

Q & A with Joe Hill about his new novel, THE FIREMAN

Please give a one-sentence description of your novel.

The Fireman is the story of an incurable runaway pathogen that causes death by spontaneous combustion, and one young woman's attempt to carry on after being infected.

What inspired your novel?

Some men just want to watch the world burn.

What other writers and/or novels might you compare your work to?

All my books are, to a degree, conversations with my influences. I've joked that *The Fireman* is really just *The Stand*, soaked in gasoline and set on fire. But structurally, it owes a lot to the *Harry Potter* novels. And because my heroine, Harper Grayson née Willowses, is a bit obsessive about Julie Andrews, the book also operates in the shadow of a certain well-known English nanny.

In some ways, though, the book is also a reaction to the recent glut of end-of-the-world fiction. *The Fireman* has a cheerfully anti-apocalyptic streak. Londoners carried on publishing books, planting flowers, and doing crosswords during the Blitz. Humans are surprisingly determined to continue thinking, arguing, puzzling, loving, teaching, and learning, even when there's a building burning on every other street corner.

What kind of readers do you think will enjoy your book?

I'm confident *The Fireman* will be beloved by men and women of all ages, but especially by children, the elderly, and people between the ages of 18 and 69. It may be of special interest to people who have been incarcerated for arson.

Who are you closest to?

I have three sons. We spend a lot of time together, sponging ourselves with raw meat, fouling our environment in bestial ways, and grunting incoherently at one another. The whole house is drool and stink and scattered, gnawed on bones.

What is your earliest memory?

When I was very small, my parents lived in Scotland. My very first memory, strangely, is riding in a car outside of Edinburgh. My mother was driving us to Loch Ness -- I was really hoping to

see a lake monster -- but there was a torrential downpour and the roads were flooding out. I remember the rain blurring everything beyond the windshield. I remember the rain washing sideways across the road. This was when I was five, almost six.

I was back in Edinburgh for the first time in thirty-plus years when I was on tour for *NOS4A2* and had a knee-loosening shock of *déjà vu* when I saw Edinburgh Castle. I knew when I saw it that I had seen it before. I'm sure that grimy stone spear made a big impression on my febrile five-year-old mind.

What does relaxation mean for you?

A cup of tea and a book. The fourth and last cup of tea of the day is the best. I usually have that one around four in the afternoon, and that's also when I settle in to try and read 40 pages.

What are you best at?

Oh, probably writing. Although there are lots of writers who are better than me. I'm not in the same league as Kate Atkinson or Jennifer Egan, but I do enjoy making things up, and I think I've done all right at it.

I'm almost unbeatable at *Connect Four*. And *Boggle*.

What's your biggest fear?

It's the least imaginative answer of all time, but the thought of something happening to one of the kids: one of them stepping in front of a bus or catching a bullet in a school shooting. Or even just being humiliated by other kids. You hope you can teach them what they need to know to protect themselves. You also don't want them to live their lives afraid or in a defensive crouch, so you have to keep most of your fears behind the parental mask to avoid worrying them. A lot of being a father is staying calm and affecting a confidence and certainty that you don't really feel.

I also worry a lot about getting mentally foggy. In that movie, *Still Alice*, Julianne Moore says she'd rather be dying of cancer than suffering from Alzheimer's, because at least if she had cancer, she'd still be her. The thought of having your memories peeled away from you, your sense of yourself taken away, makes me feel ill.

What has been your biggest regret?

I wish I hadn't spent so much time in my thirties worrying about things, habitually second and triple guessing myself. That was a lot of wasted energy, a lot of pointless self-inflicted unhappiness.

Can you tell us something that will shock your readers?

2001 is a terrifically boring, overrated film. So is *Blade Runner*. Both movies are like a trip to the dentist's office.

What one item could you not live without?

I have a house full of books I love, but if I lost them all, my town has a great library. I have some great fountain pens, and some beautifully crafted notebooks . . . but in a pinch, a cheap ballpoint pen and a notebook from the drugstore is perfectly satisfactory. I have games and the internet and videos on my giant smartphone. But if I didn't have it, I'd have a lot less distraction in my life. I've spent forty-three years as confirmed materialist, snapping up comic books and DVDs and furniture and original comic book art. But I like to believe (maybe I'm lying to myself) that my happiness is not actually dependent on those things.

Life is easier if you have money than if you don't. There isn't any doubt about it. But your stuff is not your life.

Who is your hero and/or villain?

My parents are my heroes and still my best sounding board. My dad is a very calming influence on me, and he has a genius for seeing how a problem can be converted into an opportunity. My mother is wry, dry, and the great reality check. She also declines to suffer fools in a way that is kind of inspiring . . . even if, in the course of a conversation, you yourself have been revealed as the fool.

The great villain is always time. Every day there's less of it.

Who is your favorite author?

It's a four-way tie between Stephen King, Tabitha King, Owen King, and Kelly Braffet.

If I'm not allowed to count people I'm related to, I'd pick Shakespeare from the dead, and David Mitchell from the living.

I know, I know, Shakespeare is such a trite, boring choice. What are you going to do? The plays are the most important, most beautifully crafted, most emotionally satisfying works ever

composed in English, with the possible exception of the King James Bible, and I'm not even sure about that.

What kind of music, films, and games do you like?

The Beatles and the Stones are the magnetic poles of my musical tastes . . . so naturally, my favorite album of all time is Oasis's (*What's The Story*) *Morning Glory*? Look, what do you expect? I was born in 1972, after the Beatles had gone their separate ways, and as the Stones were concluding their most important work. Of course my generation's response to the Beatles and the Stones had to be exciting to me.

I also have a lot of affection for gravel-throated blue-collar American rockers with a backlist of '80s anthems: Springsteen, Seger, Ethridge, Petty, Mellencamp. Beyond that, I've found stuff to like in almost every genre, from opera to rap, country to jazz.

I love Spielberg's '80s films so much, I planted little Spielberg Easter Eggs hidden in each of my son's names. I've probably seen *Jaws* close to 30 times. But James Cameron's first two blockbusters -- *The Terminator* and *Aliens* -- have, curiously, so far had a bigger influence on my work.

I do think a lot of the most exciting filmic work is on TV nowadays. In some ways I consciously designed *The Fireman* to play like a ten-episode American cable series along the lines of *Breaking Bad* or *The Americans* or *Walking Dead* (which are all remarkable). Within one narrative there are clearly smaller story arcs, with their own beginnings, middles, and ends, all contributing to the larger story, much as you'd find in one of those shows.

I know there's a lot of exciting stuff being done in video games, but I'm a casual gamer at best. I'm still stuck on '80s arcade titles like *Ms. Pac-Man*, *Galaga*, and *Burger Time*. I play a reinvention of *Pac-Man* on my phone, *Pac-Man 256*, which is pretty great. I do crossword puzzles now and then. I play *Scrabble* with friends. None of them will play *Connect Four* with me. They know how that goes.

Tell us something readers really need to know about you to fully appreciate your book.

There's nothing readers need to know about me to fully appreciate the book, I hope! If there is, I blew it. The story should be able to live and thrive without the writer's shadow darkening the page. Least that's what I think.