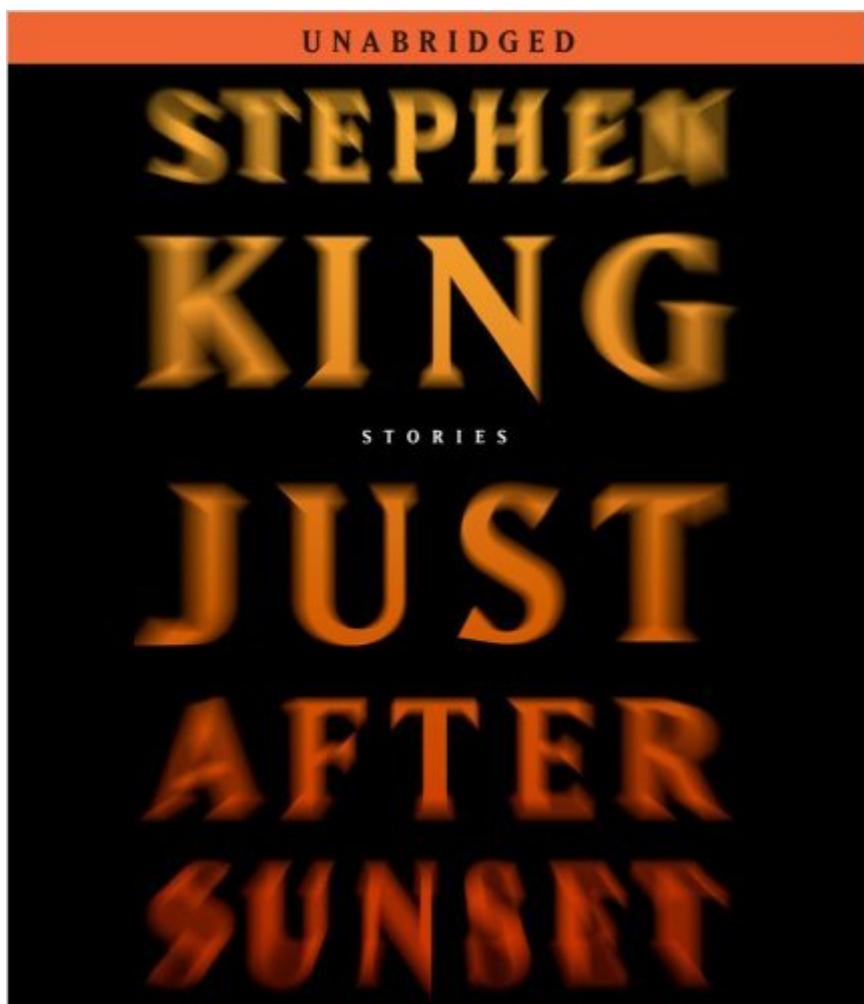


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Just After Sunset: Stories



Synopsis

Who but Stephen King would turn a Port-O-San into a slimy birth canal, or a roadside honky-tonk into a place for endless love? A book salesman with a grievance might pick up a mute hitchhiker, not knowing the silent man in the passenger seat listens altogether too well. Or an exercise routine on a stationary bicycle, begun to reduce bad cholesterol, might take its rider on a captivating -- and then terrifying-journey. Set on a remote key in Florida, "The Gingerbread Girl" is a riveting tale featuring a young woman as vulnerable -- and resourceful -- as Audrey Hepburn's character in *Wait Until Dark*. In "Ayana", a blind girl works a miracle with a kiss and the touch of her hand. For King, the line between the living and the dead is often blurry, and the seams that hold our reality intact might tear apart at any moment. In "N", which recently broke new ground when it was adapted as a graphic digital entertainment, a psychiatric patient's irrational thinking might create an apocalyptic threat in the Maine countryside--or keep the world from falling victim to it. Just After Sunset -- call it dusk, call it twilight, it's a time when human intercourse takes on an unnatural cast, when nothing is quite as it appears, when the imagination begins to reach for shadows as they dissipate to darkness and living daylight can be scared right out of you. It's the perfect time for Stephen King.

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Customer Reviews

Although I have never been an advocate of the view that Stephen King was losing his touch, this collection seems to offer a version of King with so much energy and creativity that some of his more recent works pale in comparison. It is an intense and generous sampler of short fiction that truly shows King at his best, whether you consider his best to be his horror or his more mainstream

work. "Willa," which provides a quiet, understated opener to the collection, is suspenseful, eerie, and creative. It also, in my opinion, offers a rather unique solution to what I will admit is one of King's problems: crafting realistic modern dialogue for his younger characters. (A problem that he seems to have largely eliminated in this collection, by the way, with the exception of his creative use of it here.) "Harvey's Dream" is also quiet. I found it far more unsettling than "Willa," however, as its depiction of ordinary marital unhappiness--already frightening, given its monotony and barely suppressed hatred--slowly evolves into a sharp, ice-pick intrusion of unfortunate foresight.

"Graduation Afternoon" features a similar kind of transition from ordinary unhappiness to the outright horrific. "The Gingerbread Girl" is one of the best stories in the collection. King shows a deft touch with Emily's characterization while still writing at a white-hot pace and bringing this particular reader to the edge of her seat. He takes enough time to build up Em's past and her attempts to outrun it before starting the clock with the arrival of the zealously psychotic Pickering, one of the best and most frightening villains in all of King's short fiction. Another standout is "N."

I'm a bit surprised - disappointed even - in the rather mediocre average review score for Stephen King's anthology, "Just After Sunset." While this collection of short stories is not steeped in the sensational terror and gore of King's earlier works (most of which I thought were terrific), "Sunset" reflects a more mature King - the master of words relying less on horror and more on the subtleties of ordinary people in extraordinary situations. I always found King a keen observer of culture and society - one of the best at capturing the most mundane details of ordinary life, and in King's case, weaving them into a dark fabric of fear that lures one from the familiarity of (a pet, a car, and friendly neighbor...) into unsettled and disturbing worlds, and epic battles of good vs. malevolence. All of which are reflected in this baker's dozen of darkness - twelve new and the "bonus" of "The Cat from Hell" - an early King tale that made it to the big screen in the 1990 movie "Tales from the Darkside". To the point, the contrast in style between the graphic and simple story lines of "Hell Cat", and the cleverly drawn irony of "Mute" could not be more pronounced. Both frightening, engaging, and entertaining reads, but where "Cat" is pretty much gothic horror, "Mute" is a cleverly drawn, sophisticated tale of suspense and murder that would fit well in a collection of Hitchcock. I didn't find a bad story in the lot, but if I were to pick my favorites, in addition to the fiendish "Mute", I'd place the diabolically gross "A Very Tight Place" near the top of the list. Or the poignant "The New York Times at Special Bargain Rates" - an oft-told tale in many respects, but never replayed more beautifully than here.

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