

***It*, dir. by Andy Muschietti** (Warner Bros., 2017)

It probably goes without saying that we're in the middle of an evil-clown zeitgeist. If the first decade of the new millennium was all about sparkly vampires, now the men in red noses are having their moment at the forefront of horror. This resurgence of the clown in popular culture may have gained momentum from Chris Nolan's Batman grim-fest, *The Dark Knight* (2008), wherein the late Heath Ledger captivated audiences with his performance as the Joker, an enigmatic sociopath in flaking clown white. Notable entries from the horror genre in recent years include Captain Spaulding from Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003) and *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), as well as the gruesome Twisty the Clown from *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014). The latter half of 2016 even brought us alarming news of a real-life plague of clowns, reports pouring in from around the world of sinister costumed figures seen lurking at roadsides and near schools. The hysteria lasted until (as the old joke goes) the clowns' leader got elected president, and they have all since gracefully retired back into the realm of fiction.

Given the general hype, it was only a matter of time before the most famous creepy clown of them all would be given a reboot. *It* (2017) adapts Stephen King's 1986 novel of the same name and follows the iconic 1990 miniseries starring Tim Curry. The film tells the story of a group of adolescent underdogs who name themselves 'The Losers Club'; one of the club's members, Bill (Jaeden Lieberher), is a thirteen-year-old boy with a debilitating stutter, mourning the disappearance of his little brother Georgie (Jackson Robert Scott). Unable to accept the loss of Georgie (who is snatched from the street one rainy day while Bill is laid up at home, sick), Bill teams up with friends Bev (Sophia Lillis), Ben (Jeremy Ray Taylor), Eddie (Jack Dylan Grazer), Richie (Finn Wolfhard, of *Stranger Things* (2016-present) fame), Stanley (Wyatt Oleff), and Mike (Chosen Jacobs). Their teen sleuthing leads them to the town's sewer system, and, inevitably, to 'It' — a shape-shifting entity that most often takes the form of 'Pennywise the Dancing Clown' (Bill Skarsgård). 'It' lurks beneath the town of Derry, Maine, resurfacing every twenty-seven years to snatch up children and devour them so it may sustain itself through another hibernation.

*It* starts off strongly: the opening scene, teased extensively in trailers and promotional materials, is undoubtedly the film's most chilling and memorable. Georgie chases his paper boat to a storm drain, then ducks down to search for it, unexpectedly encountering in the drain the face of a clown. This scene derives its power from the use of colour (the unrelenting

greys of the rained-out street contrasted with the vivid yellow of Georgie's raincoat and Pennywise's shock of red hair) and the contrast between the child's knowledge and that of the adult audience: the sewer, as we all know, is not the right place for a clown to be, but little Georgie believes the story that a storm 'blew the whole circus away'. To us, Pennywise's laughter is sinister, but to Georgie it is infectious, and he is easily — and fatally — persuaded to reach his hand back in for the boat.

It is in this first scene that Bill Skarsgård shows what he can do, walking the fine line between charming and sinister, putting on a bubbling and cartoonish voice as he lures the little boy to his doom. Sadly, the rest of the film leaves him almost without dialogue, relying instead on visual effects to convey the character's danger and horror. This is not, I think, due to a lack of ability on Skarsgård's part, but rather a self-conscious choice on the part of the filmmakers. This iteration of Pennywise is much more dour and demonic than the 1990 version, and lacks the darkly humorous touches that Tim Curry brought to the role. This is signalled even by the costume choices: Curry's Pennywise actually looked like a party clown, bright and larger than life in his romper suit of blue and yellow satin. Skarsgård's Pennywise wears a conspicuously old-timey costume, replete with heavy ruff and knickerbockers in a grubby grey-white. Curry's Pennywise was savvy, knowing how to blend in with modern kids' culture; Skarsgård's is a relic of the early 1900s, perhaps indicating that the alien or demonic entity took on the persona as part of the detritus that floated down into its lair long ago, and has no real understanding of what it is supposed to be emulating.

Another key contrast between the 1990 and 2017 adaptations is the pacing. The 1990 miniseries' two-episode format and run time of over three hours meant that there were considerable (and often, frankly, boring) lulls in the action. The 2017 film's pacing is frenetic by contrast: the set-pieces ('It' manifesting each child's fears; 'It' emerging from a slide projector; various antics in an abandoned house) come so quickly that they almost tread upon one another's heels. The pacing, along with advancements in SFX, gives the 2017 film much more visual interest and overall slickness than its predecessor. The downside to this rapid cycling through action set-pieces is that it makes 2017's *It* rather episodic, without a sense of building tension or an obvious narrative arc — a common problem in current mainstream horror, where scare scenes seem to be designed separately and later fitted somewhat arbitrarily into a sequential narrative (I'm looking at you, James Wan).

However, the scares that *It* delivers are generally effective. In a post-Wan era, I have to applaud the fact there is nary a jump-scare, the film being much more reliant on the

grotesque and, particularly, on what is goopy, contaminating, and abject — the ‘grey water’ of the sewers; the boils and weeping sores of the leprous vagrant that ‘It’ transforms into to haunt the germophobic Eddie. Similarly, the blood that sprays into Bev’s bathroom in a particularly harrowing and well-executed scene recalls King’s *Carrie* (1974) in its use of menstruation as a source of horror and anxiety for the adolescent girl. The film falters, however, when it becomes too reliant on CGI: the scene where Pennywise emerges from the projector screen is obviously a sop to the 3D crowd, and looks fake and ridiculous in 2D, as does the scene where Pennywise dances, his body oscillating and face remaining still as he performs what I can only describe as a furious hornpipe.

Many critics have already commented that the real appeal of *It* lies in the film’s young stars, who bring a warmth and naturalism to their roles. The central group of characters all appear fully fleshed-out and differentiated; they swear, tease one another relentlessly, and have lively exchanges of irreverent blue humour — much more like real adolescents than the one-note, sanitised versions that so often appear in film and TV. In this respect *It* succeeds where the other major King adaptation of the year, *The Dark Tower*, failed: it charms the adult audience into sympathising with its young protagonists. It should be noted that these protagonists are brought forward in time by the new adaptation. While King’s novel had the children’s part of the narrative occur in the late 1950s, *It* (2017) propels them into the late 1980s, as signalled by high-handled BMXs, Walkmans, and Ben’s secret love of New Kids on the Block. King’s ‘Losers Club’ members were afraid of classic Universal movie monsters such as the mummy and the werewolf, creatures any child of the time might have caught on late-night TV. The 2017 *It* revamps these sources of fear, replacing them with monsters that its modern audience might actually find scary: Stanley is terrorised by a version of a picture hanging in his rabbi father’s study, of a long-faced Modigliani woman with blank, asymmetrical eyes; Mike is literally haunted by memories of the town’s racist violence, hands clawing around a door as African-American victims try to escape a fire set by those attempting to drive them from the town.

These changes add freshness to the narrative, but I could not help but wish that the filmmakers had been more extensive with their changes, as a certain tokenism remains — inherited from the source material, of course, but not sufficiently altered or addressed. Bev remains the only female character in the group, cast at the end in a damsel-in-distress role by the plot, and as a romantic prize by both Ben and Bill. Particularly tonally jarring is the sequence where Bev, distraught at the sexually menacing attentions of her father, chops off

her long red hair into a tomboyish style. She joins the boys at a local quarry, where they all strip down to their underwear and go swimming. Afterwards the boys openly stare at Bev's semi-naked body as she lies sunbathing and the scene is played for laughs, in a sort of fond well-boys-will-be-boys way, rather than as another disturbing example of the sexual objectification of a traumatised girl. There is also no real attempt to fill in the details of Mike's experience of racist violence (the impression given is that racism in Derry is the work of a few misguided yokels, rather than anything prevalent or systemic). The horrifying events that resulted in Mike's parents burning to death are only briefly alluded to and conflated, in a way that I found narratively confusing, with the earlier arson attack that took place at the 'Black Spot' club.

The film has already become an outstanding commercial success (it is now reportedly the highest-grossing R-rated movie of all time)<sup>1</sup> and the director has spoken of his plans to involve the original cast in a sequel, where the young actors will reprise their roles for flashback scenes.<sup>2</sup> The main plot, however, will be set twenty-seven years on, as the protagonists return to Derry as adults to defeat the ancient evil their younger selves merely wounded. Pennywise the Dancing Clown will rise from the sewers again, and maybe this time he'll treat us to a Charleston, or a hip-hop dance-off. It'll probably look great in 3D.

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew Jacobs, 'It Keeps Scaring up Crazy Good Profits', *Huffpost*, 22 September 2017 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/it-box-office-highest-grossing-horror-movie\\_us\\_59c54130e4b06ddf45f7b380](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/it-box-office-highest-grossing-horror-movie_us_59c54130e4b06ddf45f7b380)> [accessed 5 October 2017].

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Brezican, 'Stephen King's *It*: Exclusive New Details on the Sequel', 11 September 2017 <<http://ew.com/movies/2017/09/11/stephen-king-it-sequel-details/>> [accessed 5 October 2017].