

by Ted Giese

Every 27 years the town of Derry, Maine undergoes a series of tragedies often involving children. Lurking beneath the tragedies is an evil entity feeding off the fear of its victims, stalking the weak and defenceless, hunting the put-upon and the outcast. What is this evil force? What is it called? “It.” This is the premise of Stephen King’s 1986 horror novel of the same name which tackles, among other things, the topic of fear. His book was first adapted for a television miniseries for ABC in 1990. Now, it’s the basis for a two-part film series directed by Andy Muschietti.

This first film revolves around a group of seven children from Derry on the cusp of their teenage years: Bill Denbrough; Ben Hanscom; Richie Tozier; Stanley Uris; Mike Hanlon; Eddie Kaspbrak; and Beverly Marsh. In the novel, King interweaves their storylines switching back and forth between their childhood and adult selves. The new film focuses exclusively on that brief window of time between the world of their childhood and the increasingly adult world lying ahead of them. (A planned sequel will likely deal with their adult lives.)

Muschietti modernizes King’s coming-of-age story, setting *It* in 1988, not in the 1950s. The second film, consequently, will focus on the adult versions of these characters in the current era.

Muschietti’s child characters use decidedly R-rated language. Why is this noteworthy? It’s an important reminder that just because a film has seven children as lead characters doesn’t make it a kid’s movie or a movie appropriate for children—even if it shares other deeply nostalgic, more innocent threads of comparison to softer 1980s pop-horror-adventure-films involving children. *It* is legitimately charming and humorous at points—especially in some earlier scenes as the kids are becoming friends. The humor isn’t forced as is the case in many horror films. That humour goes a long way as



the majority of what these characters are dealing with is not funny.

As *It* unfolds, these young characters deal with various manifestations of the evil plaguing Derry, predominantly appearing in the form of Pennywise the Dancing Clown. In addition to the horror of this creature, these poor souls are likewise dealing with equally horrifying personal troubles—bullying, molestation, physical abuse, and Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MSBP), as well as grief and loss. The six boys organically form what they call the Losers’ Club which Beverly Marsh eventually joins. Each kid has increasingly more daunting personal hurdles to overcome. For example: Bill Denbrough stutters; Stanley Uris can’t seem to master his preparations for his Bar Mitzvah even though his dad is the town rabbi; Ben Hanscom is overweight and relentlessly bullied by a gang of young local psychopaths led by the murderous Henry Bowers; and Beverly Marsh is falsely accused by girls in her school of promiscuity—an accusation that isn’t helped by spending all summer hanging out with six boys in the Losers’ Club.

Even without an evil entity feeding off their fears, these young people would still be living—to varying degrees—horrific lives. This is important because in King’s novel these horrors are presented in just as grim and R-rated a fashion as the other worldly frights and horrors. Yet

Muschietti and his writers present them as B-plot character development fodder, minimizing and sanitizing them with a PG/PG-13 rendition of King’s R-rated book. The result is a film that comes across more like a matryoshka Russian nesting doll where there is a PG/PG-13 B-plot tucked into the R-rated A-plot.

Christian viewers will want to contemplate the overarching theme of “fear in the midst of hardship.” There is a Christian response to fear which the film in one way addresses well and in another way misses the mark on. As in real life, fear is most dangerous when experienced alone. This is the coming-of-age lesson the children learn. One segment of the film is set in a decrepit house where Pennywise first seems to reside and where members of the Losers’ Club begin to learn that they must face their fears together and avoid facing them alone. From the beginning of the film, where Bill’s younger brother Georgie goes missing along with other kids in the community, straight through the rest of the film, the malevolent Pennywise is depicted as an evil entity seeking out its victims in a way that may remind Christian viewers of St. Peter’s description of the devil: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced

by your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

The idea of resisting the devil’s attacks is picked up by St. James in his epistle and echoes through this film, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Resisting the devil and his attacks and temptations to sin and fear is always easier when the one resisting is not alone. *It* highlights this biblical truth, even if it does so in an over-the-top manner.

What *It* misses is that Christians, who are encouraged to gather together regularly (Hebrews 10:25), are never truly alone in the first place. Through baptism they are in Christ, and God has promised to always be with them. Repeatedly, Scripture tackles fear with the promise that God is with His people no matter the circumstances. In Isaiah, God says, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous Right Hand” (Isaiah 41:10). In the face of both mundane and supernatural evils, Christians are invited to trust God and to remember they are not alone; God is with them. “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9)—even if they go into a dark flooded basement, a city storm drain or sewer, a decrepit abandoned house, or their own family home, school or community. Wherever trouble is lurking, God is also present—and as St. Paul says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

Stephen King is a prolific writer of more than 50 novels and 200-plus short stories. Some of his novels, like *Carrie* and *The Shinning*, have repeatedly

been made into film and television projects. As *It* enters into that same repeat company, it is worthwhile to ask why people want to draw again from this particular well. The obvious reason could be the character Pennywise, who again is horrifying in this film adaptation and will no doubt cause another generation of viewers to dislike clowns. Most viewers will find the murderous Pennywise very frightening indeed.

But there may be another reason why people return to this story. King has said the inspiration for writing *It* was twofold: first he liked the fairly tale of the Three Billy Goats Gruff and had originally envisioned Pennywise as a

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troll living in a sewer system instead of under a bridge; and second, he was so frequently asked about his upbringing and life experiences in relation to his books that he wrote *It* as a kind of final exam to respond to all those questions. The book, the television miniseries, and this film all tap into the flight instinct that makes children, and sometimes adults, rush up the stairs to get out of a dark basement, the instinct that makes them look twice at the unexpected shadow in their dark closet in the dead of night.

If King’s book was a kind of final exam on fear does Muschietti’s film adaptation make the grade? Overall, *It* is better than many projects adapted from King’s works but not as good as the best adaptations. Muschietti’s

It suffers from a fixation on the supernatural other-worldly frights while shying away from the more mundane grinding natural evils of life. Had Muschietti’s balance of these two elements of King’s novel been better the film would have more impact.

For viewers plagued by their own fears, anxieties and traumas, *It* holds no lasting answers apart from the obvious “don’t go it alone.” Scripture however records King David’s prayer and provides the better answer, “I sought the LORD, and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears” (Psalm 34:4).

It is not for everyone. By virtue of their genre, horror films don’t serve a broad audience. That said, *It* is making a lot of money which indicates that King’s source material and Muschietti’s film have managed to transcend genre and hit a wider audience. Even if you don’t find a movie like this appealing, its current popularity provides opportunity to talk about fear from a Christian perspective and

point to the trust Christians have in God as they resist the devil and hold fast to Christ Jesus.

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Movie Night!

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