November 23, 2008

Little Bites of Horror

By CHARLES TAYLOR

If the prospect of a collection of stories by Stephen King isn’t as inviting as a new King novel, it’s not just because the writer’s recent novels — “Duma Key,” “Lisey’s Story” and especially “Cell” and “From a Buick 8” — have been so good. It’s because King continues to be dedicated to giving his readers a luxuriant experience, the basic pleasure of getting lost in a book.

In his introduction to the new collection “Just After Sunset,” King explains that as a young almost-poor schoolteacher trying to get a writing career started, stories, many of them published in men’s magazines like Dude and Cavalier, were a way to a much needed check when the car needed a muffler or his wife’s birthday was coming up. King says the stories simply came out, and he wasn’t too concerned with learning what constituted good structure. “I was flying entirely by the seat of my pants,” he writes, “running on nothing but intuition and a kid's self-confidence.”

King goes on to say that getting a chance to edit the 2007 edition of “The Best American Short Stories” gave him an excuse to read a bunch of stories. It also, he says, inspired him to try to recapture the knack for writing stories that, along the way, had given way to the more expansive pursuit of writing novels.

“Just After Sunset” suggests why. It’s an uneven collection, in both tone and execution, and it often reminds you of how King’s writing has moved beyond its genre roots. That’s not to affirm the critics who’ve reduced King’s writing to penny dreadfuls that have no bearing on the real world. Good writing of the fantastic and the macabre is always based in recognizable emotion. Noting the detail and empathy that have long made him one of the most observant chroniclers of American middle-class life, the critic Laura Miller shrewdly observed that King should accurately be judged “a realist.”

In “Just After Sunset,” there are only flashes of the kind of recognition that King the novelist provides, and the short-story form does not allow him the space to turn his plot devices into metaphors. For me, that was most apparent in “N.” The tale has a tricky story-within-a-story structure. A woman whose psychiatrist brother has committed suicide forwards his notes to a boyhood friend who is now a television doctor. The notes tell of the shrink’s sessions with a patient who has come upon an odd patch of Maine woods where something evil and powerful lurks. The story showcases King’s almost unholy talent for making the natural world seem like something not of this world. But just when you’re ready for whatever is lurking in those woods to fully reveal itself and the power it wields, the story ends — granted, on an unsettling and clever note. But King seems to be just warming up, and the story feels like a sketch for one of his novel-length freakouts.

Other stories range from the delirious bad taste of “The Cat From Hell” to the just plain bad taste of “A Very Tight Place,” from the gloppily inspirational “Ayana” to the botched brilliance of “The Things They Left Behind.” I have a special fondness for “The Cat From Hell.” Little furry creatures are often the victims in horror stories. King’s tale is revenge for every fictional house pet ever
perfunctorily slaughtered in the name of thrills. It's disgusting, and I mean that as a compliment.

“The Things They Left Behind” proceeds to a tidy, too heartwarming ending. Imperfect though it is, it’s also the most affecting and scary story here. The narrator is an office worker who, in order to savor a late-summer day, called in sick on Sept. 11. About a year later, artifacts that belonged to his murdered co-workers begin turning up in his apartment. And that’s not all. At night, they begin whispering to each other, often in the voices of their dead owners.

So much hand-wringing has already been expended over the question of how art should deal with 9/11. No fiction that has attempted the subject has, to my mind, been as effective (or as affecting) as King’s “From a Buick 8” and “Cell.” Both novels were direct and oblique, not mentioning 9/11 but addressing the question of how you retain your humanity after the unthinkable has entered your life. (In “Cell,” the characters’ reaction to the numbers 9-1-1 determines whether they remain human or become monsters.) There’s nothing oblique in “The Things They Left Behind.” King employs a simple, unnerving device to address the way the presence of the dead was palpable in the city following 9/11.

Despite the disappointments of “Just After Sunset,” and the sense that these stories remain, at some level, an exercise, a stopgap for the next full-fledged King project, the book also feels like the work of a writer who, even in less than top form, wouldn’t dream of breaking faith with his readers.

Part of what I respect about Stephen King — and I suspect it’s part of what drives some of his fellow writers and some critics crazy — is the honesty of that admission, in this book’s introduction, that he churned out stories for money. There’s no pretense that he was “honing his craft” or “perfecting the form,” no attempt to disguise the fact that any writer who is honest enough admits to doing some time on Grub Street. Which is why, in books like “The Dark Half” and “The Shining,” King has been so witheringly accurate about the vanity and pettiness of writers.

King’s critical reputation has by now had more corrections than the Dow. He has been both Horror Hack and Underrated Littérature. Every few years, usually in the name of what Terry Southern called the “quality lit game,” somebody decides he’s taken too seriously and needs to be put back in the drugstore racks where they think he belongs. And any critical defense of King is usually good for a round of claims that said critic is decrying literature or assuming that book sales equal quality.

So let’s be clear. King isn’t good because he’s popular. But any critic who puts King’s popularity down to the dreadful taste of the masses (cue Harold Bloom) has failed to do the basic work of a critic, which is to understand and probe and not simply to judge. King gets to readers because he renders everyday life so exactly and because he understands it is always ready to rupture.

The literary critic Leslie Fiedler, in an interview given a few weeks before he died, recalled telling a group of postmodern fiction writers, “Look, let’s be frank with each other: When all of us are forgotten, people will still be remembering Stephen King.” Anyone who claims to be interested in contemporary American literature needs to understand what he’ll be remembered for.

Charles Taylor is a columnist for The Newark Star-Ledger and Bloomberg News.