really terrible piece of advice for a writer.” He laughs. “You kind of have to live instead like you’re immortal. You know, there’s no rush to finish the book. It’ll get done when it gets done. You sort of put off the idea that there’s gonna be an end.”



SO: ARE WRITERS MADE OR BORN?

While an author profile that fails to mention Hill’s background is inherently incomplete—a crime of omission for the simple fact that storytelling is in his blood—fiction that fails to do so isn’t. A story speaks for itself.

So forget writers being made or born. Perhaps a more meaningful question is: *Do you like the book you just read?*

Good stories, like Joe Hill’s name, stand perfectly alone. **WD**

Zachary Petit (zacharypetit.com) is the senior managing editor of WD.