

SCENE





ENTHUSIASTIC, CINE-LITERATE RETELLING OF STEPHEN KING'S HORROR NOVEL

*The first in a two-part adaptation of the killer clown book
has a soft spot for its troubled young heroes*

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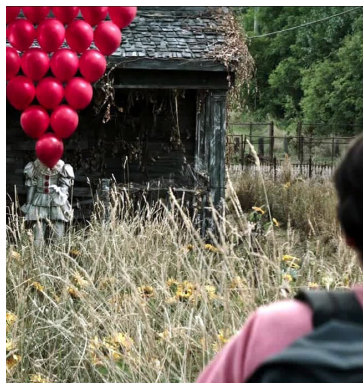
"It's summer, we're supposed to be having fun. This isn't fun – it's scary and disgusting!" It, Stephen King's 1986 novel about a shape-shifting demon that terrorises the town of Derry, Maine, was memorably filmed for TV in 1990. Boasting a mesmerising star turn by Tim Curry as the malevolent dancing clown, Pennywise, Tommy Lee Wallace's mini-series became every coulrophobe's worst nightmare, rivalling Tobe Hooper's Salem's Lot for the title of best small-screen King adaptation.

Now, the Argentinean director Andy Muschietti, who directed 2013's creepy *Mama*, brings a touch of widescreen gloss to King's enduring horror-adventure. Drawing heavily on such 80s screen favourites as *Poltergeist* and *The Goonies* (both of which were co-written/produced by Steven Spielberg), this latest incarnation will resonate with audiences hooked on the nostalgic weirdness of Netflix's *Stranger Things*. The chills may be more funhouse

than frightful, but Muschietti's tangible affection for the misfit schoolkids at the centre of this story draws us into their world, lending engaging weight to their (pre)adolescent trials and tribulations.

Tackling only the early years of King's chunky source, this "Chapter One" (a sequel is due to follow) relocates the coming-of-age section of the novel from the 50s to the late 80s. Here, poor Georgie Denbrough is dragged into a storm drain by the evil Pennywise (Bill Skarsgård, ably filling Curry's oversize clown shoes). Riddled with guilt and grief, Georgie's older brother Bill (Jaeden Lieberher, who shone in *Midnight Special*), becomes obsessed with finding the lost boy. As the summer vacation of '89 rolls around, and yet more youngsters disappear, a group of variously bullied "Losers" embark upon a Stand By Me-style quest through the woods and into the sewers, in search of a mythical monster.

Significantly, each of our key characters is haunted by nightmarish apparitions that feed upon their individual fears. Mike (Chosen Jacobs) sees visions of fiery tragedy that chime with suppressed memories of childhood trauma; Stanley (Wyatt Oleff) is distracted from his bar mitzvah rehearsals by a chaotic face that leers at him from a painting; hypochondriac Eddie (Jack Dylan Grazer) is pursued by "a walking infection" that seems to embody his mother's overprotective fantasies. As for Sophia Lillis's abused but strongly self-sufficient Beverly ("Who invited Molly



Ringwald into the group?"), her Carrie-like anxieties manifest in a bloody eruption that owes less to the lift sequence from *The Shining* than to Johnny Depp's demise in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

With his gangly arms and marionette gait, Skarsgård's wall-eyed killer clown resembles a baby-faced relative of Freddy Krueger. No surprise, then, that *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5* is seen playing at the local cinema. This is a self-reflexively cine-literate world, in which posters for *Gremlins* and *Beetlejuice* hang on children's walls, and the gateway to the monster's lair resembles Norman Bates's home from *Psycho*. In one bravura sequence, the kids use a slide projector to mount their own movie show,

which is promptly hijacked by Pennywise in the manner of the spectral Sadako from *Ring*.

Cinematographer Chung Chung-hoon, who has worked regularly with Park Chan-wook, keeps his cameras gliding elegantly around the action, lending an epic cinematic sweep to the widening horizons of youth. While TV screens burble

satirically about having fun with your friends in the sewer, the Losers get involved in outdoor rock fights and bike chases as exuberant as anything from ET. For all its horror trappings, this is still a story in which battles with the supernatural can be abruptly curtailed when your mom turns up unexpectedly. Even the bullies are children at heart. River Phoenix-lookalike Nicholas Hamilton's Henry may be the knife-wielding scourge of our antiheroes, but a scene in which he is humiliated by his boorish father ("nothing like a little fear to make a paper man crumble") reminds us that his anger has been passed down through generations, a recurrent King theme.

Flitting between crooked nursery crime chimes and lush orchestral themes, composer Benjamin Wallfisch creates an emotionally resonant score to accompany Muschietti's blend of scares and sentimentality. The result is an energetic romp with crowd-pleasing appeal that isn't afraid to bare its gory teeth. While it may not be as frightening as some hardened horror fans desire, the archetypal terrors and fundamental friendships of King's source are slickly transferred to the screen with a ghoulish enthusiasm that proves hard to resist.



