



The Breathing Method

Stephen King



About the author

Stephen King was born in 1947 in Portland, Maine, located in the north-eastern United States. His father, Donald King, who was a vacuum cleaner salesman, abandoned King and the family a couple of years later. One day, he went out to buy a packet of cigarettes and never returned.

King and his brother, David, were raised by their mother. However, King's father was also a strong influence on the young writer, as he had left behind boxes of stories and a lot of them were science fiction and horror stories, recalls King.

As a child, King loved tales of science fiction and horror. He spent most of his time reading comic books and fantasy magazines. He began writing his own unusual fiction while he was still in high school, and he soon published his first story, *I Was a Teenage Grave Robber*, in an amateur magazine.

King attended the University of Maine and began selling stories. He didn't make enough money from his writing to support himself and a young family until the publication of his first novel, *Carrie*, in 1973. He sold the paperback rights to the now-famous book for \$400,000. He has since published more than thirty best-sellers.

King's life has strangely shadowed his fiction. Like his author hero, Paul Sheldon, in *Misery*, his fame has brought him close to danger. He has received threatening letters from disturbed fans, and his own house has been attacked. In June 1999, he was also involved in an incident with uncanny links to *The Breathing Method*: he suffered a near-fatal road accident. He was hit by a van while walking near his home in Maine, and he spent many months in hospital recovering.

A number of King's stories have been made into films, including *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *The Body* (a story from the same collection as *The Breathing Method*, which was filmed as *Stand by Me*), *Misery*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*.

Summary

Stephen King, the world's highest earning author, published *The Breathing Method* in 1982 as part of a collection of stories called *Different Seasons*. The collection was intended to show more subtle sides of the author's creativity than he had so far shown in his horror writing. However, most readers agree that *The Breathing Method* is as terrifying as King's other work.

The Breathing Method is interesting for being a story told within a story. The background narrative begins in New York City in the 1970s. David Adley, an older man who has worked in the same law firm for many years, pays his weekly visit to an old-fashioned gentleman's club, where the members often tell each other stories. Particularly frightening tales are told at the club on the Thursday night before Christmas – the traditional season of ghost and horror stories.

The Breathing Method is the story that Adley hears on this particular Thursday night before Christmas. It is a bizarre tale told by an old doctor. It is about the time in 1935 when an unmarried pregnant woman came to see him, and how he taught her his new "breathing method" to use during labor – with terrifying results!

Background and themes

The origins of story-telling: An interesting theme in *The Breathing Method* involves the art and origins of story-telling. *The Breathing Method* is a story told in a strange place. The timelessness and other-worldliness of David Adley's club creates an air of mystery that prepares the reader for the weird tale that Dr. McCarron tells. The stories are told around a fireplace, and before each one is shared, the teller must throw a packet of powder into the fire that bursts into flames of unusual – and even unknown – colors. King seems to be suggesting that these strange stories – and by association, the stories that he himself writes – come from very bizarre corners of the human mind.

The role of women in American society: A main theme of Dr. McCarron's tale is the role of women in American society in the early part of the twentieth century. The story



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is told in an exclusive men's club, which women aren't permitted to attend. It is very much a man's world, and quite representative of mainstream US society during the story's 1930s setting. At that time, American women had only just been given the right to vote (in fact, in 1920), and there were still major limits controlling women's participation in the workplace, as a woman's place was still considered to be in the home.

Conservative attitudes: Regarding sex and childbirth outside marriage, attitudes were very conservative in the 1930s, especially when compared to those in the modern age. It was considered disgraceful, especially for a woman of the educated classes, to be pregnant without being married. In fact, even in 1969, at the height of the western "sexual revolution", a survey showed that sixty-eight percent of Americans believed that sex outside marriage was wrong. Therefore, Sandra Stansfield's courage and honesty, and her pride in her pregnancy, would have been considered remarkable for her time.

The breathing method: The breathing method related by Dr. McCarron in King's book is based on fact. In 1933, a British obstetrician, Grantly Dick-Read, wrote a book entitled *Natural Childbirth*, which presented his theory that excessive pain during child labor is a result of muscular tension arising from the fear of giving birth. He felt that pregnant women should be taught how to breathe and relax during child labor. The idea that women could have more control over childbirth was revolutionary at the time. The Lamaze method, a popular method of childbirth preparation that is still employed today, was first introduced by Fernand Lamaze, a French doctor, to reduce the pain and tension of child labor. One of the method's main exercises involves getting the woman to alternate deep chest breathing with quick shallow breathing – an exercise that is exactly like the one taught by Dr. McCarron to his mysterious patient in *The Breathing Method*.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1

Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *What can you see? Can you see any words in the picture? If so, what do they say? Is there anything strange or different about the picture? What do you think the story will be about? What do you think will happen in the story? Do you think the story will be realistic or fantastic? Why do you think this? Do you*

think the story will be exciting or dull? Why do you think this?

- Discuss:** Ask students if they have ever seen a film version of a Stephen King book (i.e. *Carrie*, *It*, *Pet Cemetery*, *Misery*, *Stand by Me*, *The Green Mile*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Shining*, *Thinner*, etc.). *Did you like the film? Why or why not? Do you remember the story in the film?* Get students to recount as many of the stories as possible, and write notes on the board to record what each of the stories is about.
- Research:** Ask students to bring information about Stephen King to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

After reading

- Pair work:** Write the word *horror* on the board and teach students what it means (a strong feeling of shock and fear). Then put students into pairs and ask them to think about what makes a good horror story. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and share their findings with their classmates.
- Write:** Write the following sentence on the board: *It is the tale, not he who tells it.* Then put students into pairs and get them to look at the picture and caption on page 5. They should write a short paragraph to explain what the inscription on the fireplace means. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read their paragraph to their classmates.
- Discuss:** Put students into groups of four and get each student to tell a ghost story to the rest of the group. The groups should then choose the story they liked best, gather at the front of the classroom and retell the story to the entire class.

Chapter 2, pages 20–34

Before reading

- Discuss:** Write the word *pregnant* on the board and teach students what it means (when a woman has a baby growing inside her). Then put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:
How does a woman's body change when she is pregnant? Do you think being pregnant now is different from being pregnant in the past? If so, how is it different? Can being pregnant be dangerous? If so, how can it be dangerous?
- Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to make a list of the ways in which western society's view of women has changed since the 1930s. When they have finished, ask each pair to join another pair and compare their lists. They should add any changes that are on the other pair's list to their own list. Finally, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read their list to their classmates.



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After reading

- 9 Write:** Write the following combinations of letters and blanks on the board – they are outlines of words that can be found in Chapter 2 (pages 20–34). Get students to fill in the missing letters to spell the words. When they have finished, some of the students should stand at the front of the class and read the words to their classmates.

a _ _ s p _ _ _ _

b b _ _ _ h

c _ _ d _ _ _ n _

d _ _ b y

e _ r _ _ n _ _ _

f d _ m _ g _ _

g p _ _ n

h t _ r _ _ b _ _

- 10 Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapter 2 (pages 20–34). When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which scene the picture illustrates.

Chapter 2, pages 35–48

Before reading

- 11 Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen in Chapter 2 (pages 35–48).
- 12 Read carefully:** Put students into groups of four and get them to read the four captions in Chapter 2 (pages 35–48) out loud. The first student should stand up and carefully read the first caption (page 36) out loud, the second student should stand up and read the second caption (page 40) out loud, the third student should stand up and read the third caption (page 43) out loud and the fourth student should stand up and read the fourth caption (page 47) out loud.

After reading

- 13 Check:** Review students' predictions about what would happen in Chapter 2 (pages 35–48). Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
- 14 Artwork:** Get students to draw a picture of one of the characters in Chapter 2 (pages 35–48). When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which character the picture illustrates.

Chapter 3

Before reading

- 15 Discuss:** Write the phrase “story within a story” on the board and teach students what it means (a literary technique in which the writer tells a second story within the first one that he or she is writing). Then put students into small groups and get them to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using the “story within a story” literary technique.

After reading

- 16 Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to write three questions that they would like to ask Stevens. When they have finished, ask them to exchange their list with another pair and write answers to the other pair's questions.
- 17 Write:** Put students into small groups and get them to write notes for a different ending to the story. The notes should be brief summaries, not long and detailed. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their new ending to their classmates. Finally, take a vote to see which ending the class likes best. (Note that the groups aren't allowed to vote for their own story.)

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.