

Words as Weapons: Writers' Block, Creativity, and the Supernatural in Stephen King's Bag of Bones

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Abstract—These abstract focuses on Stephen King's 1998 novel, analyzing its title as a metaphorical weapon. It examines how the visceral imagery of "bones" exposes the underlying horror of inherited generational trauma and systemic violence, transforming the human body from a vessel of love into a weaponized symbol of history. This study examines Stephen King's critically acclaimed 1998 novel, *Bag of Bones*, proposing that the title itself functions as a visceral, horrifying weapon against the psychological and historical denial of a community. In King's narrative, the literal and metaphorical "bag of bones", the scattered, abused skeletal remains of a murdered Black blues singer and her son acts as an agent of vengeance and symbolic violence. This paper explores how this skeletal motif represents the weaponization of history, forcing the protagonist, a grieving writer, to confront the dark, buried secrets of a seemingly idyllic Maine town.

Index Terms—systemic horror, metaphorical, bag of bones, trauma.

Stephen King is famously known as the "King of Horror," credited with reviving and popularizing the horror genre in the late 20th century. He is celebrated for moving horror away from classic monsters and into relatable, everyday American settings, grounding his chilling, supernatural tales with deeply fleshed-out characters and psychological tension. *Bag of Bones* (1998) is a gothic horror novel by American author Stephen King. The novel follows Mike Noonan, a recently widowed author who has an overwhelming case of writer's block.

After experiencing several haunting dreams about his summer house, named Sara Laughs, Mike visits the house to attempt writing one last time. He soon gets embroiled in a legal battle between a local woman named Mattie Devore and her father-in-law, computer tycoon Max Devore, for custody of Mattie's child, Kyra. Mike also learns that his late wife, Jo, was leading a secret life at Sara Laughs, and uncovers a

startling truth about the town itself. King drew heavily from the 1938 Gothic novel *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier for inspiration. *Bag of Bones* won the Bram Stoker Award for Best Novel and the Locus Award for Best Dark Fantasy/Horror Novel in 1999. In 2011, the novel was adapted by horror filmmaker Mick Garris into a two-part miniseries starring Pierce Brosnan as Mike Noonan.

Mike Noonan is a 36-year-old novelist whose wife, Jo, suddenly dies in 1994 of a brain aneurysm. Mike learns that Jo was pregnant when she died, a discovery that exacerbates his loss. Mike spends the next four years grieving Jo, experiencing an intense case of writer's block that leaves him physically ill. By 1998, his writer's block is compounded by a series of recurring dreams set in his summer lake house, Sara Laughs. Mike interprets the dreams as a sign that he should go to Sara Laughs if he wants to try writing again. Mike returns to Sara Laughs in June 1998. As soon as he enters the house, he becomes aware that it is haunted by a number of supernatural presences, including the spirit of Jo.

Mike soon meets a young local widow named Mattie Devore and her daughter, Kyra. The Devores are related to a man named Max Devore, a computer software tycoon who left the nearby town of TR-90 for California many years earlier. Max is fighting for custody of Kyra, believing that Mattie is unfit to raise her. It soon becomes clear that the wealthy Max feels threatened by working-class Mattie, especially since he had exerted multiple efforts to block her marriage to his now-deceased son, Lance. Mattie's legal troubles escalate when Mike is called to give a deposition to Elmer Durgin, Kyra's court-appointed guardian. Sensing that Durgin is on Max's payroll, Mike hires a New York lawyer named John Storrow to defend Mattie. Storrow employs his own legal team to assist in the effort.

“It’s not a question of love or affection. I can give those and I can take them. I feel pain like anyone else. I need to touch and be touched. But if someone asks me, ‘Are you all, right?’ I can’t answer no. I can’t say help me.” (Chapter 1, Page 11).

Mike characterizes himself as someone who isn’t inclined to ask others for help. This hints at the isolation he experiences during the four years after Jo’s death. It also sets up his connection with Mattie later on, since she becomes the first person that he is willing to be vulnerable around and to open up to about his writer’s block.

Through several conversations with people in the town, Mike learns that Jo had been leading a secret life in the year before her death. She had visited Sara Laughs without Mike and had been seen at one point with another man. Mike demands answers from Jo’s spirit, but hears nothing back other than a plea to help Mattie.

Mike has a vivid fever dream that makes him aware of his growing attraction to Mattie. The dream also marks the end of his writer’s block, as Mike throws himself into work on a new crime thriller novel. Mike attends the deposition, where he outmaneuvers Durgin’s entrapments with the help of a local lawyer. After several more days spent writing, Mike learns that the townspeople, many of whom are financially dependent on Max, have begun to ostracize Mattie. Storrow is confident, however, that the custody case is moving in their favor. He soon uncovers evidence of Durgin’s collaboration with Max.

Mike follows a trail of historical clues related to a writing project Jo was working on before her death. Jo’s research initially concerned the history of a Black musician who lived in the area named Sara Tidwell (the namesake of Mike’s house), though at some point Jo began to inquire about the history of children who had died around Dark Score Lake, where Sara Laughs is located. One of the children was Sara’s son, Kito, who drowned in the lake. While following Jo’s trail, Mike falls out with his longtime caretaker, a local named Bill Dean. Mike begins to suspect that Bill is racist, which sours their friendship. Mike also learns that he may have a family connection to the town, which formed part of Jo’s research.

“According to gloomy old Dennison Carville, the aspiring novelist should understand from the outset that fiction’s goals were forever beyond his reach, that the job was an exercise in futility. ‘Compared to the

dullest human being actually walking about on the face of the earth and casting his shadow there,’ Hardy supposedly said, ‘the most brilliantly drawn character in a novel is but a bag of bones.’ I understood because that was what I felt like in those interminable, dissembling days: a bag of bones.” (Chapter 3, Page 33)

Early on in the novel, Mike explains the novel’s title by citing an apocryphal quote from English author Thomas Hardy and suggesting that he feels like the “bag of bones” that Hardy speaks of. Following the death of Jo, whose validation engendered Mike’s creative abilities, Mike no longer believes in his writing and struggles with “Overcoming a Fear of the Future”.

Max and his accomplice, Rogette Whitmore, confront Mike, urging him to drop his support for Mattie. Mike refuses to be cowed, so Max and Whitmore resort to physical violence, nearly killing him. Mike survives the ordeal with the help of Jo’s spirit. Later, Max and Whitmore send Mike a letter, promising to drop the custody case if Mike withdraws himself from Mattie’s personal affairs. Mike accepts the offer and is surprised when he learns that Max has died by suicide the following morning.

Even though Mattie’s legal troubles appear to be over, Bill urges Mike to leave town to save his reputation and their friendship. Mike refuses, reassuring him that his intentions are good. Soon, Mike and Mattie declare their feelings for one another. Wary of their age gap, Mike asks for time to consider before entering a romantic relationship.

To his relief, Mike discovers that the man who was seen with Jo was none other than her brother, Frank, who accompanied her to assure her safety. Jo’s research revealed that Mike’s town connection made him vulnerable to the psychic influence of Sara Laughs. Kyra demonstrates her own psychic ability when she shares that she is in contact with the spiritual presences around Dark Score Lake. The spirits use a set of fridge magnets to send messages to Mike and Kyra. Kyra’s magnets give her a list of names associated with the lake, including Carla Dean, a relative of Bill’s, and Reg, a relative of Sara Tidwell. Mike experiences another vivid fever dream that takes him to the time of Sara Tidwell. He encounters Kyra and helps her to escape when a group of men led by Max’s great-grandfather, Jared Devore, attempt to apprehend her. Though Mike becomes too

preoccupied with the town mysteries to continue writing his novel, he frequently slips into subconscious trances he associates with writing. These trances grant him further psychic visions of the present and the past.

Storrow learns that Max has left Mattie a lucrative inheritance in his will, provided that Mattie does not leave TR-90 for one year. This causes Mike to believe that Max had something else planned for Mattie before he died. While celebrating their legal victory at Mattie's trailer, a group of men conduct a drive-by shooting that kills Mattie. Fearing for her safety, Mike takes Kyra back to Sara Laughs as a massive storm falls over the area.

During the storm, Mike loses himself in a trance and enacts a plan to kill Kyra and die by suicide. He is rescued by the spirits of Mattie and Jo, who help him realize that Mattie had hidden messages in Mike's manuscript. He follows the message to a hidden room under Jo's old studio, where he locates a box containing all of Jo's research notes. The discovery reveals that there is a curse upon the lake. At the turn of the century, Jared Devore and several men raped and killed Sara Tidwell because they refused to accept a Black woman in their community. When Sara's son, Kito, stumbled upon the scene, Mike's granduncle, Harry Auster, drowned him in the lake.

The violent nature of Sara's death allowed her to live on as a ghost, taking revenge on the town's descendants. Her psychic power influences families to give their children names that begin with "C" or "K" in memory of Kito. These children would then be killed by men from local families. Kyra would have been the latest victim in this series of murders, except that Mike overcame Sara's influence.

Mike puts an end to the curse by finding Sara and Kito's final resting place and dissolving their bones. Sara takes on a physical form to stop Mike, but Jo prevents her from harming him. When Mike returns to the house, he finds that Kyra has been kidnapped by Whitmore. He pursues them to the lake dock, where Whitmore is swept into the water by Mattie's ghost and dies.

When Mike and Storrow arrive at Mattie's trailer, they are stunned by her beauty. The group prepare for their picnic and play Frisbee. Mike retrieves Mattie's boombox so that they can dance. Mike is once again stunned when Mattie starts dancing. He thinks about

everything he has missed about life after four years of grieving.

The group cook their steaks before the storm rolls in. They all agree it is the best meal they've ever had, and Mattie tearfully expresses her gratitude for everyone's help. While bringing Kyra up to the trailer for her nap, Mike sees a blue car pass by. The car has a bumper sticker from Buddy's Diner. Mike expects that everyone else in town has gone up to the nearby church for Royce's funeral. Mike can hear them sing their hymns. As a quote from the article A New Vision of Chromatic Constructs of Identity in Britt Bennett's The Vanishing Half. "People say humans are valued by heart not by colour gender race culture or family."(Pg No:5).

After putting Kyra to sleep, Mike finds Mattie in the doorway. Pressed together in the narrow space, they both express their mutual desire for one another. Mike promises to come back later that night, admitting how lonely he has been. They kiss as the rain starts to fall. The men outside ask for help in carrying the things in. Mattie heads out first to help. Mike hears thunder, then gunfire.

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