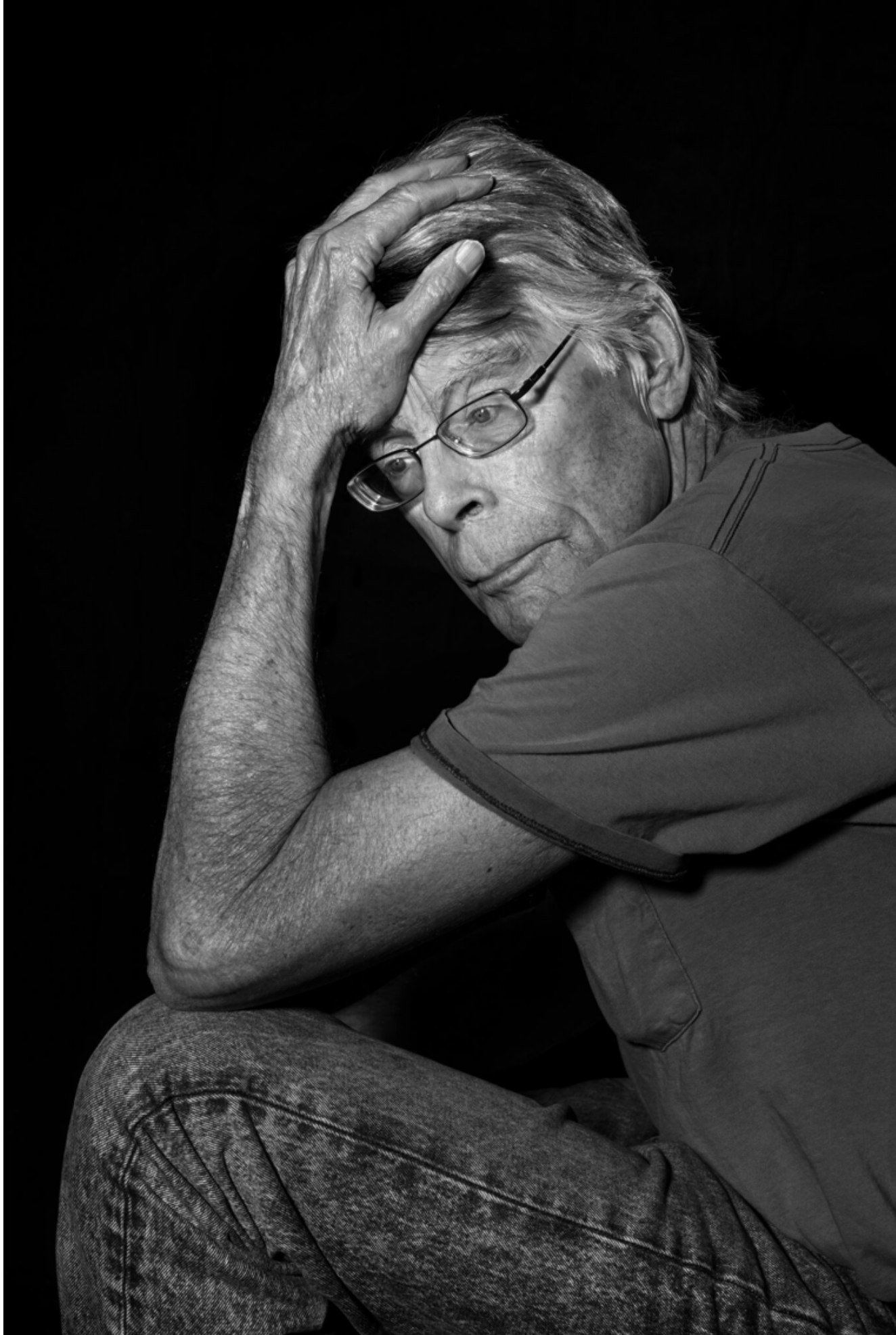


Stephen King on Why 'Lisey's Story' Was One He Had to Adapt Himself

"I've held onto it the way you hold on to something you love," King said about the novel, which has been reimaged as an eight-part series starring Julianne Moore and Clive Owen.



"I've held onto it the way you hold on to something you love," Stephen King said about "Lisey's Story," the rare novel he has adapted for TV himself. Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

"I've held onto it the way you hold on to something you love," Stephen King said about "Lisey's Story," the rare novel he has adapted for TV himself. Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

Dig into a Stephen King novel or watch one of his film adaptations, and life's joys quickly become life's terrors. Cars are [wicked man traps](#). Prom is [a nightmare](#). Dogs? [Total snuff machines](#).

But ask Pablo Larraín, the director of "[Lisey's Story](#)," the new supernatural mini-series based on King's [2006 novel](#), and in King's world, terror *is* joy. Larraín found that out when he visited King at the author's home in Maine.

"He invited me to stay in a guesthouse, and he said to me, 'You're the only guest, but that doesn't mean you're alone,' and walked away," said Larraín, the Chilean director best known for the film "[Jackie](#)." "I barely slept."

"The next morning, he walked in with eggs and made fun of me," he added. King knew he had made him afraid of nothing.



Julianne Moore plays the title character of "Lisey's Story," a widow coming to terms with her husband's tragic life. Apple TV+

Alone, but not: It's a theme that courses through King's sweeping [body of work](#), and it returns for several characters across layers of time and space in "Lisey's Story," which begins Friday on Apple TV+. Julianne Moore stars as Lisey Landon, the widow of Scott Landon, a famous novelist (played by Clive Owen) whose childhood traumas drove him to forge a connection to a transdimensional world called Boo'ya Moon.

As vividly depicted in the show, Boo'ya Moon is a place of tranquil beauty, like a Pre-Raphaelite wonderland. But it's also menacing terrain, where cloaked figures sit silently inside a massive amphitheater awaiting resolutions to earthly traumas.

In recent years, there have been a string of glossy TV adaptations of King's works, including ["The Outsider,"](#) ["Under the Dome"](#) and ["The Mist."](#) But "Lisey's Story" is

different. King [has said](#) that the novel is one of his favorites, and one that he would want to [adapt himself](#). So he did: King wrote the entire series, something he hadn't done for a TV series adaptation of one of his own novels since he wrote the ABC mini-series version of "The Shining" (1997).

"I've held onto it the way you hold on to something you love," King, 73, said last month by phone.

As in many King stories, a linchpin of "Lisey's Story" is mental illness. The wobbly territory between reality and paranoia is sensitively portrayed by Joan Allen in her role as Lisey's sister Amanda, who is treated at a mental institution for catatonia and self-harm, afflictions that mask otherworldly secrets. (Jennifer Jason Leigh plays the caretaker third sister, Darla.) On the other hand, there's Jim Dooley (Dane DeHaan), a deranged stalker whose single-minded quest for Scott's unpublished work has violent consequences for the family.

Calling from Maine, King spoke about the many storytelling layers of "Lisey's Story," the responsibilities of horror creators and how there may be nothing that generates more scares than the human mind. These are edited excerpts from that conversation.

"It's important to see the characters are rounded and not pop-up characters," King said about his depictions of mental illness. Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

Of all of your novels, why adapt "Lisey's Story" yourself?

I held onto it, never expecting I would do anything with it. But I love this book. Ordinarily, I send them off the way you send a kid to college. You hope they do well, but you're hands off. If they do a great job, you can say, "That was based on my material." If not, you can say they screwed up. If you're going to be in it, you're going to be in it all the way. That's a big commitment once you get to be 70.

Why episodic television?

It's more novelistic. "Lisey's Story" is a long book. The novels that seem to work best in films are the ones that are shorter and more simple. I don't think "Lisey's Story" would work as a movie because it's got many layers.

I also love the idea that you can spread out the story a little bit. But you have to be careful because if it's going to be eight hours long, you have to hold the audience.

Figuring out what is in and out of bounds when it comes to depicting mental illness can be tricky, especially in the horror genre, where madness motivates almost everything. How do you make sure to do that in a sensitive way?

It's important to see the characters are rounded and not pop-up characters — not to make fun of someone with a mental problem or say it's their own fault. I don't think it is.

You have to see the mentally ill [character] as not at fault. But still they have to be either treated or taken to a place where they can't hurt other people.

How much of Dane's character is based on real-life stalkers from your own experience?

We've had some deep space cowboys in our life. One of them broke into our house. I wasn't here. Tabby [King's wife, the writer Tabitha King] was home by herself, and the guy said he had a bomb. It was a box, and it wasn't a bomb. It had pencil erasers in it and things that were wired with bread ties. She ran out of the house and went to a neighbor and the police. The guy probably wasn't dangerous. There's a guy who drives around in [a van that says](#) I killed John Lennon. There are nutty people out there.

[Subscribe to attend](#)

For a year, the "Offstage" series has followed theater through a shutdown. Now we're looking at its rebound. Join Times theater reporter Michael Paulson, as he explores signs of hope in a changed city with Lin-Manuel Miranda, a performance from Shakespeare in the Park and more.

There's an interaction between Jim and a frightened librarian that's incredibly tense. Where did the idea for that come from?

That wasn't in the original. Pablo came to me and said: "What would you think if he was in a library? Could you

write some stuff that's kind of menacing but also weird?" He mentioned Quentin Tarantino and the dialogue that he does. I said I could do that. So I did.

How did working on this show differ from when you've adapted one of your novels for TV before, like the broadcast version of ["The Stand,"](#) from the 1990s?

Commercials break the flow. If you're trying to make people believe in fantastical events, it's like waking them out of a sound sleep to see an ad. But this way, all I had to worry about was telling the story and keeping it clear and leaving something at the end that would bring people onto the next one.

Pablo Larraín, left, directed all eight episodes of the series. "Pablo and I spent a lot of time in preproduction," King said, hashing out the real and the fantastical. Apple +

They say the minute you show the monster, you take away its power. "Lisey's Story" is a show-don't-tell adaptation, unlike ["The Outsider,"](#) which depicted almost nothing supernatural. Why that approach?

The real world has to be very carefully done. You have to stitch together the fantasy and horror with very fine stitches so that the person who watches or reads the book says, these are real people and I understand their problems. Then you say, I'm going to put these people you know and understand in a different situation that's probably unreal. "The Outsider," the series and the book, are about how we react when we are faced with the inexplicable.

"Lisey's Story" has elements that are realistic. Pablo and I spent a lot of time in preproduction, and he said: "Stephen, Boo'ya Moon doesn't really exist, does it? It's a fantasy construct where Scott goes to escape from his own mental illness, like a safety valve." I said, "It's a real place, whether or not it pre-existed or he created it." He really accepted it and became a total fan of the idea.

There's a scene between Julianne's and Dane's characters that involves a pizza cutter, and it's pretty gory. Have your thoughts changed over the years about what responsibilities horror artists have when it comes to depicting violence, particularly violence against women?

Violence does happen against women, and the real issue [when writing fiction] is how the woman responds to that. Lisey responds by getting tougher. In that sense she's a role model. She's not all beaten down and scared. She pretends to be, but she's not. Those scenes are difficult to watch, but it's like what Hitchcock said about ["Psycho"](#): Most of what's there is in your imagination. We never see a single cut put on Julianne Moore or a blow hit on her face. You hear sounds and hear her react and the aftermath, but not the acts themselves.

My idea about what you would call the pornography of violence — when you see somebody's face slashed — is that it's important that you care about the characters. It's not like the "Friday the 13th" movies where you come into

the theater to see 16 horny teens die in 16 interesting ways, whether it's the arrow through the breast or a squeeze to the head. "Lisey's Story" is more artistic and more thought provoking.

King in Bridgton, Maine. "If you're going to be in it, you're going to be in it all the way," he said of taking on the adaptation himself. "That's a big commitment once you get to be 70." Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

You've said "Lisey's Story" was sparked by a near-death experience. How did that make you re-evaluate your life and work?

I had double pneumonia, and I was in the hospital for a long time. I was very ill, and my wife took the opportunity to redecorate my study, which was old and beat up. To me, it's almost like a terminal, where I go to blast off.

After I came out of the hospital, she said: "Maybe you don't want to go in your office. You won't like it." Of course I went up there, and it's in a transitional state. All the books had been packed in boxes to go back on the shelves. I was on different medications and looked around the office and thought maybe I was dead. That's what would happen: You'd have to clean out everything after the person died. Then I thought this would make a great opening for a story, and the rest of it fell into place.

With the pandemic and the election and the racial justice protests last summer, a lot of people have been having life-changing confrontations with mortality. Are

you?

I don't sense it. Mentally, it's a great relief that Trump isn't in the White House anymore. Whether or not any of that is reflected in my work? I doubt it.

Are there any books or TV shows you've watched during the pandemic that have inspired you?

I watched an awful lot of "Law and Order: SVU." Those are pretty good stories. I keep [saying on Twitter](#) that I would love to see "Law and Order: Vampire Squad."

We use cookies and similar methods to recognize visitors and remember their preferences. We also use them to measure ad campaign effectiveness, target ads and analyze site traffic. To learn more about these methods, including how to disable them, [view our Cookie Policy](#). Starting on July 20, 2020 we will show you ads we think are relevant to your interests, based on the kinds of content you access in our Services. You can [object](#). For more info, see our [privacy policy](#). By tapping 'accept,' you consent to the use of these methods by us and third parties. You can always change your tracker preferences by visiting our Cookie Policy.

[Manage Trackers](#)