

He Defies the Labels and Pushes the Limits

By Charles Ardai

People eager to label Stephen King tend to remember the vampires, the ghosts, the telekinetics and shapeshifters and sewer-dwelling evils that wear a clown's mask, and they label him a horror writer. But his principal subject has always been the cruelties that one human being can inflict upon another. And increasingly in recent years his subject has been mortality—the fragility of life, the inevitability of its end, the ways that end can tragically be hastened—and to my mind, those things make him a crime writer.

To Mystery Writers of America's mind, too, since the organization awarded him the Grand Master designation in 2007. And just think how many of his works, from the earliest to his most recent, are crime stories. *Misery*: a fan abducts her favorite author. *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*: prison stories both and the latter a murder mystery. *The Dark Half*: the pseudonym a writer uses for penning crime novels (named after Don Westlake's pseudonym, no less!) comes to life and starts killing people. *Dolores Claiborne* is the confession of a murderer, *Mr. Mercedes* is a cat-and-mouse thriller about a detective tracking a deranged killer, and several of the pseudonymous novels penned under the name "Richard Bachman" are crime fiction as well. Then, of course, there are the two books Steve was generous enough to let Hard Case Crime publish, *The Colorado Kid* and *Joyland*, one a whodunit about a serial killer operating in and around carnivals, the other a mystery about the nature of mystery itself.

Steve comes by this thread in his work honestly: He's a passionate reader of crime



fiction, more knowledgeable about the genre than many who've spent their professional lives entirely within its boundaries. It's rare that someone stumps me with a recommendation of an old crime novel I've never heard of, but Steve has managed it repeatedly. A fan of Dorothy Sayers, he once began writing his own Peter Wimsey novel, and at another point he contemplated writing about John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee. He's written tributes to Chandler and to Sherlock Holmes. Wildly original and blessed with a boundlessly fertile imagination, Steve also remembers where he came from and who inspired him along the way.

And he, in turn, inspires us. Not just by his own extraordinary example—gifted, prolific, beloved, successful—and through his book *On Writing*, which many an author (of crime fiction and otherwise) has cited as indispensable, but also by passionately and repeatedly expressing his enthusiasm for the mystery genre unreservedly where not only we but also his millions of other readers can hear it.

No one could ask for or have a better number-one fan.



Charles Ardai is the Edgar, Shamus, and Ellery Queen Award-winning editor of Hard Case Crime, which published *The Colorado Kid* and *Joyland*, and a writer/producer on the TV series *Haven*, based on *The Colorado Kid*.