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FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT

By Stephen King

765 pp. Viking.

A decade ago, Stephen King made his literary aesthetic clear: "I try to terrorize the reader. But if . . . I cannot terrify . . . , I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud." The figures on his royalty checks suggest this strategy works, and he sticks to it closely this time. Unlike his adventurous *The Eyes of the Dragon*, Mr. King risks few departures from earlier form in the quartet of short novels in *Four Past Midnight*.

By now, everyone knows Stephen King's flaws: tone-deaf narration, papier-maché characters, clichés, gratuitous vulgarity, self-indulgent digressions. Each is amply present in these pages ringing with echoes of earlier King. Most tales revisit the old Maine setting. The characters are still types rather than individuals. Even the crude taste looks familiar, the five pages rendered with more detail than we'd care for to describe a man's getting interrupted in the bathroom by a phone call.

Not proud at all, Mr. King rehashes plot devices as well. "The Langoliers," as did *The Stand*, eliminates all humanity but a few survivors, this time on a plane that has passed through a "time rip." This ploy of minimizing his cast serves Mr. King's purpose, however, as he constantly relies on there being no one around with the common sense his characters invariably lack until the last moment when, miraculously, they realize exactly how to avert catastrophe.

However, we don't read Stephen King for common sense, originality or insight into the adult world. Many who wouldn't want the fact broadcast read this master of suspense to escape their helpless fear of the headlines and to re-experience the more innocent terrors of childhood, to be once again a pre-schooler whose heart pounds from a nightmare.

In this collection, only "Secret Window, Secret Garden," about an adult's psychological disintegration, fails to achieve that effect.

"The Langoliers" exploits the primal fear of abandonment, even of ceasing to exist. "The Library Policeman" reawakens the most haunting dimensions of childhood admonitions. In "The Sun Dog," the terrifying agent is a boy's Polaroid camera. Mr. King's recurring tactic of making the ordinary function in a bizarre way always hooks the child in us. Significantly, this "simplified" Polaroid is too complex inside to fix. We had hoped, growing up, for comforting knowledge of how the world works, but the technology opening onto the 21st Century has outraced us.

Also abundant here is another source of Mr. King's mass appeal, springing ironically from his clichéd diction, what Paul Gray called "postliterate prose."

Admittedly lazy, Mr. King often avoids laboring at description by summoning pre-existing images from cartoons, old movies, television shows and commercials. Here, sinister men wear "white *Andromeda Strain* suits." People wind up in a "dreary version of Fantasyland." Ruffled adulterers when caught look "like Alfalfa in the old Little Rascals." Men wish for guns "like the one Dirty Harry wore." Slacks are "the color of Bazooka bubble gum." As the poet laureate of pop, Mr. King is read by many who might otherwise never read at all. He creates an immediate and familiar landscape and could form the ideal bridge from the Road Runner to Raskolnikov.

There is little here Mr. King has not done before, but once again he proves difficult to lay aside.