

**Maybe It Shouldn't Be a Party:  
Kids, Keds, and Death in Stephen King's *Stand By Me* and *Pet Sematary***

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What connects *Stand By Me* (1986) and *Pet Sematary* (1990) most poignantly—if not most immediately—is the sneaker. In *Stand By Me* (originally published as “The Body” in *Different Seasons* [1982]), four boys venture out of the stagnant town of Castle Rock, Oregon to view the dead body of an adolescent boy who has been struck and killed by a train and discover that he has been knocked out of his Keds. In what may be considered the most obscene moment in a film that features an epic barf-o-rama, children on a trestle almost run down by a locomotive that makes no apparent attempt even to slow down, and testicle-sucking leeches, Gordie (Wil Wheaton), Chris (River Phoenix), Teddy (Corey Feldman), and Vern (Jerry O’Connell) discover the corpse of Ray Brower sprawled in the brush to one side of the train tracks in his stocking feet. His tennis shoes are nowhere to be found—this is because the train hit Ray Brower with such force that it knocked his Keds into *Pet Sematary* (originally published in 1983, a year after “The Body”). In *Pet Sematary*, it is not a train that is the engine of destruction, but a truck. The son of physician Louis Creed (Dale Midkiff), Gage (Miko Hughes), wanders into the road with its endless parade of semis that runs past their rural Maine home and, like Ray Brower, is knocked out of his diminutive tennis shoes. However, in this “horror” film, rather than the audience being shown Gage’s shoeless (dis-Kedperated?) corpse, the aftermath of the collision is represented instead by a sneaker that lays strewn on the road—the missing sneaker from *Stand By Me*.

Each film arguably crystallizes around the “punctum” of the sneaker and the presence or absence of the sneaker to the viewer condenses each film’s attitude toward death and mourning.

In *Stand By Me*, the mute presence of the body combined with the fact of the missing sneakers lays bare for the boys—and the viewer—the inevitability of both loss of childhood and loss of life. The corpse of Ray Brower, knocked out of his tennis shoes, prompts the film’s protagonist, Gordie Lachance, to mourn the loss of his brother, Dennis (whose name coincidentally rhymes with “tennis,” played in the flashback within the flashback by John Cusack), and to confront his own feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness developed from living in the shadow of first his brother’s life and then his death. More broadly, as Tony Magistrale asserts, Brower’s body symbolizes death on a variety of levels: “The death of their friendly foursome, the death of their summer, and, most importantly, the death of their own childhoods” (38). Beyond even this, however, the body of Ray Brower—a kid knocked out his Keds by a train while picking blueberries—embodies the existentialist angst of living in a world in which accidents occur, things get lost forever, and uneasy ghosts and reanimated corpses emphatically do *not* return from beyond the grave to warn or demand justice or even to antagonize the living and feast upon their brains. What Gordie *Lachance* ultimately has to face is “the chance”—the simple, horrible fact that sometimes accidents happen and people die without reason—and they don’t come back.

In contrast to this facticity of haphazard death made manifest by the presentness of the shoeless corpse of Ray Brower, the corpseless shoe that flies in from offscreen at the moment of Gage’s death in *Pet Sematary* encapsulates this film’s transformation of Chance into Creed as Louis Creed’s views on death morph from cynically believing that “we wink out like a candle flame when the wind blows hard” to maintaining that “we go on.” By emphasizing the tiny shoe, a potent symbol of childhood, while obscuring the corpse, *Pet Sematary* averts its gaze from death and fixates on a symbol of life thereby instancing the film’s strange cinematic foot fetish in which loss is disavowed. (Death in the film is intriguingly correlated throughout with missing

shoes—in addition to Gage being knocked out of his sneakers, when Louis accompanies Victor Pascow [Brad Greenquist] on a late-night jaunt through the woods, he does so barefoot, and when his wife Rachel [Denise Crosby] returns from the grave at the end of the film, she significantly is missing one shoe.) What *Pet Sematary* ultimately evades is the agonizing realization that *Stand By Me* affirms—that chance rather than fate governs the course of human events and that death is final.

This contrast between the two films is deeply ironic and can also be said to speak in a general way to the appeal of horror movies like *Pet Sematary*. It is ironic that *Stand By Me*—a movie directed by Rob Reiner and categorized as “drama” (and not one that most people generally associate with Stephen King)—should confront the reality of death more starkly and potentially more horrifyingly than the very Stephen King-ish horror movie, *Pet Sematary*, in which characters are mutilated and murdered by reanimated corpses. And it is arguably the case that, even if what *Pet Sematary* stages is the quintessential gothic theme of “the helplessness of humanity in the face of powers that are both larger than the individual human and committed to his obliteration” (Magistrale 107)—what H. P. Lovecraft would call “Cosmic Horror”—it remains comforting in its assurance that spirit does not simply “wink out” at the moment of death. The resurrections of the cat, Church, along with Gage and Rachel—and most especially the intercession of the “discorporated” Victor Pascow—console one with the knowledge that consciousness persists beyond the moment of death and that the universe is a rule-governed place in which things do not simply happen by chance but for a reason. This suggests ironically that part of the appeal of horror movies in which the laws of reality as we know them are violated and the dead return is both the denial of the finitude of death and the desire to believe that it is fate rather than chance that governs the course of human existence. Thus, at least from this

perspective, *Pet Sematary* ultimately emerges as far more comforting in its conclusions than *Stand By Me*'s nihilistic rejection of ghosts, God, and fate.

### **Maybe It Shouldn't Be a Party: *Stand By Me***

There's something eerily appropriate about the fact that "Keds," the name for a brand of children's tennis shoes worn by the dead Ray Brower, can be read as a portmanteau word combining "kids" and "dead" because the whole trajectory of *Stand By Me* consists in a group of kids journeying (in sneakers) toward adulthood by way of the confrontation with death. I believe Arthur Biddle hits the nail on the head when he describes the film as built around an "archetypal rite of passage"—the journey—marking the "transition from one life stage to another" (83). However, the film subverts conventional understandings of this familiar archetype by leading its protagonist and the viewer step-by-step toward the conclusion of the meaninglessness of existence. What Gordie, the film's central protagonist, ultimately must confront and accept is the reality—and finality—of death, as well as the twin realizations that the universe is a chaotic place in which jeeps turn over killing young men and trains hit boys picking blueberries, and that the living must let the dead be dead and focus on the business of life, which the film equates with "standing by" others—caring for family and friends. The film in essence follows a formula that ultimately reveals the meaninglessness of formulas. In the process, it also teaches the viewer how one should accept death, mourn the dead, and conduct the business of living.

In terms of confronting and accepting death, the film in fact takes death as its starting point as an adult Gordie Lachance (Richard Dryfus) contemplates a newspaper report of the death of his childhood friend, Chris Chambers, who, the viewer subsequently learns, died (like Ray Brower) unpredictably of random violence—he was stabbed when trying to break up a fight

between two strangers in a fast food restaurant. News of Chris's death prompts Gordie to reflect on the "first time [he] saw a dead human being" and propels him (and the viewer) into the extended flashback that constitutes almost the entire movie detailing his journey, along with Chris, Teddy, and Vern, along the "magic corridor" (King 399) to Ray Brower and adulthood. The scene shifts to 1959 and, to the tune of Ben E. King's "Stand By Me," a young Gordie appears, first in front of a drugstore magazine rack filled with detective and true crime magazines (which foreshadow the boys' own hunt to discover the corpse of a missing adolescent boy) and then playing at being an adult in his clubhouse as he and his friends Chris and Teddy smoke, swear, and play cards.

What the viewer quickly discovers is that each one of these boys in this film about growing up is already missing something or is, on some level, scarred. Chris comes from a family with a bad reputation and is presumed as a result to be "bad" himself—a fact that is exploited by his elementary school teacher when Chris returns stolen milk money only to have his teacher use it not to exonerate him but to purchase a new blouse for herself. Teddy has been physically scarred by his father who held his head to a stove and severely burned one of his ears and is clearly mentally traumatized as well as he is shown in the film to be both war-obsessed and suicidal. Vern, who is not especially bright, more benignly—but also with potent symbolism—has lost a jar of pennies that he buried under his porch and for which he has been searching all summer. And, most notably, Gordie himself has been forced to grapple both with the death of his brother in a jeep accident and his parents' neglect which preceded Dennis's accident and has only been accentuated in its aftermath. All of these details work to offset the nostalgic tone of the narration by establishing the town of Castle Rock as itself a kind of "dead world" (Magistrale 40) and, in keeping with much of King's fiction, to unveil the

disfunctionality and stultification underlying small town life. Although the written version of “The Body” is subtitled, “Fall from Innocence,” it is clear that these boys in various ways and to varying degrees have already been exposed to corruption and loss *avant la lettre*.

Furthermore, despite the voice-over narration’s wistful pronouncement during the junkyard sequence that, “We knew exactly who we were and exactly where we were going,” the film’s action reveals the boys—especially the film’s two central characters, Chris and Gordie—not as focused, self-assured, and complete but instead as identities in flux and engaged in a processes of social negotiation and self-creation. Both Gordie and Chris must confront socially-constructed senses of themselves as “no good.” In Chris’s case, what he must grapple with is a discrepancy between the town’s expectations of him as someone coming from a “bad family” and his own divergent appraisal of his character, potential, and self-worth. Chris in fact possesses a fairly positive self-image and is shown to be an extremely caring person who bolsters the egos of others (Chris is the character who most frequently touches or puts his arm around the shoulders of others and is variously figured as both a substitute father and mother figure for Gordie) but who is frustrated by the town’s assumptions about him. He assumes that these social expectations will dictate his future course of action—that he will be separated from Gordie in Junior High as the latter is slotted into courses intended to prepare him for college—and he has been disillusioned about the moral probity of authority figures as a result of his teacher’s cruel opportunism. What the viewer of the film learns at the end is that Chris, in fact, by dint of hard work, managed to overcome social stigmatization, go to college and become a lawyer—only to end up dead on the floor of a fast food restaurant for no reason other than a desire to play peacemaker.

The damage to Gordie's ego is more profound. While Chris chaffs against the social perception that he is bad as a result of coming from a "bad family," Gordie in fact has accepted the negative appraisals by others as his own truth. Early in the film, Gordie notes that, following the death of his older brother, he had become "the invisible boy" as far as his parents were concerned. However, the film makes it clear that he was always the invisible boy, a distant second-best in comparison to his star-athlete brother. During his nightmare in the forest, Gordie dreams of being at the funeral of his brother as his father turns to him and tells him, "It should have been you, Gordon" and, subsequently, just prior to the film's climax in which Gordie fends off Ace and his gang with a gun, the confrontation with Ray Brower's body unleashes a flood of emotion in Gordie as he, in rapid succession, protests his brother's death ("Why did you have to die?"), echoes his father's dream sentiment that it should have been him, and expresses his beliefs that he is "no good" and that his father hates him.

The viewer learns that Gordie, as is the case with Chris, is eventually able to overcome this inferiority complex. At the end of the film, the adult Gordie concludes his recollections and goes outside to play with his son, thus establishing that, not only has Gordie achieved normative adult male sexuality, but that, in contrast to his experience with his own father, he is able to care for and nurture his son. In Gordie's case, clearly, the experience of going to seek Ray Brower's body was a turning point in his maturation, but the film also suggests that Gordie, as an author, is able to engage with social issues (such as teenage alienation—the story of "Lard Ass Hogan") and, more broadly, self-creation through creative endeavor. Although Winter quotes King as saying, "The only reason anyone writes stories [...] is so they can understand the past and get ready for some future mortality" (107), it is also arguably the case that Gordie's stories—

belittled by his father (Marshall Bell) but lauded by his brother and his friends—allow him to sculpt an identity apart from the impressions received from his family and community.

In contrast to Chris and Gordie, Teddy Duchamp (whose last name alludes to an important figure associated with the Dada artistic movement that celebrated irrationality and rejected traditional artistic values) is not so lucky. Unable to accept the reality of his father's abuse and mental illness, within the film Teddy lashes out at those who cast aspersions upon his father, engages in suicidal behavior (standing in front of an on-coming train, only to be pushed from the tracks by Chris), and escapes from his unsatisfactory reality through obsessive engagement with violent war fantasies. What we learn about Teddy at the end of the film is that he was rejected from the military three times, that he floated from odd job to odd job in Castle Rock, and that Gordie believes he spent some time in jail. Only Vern within the film, despite his fear of his older brother, is presented as having an even moderately “normal” or stable home life untouched by domestic violence, alcoholism, or death. The point here is that, rather than having completed identities from the start, it is clear that the boys are instead trying to figure out who they are and where they stand in relation to each other, their families, and the larger community, and the journey to find Ray Brower's body functions as an important turning point in this process of self-discovery. The boys come into being—at least to a certain extent—precisely through the confrontation with death.

The beginnings of this metamorphosis are evident early on in the film, following the junkyard scene. Teddy, who has lost control of himself in response to the taunting by the junkyard attendant, apologizes to the other boys for ruining their “good time.” In response, Gordie suggests, “I'm not sure it should be a good time. Going to see a dead kid ... maybe it shouldn't be a party.” This sobering assessment signals a shift from the youthful exuberance of

the outing's beginning and suggests a burgeoning awareness of the ethical and existential ramifications of confronting death in the form of the corpse of a boy approximately their own age.

However, the film, despite its message of the omnipresence and inescapability of death—indeed, the shopkeeper who sells Gordie provisions quotes to him from *the Book of Common Prayer*, “In the midst of life, we are in death”—quietly refuses to substitute illusory or supernatural evils for real ones and even cleverly demystifies legend and rumor. Thus, the feared junkyard dog, Chopper, turns out to be a harmless mutt rather than Cujo; Gordie's brother Dennis dies in jeep accident, but presumably not as a result of the malevolence of a sentient vehicle like Christine; and, perhaps most significantly, the woods in which the kids camp is not haunted by the ghost of Ray Brower or a Wendigo or a werewolf or any other supernatural entity. There are no Indian burial grounds or vampires with hypnotic stares in this film to confirm that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in their—and our—philosophy. Instead, what the boys have to contend with is precisely “the natural” in the form of howling coyotes, leeches, the cruelty of other people, and their own traumatic experiences.

Which brings us now to Ray Brower. The discovery of his shoeless body lying in the brush alongside the railroad tracks is the film's pivotal, obscene moment in which the boys confront both the impossibility and the inevitability of death. As Gordie looks down on Ray, he attempts to come to grips with what he sees: “The kid wasn't sick, the kid wasn't sleeping, the kid was dead.” This is death stripped of metaphor and meaning. It is not a noble death such as Teddy imagines in his fantasies about his father storming the beaches at Normandy and it is not an exciting or heroic death such as the boys might witness on one of their favorite TV Westerns. Ray Brower was knocked out of his shoes by a train while picking blueberries. He didn't

commit any crime that warranted death, he doesn't haunt the woods, and he isn't coming back—he's just dead, seemingly for no other reason than for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Gordie, the invisible boy, looking down on Ray Brower, comes face to face with the meaninglessness that is death. As Biddle puts it, "Through the agency of a pair of filthy tennis shoes, Gordie finally is able to transmute death from an abstraction to a concretion and to understand it as a denial of life" (94). Although Magistrale asserts that, for Chris and Gordie, "Ray Brower's mutilated corpse comes to symbolize the dead world of Castle Rock" (40), it is more than this. This corpse of a boy approximately the same age as Gordie forces him to confront the reality of his brother's death and then, as Heldreth observes, to face the prospect of his own (67). Gordie's strange "death drive," his "obsession" (which is the word that Gordie himself uses) with viewing the corpse of Ray Brower, prompts the realization of the "existence of death in life" (Biddle 85) and the realities of accident and loss.

This would be a bleak epiphany indeed were it not for the fact that *Stand By Me* offsets this nihilistic conception of the universe with the countervailing affirmations of positive relationships with others and moments of wonder. First through Gordie's relationship with Chris, and subsequently through the representation of the older Gordie with his own son, the movie shows us that we endow a meaningless universe with significance through caring and nurturing relationships with others. And Gordie's magical encounter with the deer that emerges from the forest on the morning that the boys find Ray Brower's corpse and which stands close to him for a few moments before scampering off is the secret story at the heart of Gordie's tale; it is something of which he has never spoken or written before—a rare, wondrous moment of communion with the natural world that reaffirms life in the midst of death.

Ultimately, *Stand By Me* is a film that asks us to stand in Gordie's shoes and to appreciate both the presence of death in life and the wondrousness of life amid mindless destruction. Like Jud Crandall (Fred Gwyne) in *Pet Sematary*, the film advances the position that learning about death is a necessary part of growing up and that death needs to be appreciated as the moment when "pain stops and the good memories begin" (Jud). What the film rejects entirely is that God or fate governs the course of human existence. Dead is not better in *Stand By Me* (although the human heart is certainly stonier); dead is just dead. And the job of the living is to let the dead be dead, to mourn the dead even as we live our lives aware that, at any moment, we could be knocked out of our Keds without warning or reason.

### ***Pet Sematary's Foot Fetish***

In many respects, *Stand By Me* and *Pet Sematary* are closely linked. Both films stage a confrontation with death and are built around the death of a child—whereas Ray Brower was hit by a train and knocked out of his Keds, Gage Creed gets hit by a truck and knocked out of his tiny sneakers. And in both films, the primary protagonist, through the intimate confrontation with death, is forced to reconceptualize his understanding of the way the universe works. However, the conclusions at which the films arrive are diametrically opposed: Whereas *Stand By Me* supports an interpretation of the universe as an essentially chaotic place in which human beings endow the world with structure and meaning through relationships and narrative, *Pet Sematary* essentially affirms a Christian conception of the universe in which forces of good and evil war for possession of human souls and in which consciousness persists after physical dissolution. Although *Pet Sematary* on the one hand is all about death—it begins in a pet cemetery and subsequently stages or recounts Victor Pascow's death, Church's death, Missy's

(Susan Blommaert) death, Gage's death, Rachel's sister Zelda's (Andrew Hubatsek) death, Timmy Baderman's (Peter Stader) death, Jud's dog's death, Jud's death, and ultimately Rachel's death—and the film offers lip-service to the idea that “sometimes dead is better” through Jud Crandall's homily on death as being “when the pain stops and the good memories begin”—on the other hand, the film enacts a systematic evasion of death by emphasizing that death is not an end. The film arguably begins where *Stand By Me* leaves off—with Louis Creed's rationalistic assessment of the universe—and ends where *Stand By Me* begins—in a universe in which death never really takes place because things happen for a reason and death is not an end but simply a “barrier” separating two states of existence. This conclusion suggests that part of the appeal of “horror” movies like *Pet Sematary*, beneath all the violence and gore, ironically is a comforting affirmation of death as simply a transition, rather than a conclusion.

The existing body of critical literature on *Pet Sematary* is fairly consistent in its appraisal of the film as one enacting a tragic vision in which human beings are manipulated by forces that outstrip human control and punish human beings for overreaching. Magistrale, for example, writes that, “The theme of *Pet Sematary* is the helplessness of humanity in the face of powers that are both larger than the individual human and committed to his obliteration” (107). He adds that, “*Pet Sematary* is a deeply pessimistic film that highlights the limitations of being human, the malefic design of fate and its consistent pressure to push us toward tragic consequences” (107). Mustazza, attending to the novel, likens *Pet Sematary*'s plot to a Greek tragedy in which fate governs the course of human events and notes that “Like Oedipus, Louis does nothing to cause the tragedy that will grip him” (79-80). And, in keeping with Mustazza's meditations on Greek tragedy, Strengell (also discussing the novel) interprets *Pet Sematary* as being essentially

about “hubris”—Louis Creed is punished for playing God, for transgressing the barrier between life and death that isn’t meant to be crossed (57).

However, the bleakness of these appraisals is offset by the underlying affirmation of the existence of fate and God. If events are predestined, then human beings are absolved of responsibility; if humans are punished for playing God, then God not only exists but intervenes in the ordinary course of human affairs; and if death is a barrier not meant to be crossed by the living, then death is not a winking out of consciousness, but simply a transition or transformation. With this in mind, it is clear how the film, despite all surface appearances, can be read as in keeping with Christian values (see King qtd. in Winter, 134, as well as Strengell 62) and as providing a “temporary escape from the imminent presence of death” (Schroeder 141). Indeed, *contra Stand By Me*, what *Pet Sematary* enacts is the systematic evasion of death.

Like *Stand By Me*, *Pet Sematary* attempts to school the viewer on how to regard death and on appropriate mourning practices. The film begins with a fieldtrip lead by Jud Crandall to the local pet cemetery in which Jud responds to Rachel Creed’s concern that the venue’s lesson isn’t appropriate for her young daughter, Ellie (Blaze Berdahl), by noting that “They [children] have to learn about death sometime.” Ellie grasps the lesson, but resents the inevitability of death and, in reference to the possibility of the death of her cat, Church, indignantly exclaims, “Let God get his own if he wants one, not mine!” Later, Jud comments that Ellie eventually will “learn what death really is: when pain stops and the good memories begin.” And all of this leads up to the moment when, following the return of the resurrected Church, the formerly rationalistic doctor professes his belief in an afterlife and acquires, according to Schroeder, “a new sort of faith” (136). In response to Ellie’s inquiry about what happens when one dies, Louis explains that “Some believe that we just wink out like a candle flame when the wind blows hard.” When

Ellie questions if he believes this, he responds (following a growl from zombie-Church), “No. I think we go on. Yeah, I have faith in that.” While the film’s tagline is “sometimes dead is better,” Louis Creed and the viewer together come to appreciate that dead does not necessarily mean gone.

Like *Stand By Me*, *Pet Sematary* focuses on “the ultimate horror of every parent” (Winter 134), the death of a child. And, as is also the case with Gordie’s parents in relation to their son, Dennis, we’re shown that Louis’s melancholic refusal to accept the deaths of first his son and then his wife is an inappropriate response. As Schroeder asserts, Louis’s behavior is a test case for how not to mourn and there is some justification for reading the Wendigo and the physical return of the dead in the movie as “symbolic metaphors for uncontrolled grief and its potential for self and community destruction” (138). However, unlike *Stand By Me*, *Pet Sematary* does not focus on the existential angst of confronting a Godless universe, nor does it emphasize the potential fulfillment of nurturing relationships or the power of narrative as a tool for self-creation. Instead, the film interpellates the viewer into a conservative theological framework that asserts that human beings err in overreaching the natural and attempting to play God and that excessive mourning is inappropriate not because death is simply a part of life that needs to be accepted but because death is not the cessation of spirit.

And this leads us back to the shoe because, in place of a corpse, *Pet Sematary* asks the viewer to focus on a sneaker in the middle of the road symbolizing Gage’s passing—his crossing of the barrier between life and death. In *Stand By Me*, Ray Brower is knocked out of his Keds—his journey is done and he isn’t going anywhere. Gage, on the other hand, is someplace else—to use Louis’s words, he goes on. The sneaker thus functions as a sort of fetish object—an object upon which one focuses in order to deny the possibility of loss, of castration, of death. This is

*Pet Sematary*'s slight of hand, so to speak—to offer up death only in the end to deny it. Against all appearances, *Stand By Me* finally emerges as the darker of the two films. In a universe governed by chance rather than fate and in which the dead, vengeful or not, do not return, human beings have to make their peace with the inevitability of death in the absence of any kind of consoling belief in an afterlife or divine justice. *Stand By Me*, in essence, puts *Pet Sematary*'s shoe on the other foot.

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