

## The double-edged pen: Omnipotent fantasies in the creativity and addictions of Stephen King

Dustin Kahoud\*

*Psychology Department, Long Island University - Post, Brookville, NY, USA*

*(Received 6 February 2014; accepted 20 June 2014)*

The legendary debate over whether a connection between creativity and addictions exists is one that is shrouded in mystery and intrigue, but also one that continuously returns to the circuitous metaphor of *the chicken and the egg*. In an effort to better understand nuances in the relationship between creativity and addictions, this paper examines the life of Stephen King, and the omnipotent fantasies from which both his creative processes and addictive behaviours emerged. Since the early twentieth century, psychodynamic thinkers have highlighted omnipotent fantasies as a psychological force driving creative processes as efforts towards personal transformation. Similarly, numerous psychodynamic theories have highlighted omnipotent fantasies as playing a cardinal role in the psychological processes that propel substance abuse. And yet, the construct of omnipotence has yet to be examined as a theoretical bridge to bind such theories of creativity and substance abuse together. While fostering personal meaning and self-transformation when manifested in his creative writing processes, omnipotent fantasies have also lead Stephen King down a precarious path of addictive behaviours. Through a narrative analysis of the life of Stephen King, who has written in great depth about both his creativity and substance abuse, I will illustrate how omnipotent fantasies often shape and foster both healthy, creative processes towards growth and maladaptive, addictive impulses towards self-destruction.

**Keywords:** addiction; Stephen King; creative writing; omnipotent fantasies; narcissistic illusion; fantasies; psychoanalysis

Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink. Drink and be filled up. (King, 2000a, p. 270)

When one learns of the darkness pervading the rich fantasy life of Stephen King, the author's commonplace designation as 'undisputed master of the modern horror story' begins to make a great deal of sense. 'I'm afraid of everything,' King confesses (as cited in Rogak, 2008, p. 1). Spiders, snakes,

---

\*Email: [dkahoud@liu.edu](mailto:dkahoud@liu.edu)

insects, death and the dark are just a handful of his phobias. He also suffers from a number of obsessive-compulsive rituals and harbours superstitions. Now a writer in his late sixties, King has been fighting off his inner demons and banishing them to sheets of paper since he was a child. He is renowned for his uncanny ability to strike terror in the hearts of readers and has become one of the most prolific popular fiction writers of all time. Since his first novel, *Carrie*, landed on shelves in 1973, King has been fervently cranking out his own brand of horror, suspense, psychodrama, science fiction and fantasy novels. To this day, there has yet to be any signs that the creative steam that billows forth into his keyboard is dissipating. King has written and published over 65 novels in 38 years on top of volumes of short stories, articles and works of non-fiction. There are few authors whose collections can rival the shelf space required to accommodate the complete works of Stephen King, not to mention the countless films and TV series adaptations of his books that solidified the American author's place as a household name around the world.

Do we dare delve into what has driven King to become as successful in his writing as he is today? In 2000, he published a colourful blend of personal insight, humour and tragedy in a memoir chronicling the experiences that have shaped him as a writer and as a human being. King describes his memoir, *In Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, as 'a kind of curriculum vitae – my attempt to show how one writer was formed' (King, 2000a, p. 18). Through a narrative analysis of King's autobiographical works and interviews, allow me to shine some light on a foreboding passageway into the complex mind of a man who will forever send chills down the spines of those who venture to turn his pages. I will begin by exploring the creativity derived from King's rich fantasy life and move from there to an examination of how those very aspects of his mental life spawned his life-threatening substance abuse problems. Follow me now on a guided tour through the internal world where omnipotent fantasies provide both the guiding light and the plunges into darkness that have made Stephen King the author and the man he is today.

### **The ties that write: omnipotence and creativity**

For as long as he can remember, Stephen King has been creating. Long before he developed the ability to weave a spellbinding tale through words, King was changing the world around him through the powers of his imagination. Reflecting on his earliest memory, King (2000a) recalls often imagining he was someone else. Specifically, he remembers fantasising about being the Ringling Brothers Circus strongboy. He was two and a half or three years old. In the privacy of his inner world, King found himself in an animal skin singlet and at the centre of a vast crowd waiting on the edge of their seats in a tense silence. As the spotlight followed his every move, he lifted a cement cinder-block and carried it across the garage that served as centre stage. Reflecting on

the awestruck crowd and how his circus stunt played out in this vivid memory, King (2000a) writes:

Their wondering faces told the story: never had they seen such an incredibly strong kid. 'And he's only *two!*' someone muttered in disbelief ... Unknown to me, wasps had constructed a small nest in the lower half of the cinderblock. One of them ... flew out and stung me on the ear. The pain was brilliant, like a poisonous inspiration. (King, 2000a, pp. 18–19)

It would not be the last time King was inspired by his pain. He reports that, as a child, he saw and felt too much for his age. Regarding what some called an 'overactive mind' and others appreciated as a fertile source of talent, King comments, 'My imagination was too big for my head ... so I spent a lot of miserable hours ... With the kind of imagination I had, you couldn't switch off the images once you'd triggered them' (King, as cited in Rogak, 2008, p. 18). He later attributes the vividness of these images and the power they wield in his fiction to the absence of an internal filter (King, 2000a).

To compound King's naturally sensitive temperament, any narcissistic illusions of wielding control over the external world were shattered at an early age. When King was just two years old, his father went out for a pack of cigarettes and stepped out of his life forever. Donald King had landed himself in severe debt and decided to walk out on his wife, Ruth Pillsbury King, and two boys, Stephen and his four-year-old brother, Dave. From that point on, the family only referred to Donald as 'Daddy Done,' short for 'Daddy Done Left.' In the wake of Donald's abrupt exit, Ruth King was forced to work two or three jobs in order to support her children and pay off the debt her husband had left behind. With his mother working around the clock and his older brother spending time with children his own age, King ended up spending much of his childhood alone. In response to questions regarding the influence of his solitude on his writing, King once remarked: 'As a kid, I didn't talk much, I wrote ... I'm not a very good talker. I'm not used to externalizing my thoughts other than on paper, which is typical of writers' (Rogak, 2008, p. 100).

King reports that around the age of eight, he became infatuated with anything that could strike a sense of terror in his heart (King, 2000a). 'I liked to be scared, I liked the total surrender of emotional control' (Rogak, 2008, p. 16). To articulate the pleasure that the horror genre induces in him, King explains this need to feel afraid as a striving, on some level, to achieve mastery over those things that terrify him most, not unlike the phenomenon described as 'repetition compulsion' (Freud, 1920/1961). Ironically, the young King immersed himself in stories of horror and fear in an effort to cope with the horror and fear he faced in life. Part of his love for the thrill of being afraid was the exertion of a sense of omnipotent control over his reality by seeing the worst pain in his life pale in comparison to the traumata of his

stories: 'I've always believed if you think the very worst, then, no matter how bad things get (and in my heart I've always been convinced that they can get pretty bad), they'll never get as bad as *that*' (King, 2000b, p. 234).

It was this love of horror stories and the protection they provided from both the internal and the external world that first sparked King's inspiration to create his own stories. King describes writing as his most powerful remedy and defence against the emotional discomfort in his life (Rogak, 2008). In his non-fiction work, *Danse Macabre*, King (1981) provides a rationale for why his life has become devoted to creating horror stories when there is already so much *real* horror alive in the world:

We make up horror to help us cope with the real [stories]. The dream of horror is in itself an out-letting and a lancing ... and it may well be that the mass-media dream of horror can sometimes become a nationwide analyst's couch ... People often ask me to parse out meaning from my stories, to relate them back to my life. I'm always puzzled to realize years later that in some ways I was delineating my own problems, and performing a kind of self-psychoanalysis. (p. 13)

One event in particular took on profound significance for him regarding his unrelenting urges to write. As King matured into adolescence and became more curious about his father, he one day decided to go exploring in his aunt's attic where his mother had packed up all of the artefacts left behind by her ex-husband. In one of the biggest surprises of his life, King stumbled upon a box of 1940s science fiction novels along with a stack of rejection slips from magazines with hastily scribbled notes of encouragement, asking Donald to try again. *His father had been an aspiring writer, too!* In *Danse Macabre*, King (1981) speculates about whether his initial infatuation with creative writing and fiction can be partially attributed to this moment when he discovered the interests he and his father shared in common:

Talent is only a compass, and we'll not discuss why it points toward magnetic north; instead we'll treat briefly of that moment when the needle actually swings toward that great point of attraction. It has always seemed peculiar to me that I owe that moment in my own life to my father, who left my mother when I was two and my brother, David, four. (p. 97)

Here I would argue that King may have unconsciously fantasised about becoming merged, reunited perhaps, with the idealised image of his father. King himself said, 'I am always interested in the idea that a lot of fiction writers write for their fathers because their fathers are gone ... There does seem to be a target that this stuff pours out toward' (Platt, 1983, p. 278). While one aspect of King's experience of self points him towards this idea that he is searching for his father through his writing, another self begs to differ with the small, hurt, rejected inner boy. This more aggressive, powerful and protected aspect of King's personality argues against expressing such vulnerabilities. The opposing sides clash, and King expresses the bitter conflict over having been

rejected on the influence his father had on his becoming a writer. He ponders, 'Maybe in some sort of imaginative way I'm searching for him or maybe that's just a lot of horseshit' (Platt, 1983, p. 278).

The young writer soon thereafter learned that his writing might help him to bury the haunting memories of his abandoning father, and this idea added further fuel to the fire of his creative reserves. One of the rare instances in which Ruth King discussed her ex-husband with her son was after King happened upon the literary remnants of his long-lost father. Ruth told her son that his father had always given up on anything he ever tried due to 'laziness.' King thanked his mother for her honesty and then raced up the stairs towards his bedroom where his typewriter awaited an onslaught of fingers upon its keys. I would offer that this sudden spurt of creative inspiration may have been propelled by omnipotent fantasies in which King slays his father with the power of his words and steps over the body to achieve the literary successes he never could – an *oedipal victory*.

In doing so, King would have forever won the admiration of his mother, thus squashing his father further into the ground. Perhaps, the intensity of his creative pursuits partially reflects an expression of rage towards his father over his abandonment as well as furious competitive strivings to be the sole winner of his mother's love. In becoming his mother's idealised image of a son, King could save her by filling the position of her absent husband and becoming the man his father never could be. King's drive to succeed as a writer – a career his father had tried his hand at and failed – and have his work accepted and loved by others was insatiable. Succeeding as a writer would symbolically show his father (in fantasy) that he was more powerful and that he could *destroy* him. Through his writing, King expresses not only the pains of losing his father and his unconscious desires to connect with this shadowy figure, but also his rage, his hatred and a sense of mastery over the dark world his father left him behind in to fend for himself.

While the memory of King's father inspired from a rather dark place, his mother Ruth's presence was internalised as a guiding light, shining through the mists of the painful realities of becoming an adult. Through his relationship with his mother, King found inspiration for his writing through the maternal offerings of mirroring, idealisation and warmth. Ruth's parenting style offered a healthy gratification of her son's narcissistic illusions. Not only did King receive a sense of being special, unique and gifted in return for presenting his mother with one of his stories, but he was also given the power to communicate something crucial to her through his writing. But what was it he was trying to say? Perhaps King was trying to tell his mother that he would always be there for her, that he would protect her and lavish her with the gifts of his creativity. Not only would he correct his father's failure to succeed as a writer, but he would also mend the wounds of the man's painful disappearance. King would never be the coward who ran away from the pressures of raising a family.

As the muse for his creative writing, Ruth became a strong advocate for King's triumphant rise over the significant losses of his early life. Her empathy and encouragement provided the magic that allowed her son to transform his omnipotent fantasies into creative productions to later be treasured by millions of fans. Regarding the response he was met with upon presenting a new piece of writing to his mother, King (2000a) writes:

Eventually I showed one of these [stories] to my mother, and she was charmed. I remember her slightly amazed smile, as if she was unable to believe a kid of hers could be so smart. Practically a damned prodigy, for God's sake. I had never seen that look on her face before. Not on my account, anyway. And I absolutely loved it. (p. 28)

King reports that his mother often served as an unwavering source of energy for his writing projects, adamantly expressing her faith in his talents throughout his life. Reflecting on the courage his mother bestowed on him in pursuing the precarious path towards a writing career, King states: 'Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who *believes* in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough' (p. 73). As extra incentive, Ruth even began to pay her son a small fee to purchase some of his earliest stories. In the following statement, King (2000a) recalls the first time he pondered the possibility of being able to write as a *career* – to actually be paid to do what he loved doing most:

I remember an immense feeling of *possibility* at the idea, as if I had been ushered into a vast building filled with closed doors and had been given leave to open any one I liked. There were more doors than one person could ever open in a life-time, I thought (and still think). (p. 26)

When considering the ways that King's writing gratified narcissistic illusions from an early age, it is not surprising to learn that he regards his impulse to write as an addiction. Ever since receiving his mother's warm praise upon presenting her with his first piece of writing, King was instilled with inspiring and motivating fantasies of being loved and admired as well as a powerful force – one not to be reckoned with. Not only could he protect his mother and bring her happiness through the power he wielded with a typewriter, but he could also destroy the internal representation of the bad, rejecting father. And as he progressed in his career, this interpersonal influence became generalised to millions of fans. Not only could he bring happiness to fans all over the world through the entertainment he provided, but he also had the power to terrify people all in a matter of storylines – filling the hearts of fans with dread and keeping people awake and compulsively checking under their beds at night. King's writing offered a sense of omnipotent control over the world. He once joked about his writing talent as being the result of an addiction gene he had inherited from his mother that 'got rewired somewhere along the way'

(Rogak, 2008, p. 156). Regarding the compulsive nature of his fascination with creative writing, King suggests:

I think it's part of that obsessive deal that makes you a writer in the first place, that makes you want to write it all down. Writing is an *addiction* for me. Even when the writing is not going well, if I don't do it, the fact that I'm not doing it nags at me. (as cited in Rogak, 2008, p. 2, emphasis added)

King repeatedly emphasises that, while perhaps yet another addiction, his writing has always been adaptive for him as a drain through which he could purge his fears, insecurities and inner disturbances. In performing his own 'self-psychoanalysis,' as he puts it, King repeatedly attempts to dispel his own demons and darkest fears. Through this form of sublimation, he can articulate his most terrifying experiences and painful feelings, a chance to be 'known' to a nationwide analyst's couch (King, 2000b). In an interview for *Playboy Magazine*, King (as cited in Norden, 1983) reflects on the therapeutic function of his creative writing and how it has served to ease his anxieties regarding his own mental health.

In addition to the influence of omnipotent fantasies as an adaptive force driving King's experience as a writer, I would suggest that such fantasies are also meaningful when considered in light of his encounters with another source of magic in his life. In alcohol and drugs, King discovered a rich supply of nutrients for fostering his narcissistic illusions, and like his writing, his use of substances initially provided him with the intense satisfaction of feeling 'filled up.' But as King soon found out, the void he was seeking to fill through both his writing and his substance abuse was more cavernous than he had anticipated.

### **Scribbler's little helpers: omnipotence and substance abuse**

While King's impulses to write flourished in the fertile soil of his narcissistic illusions, a similarly addictive strand of behaviours was taking root. After spending a majority of his childhood in the company of the characters he found in books and created in his own stories, it was around the age of 17 that King first encountered a new friend. This companion would take him through polarising ups and downs for the following 30 years. Initially, the drug presented as a transformational solution for life's many problems not so different from the fantasy world that fiction provided. But as King's relationship with alcohol and other drugs progressed and changed, what once seemed an innocently tantalising remedy began to reveal hidden, virulent features.

King picked up his first drink during the late 1960s in his senior year of high school and found himself instantly attached to the drug. Although King's self-described 'overactive imagination' may have served the function of a manic defence, protecting him from the grim realities of a fatherless childhood,

his racing mind became exhausting at times. Specifically, King fell in love with alcohol's ability to modify the textures of his consciousness, providing him with the illusion of escaping his body and slowing the frantic pace of his mind. As he puts it, alcohol provided 'a clearer sense that most of your consciousness is out of your body, hovering like a camera in a science fiction movie and filming everything' (King, 2000a, p. 89). While attending college during the late 1960s, King continued to drink to excess and dabbled liberally in the harder drugs available on college campus across America at the time: 'I did a lot of LSD and peyote and mescaline, more than sixty trips in all' (Rogak, 2008, p. 45). One of King's old roommates tells a tale from their college days about an incident in which Stephen and his housemates all took a hallucinatory drug known for its potency and equilibrium-disturbing effects. That night, everyone in the house became lost in the experience of talking, laughing and listening to music. All of a sudden, one of the roommates noticed that King had disappeared. After frantically searching the house and then heading to campus to check the bars, the dorms and even the English department, King's roommates found him upon returning to the house. A friend commented on the condition in which they found him:

He was sitting in a three-legged easy chair with his feet up on a cranking kerosene heater, which was in the process of melting his rubber boots, and he was oblivious to it all ... I think he was reading *Psycho*. On this particular drug, no one else could even manage to turn the pages, but Steve was sitting there reading, totally safe in his own little cocoon of fiction. (Rogak, 2008, p. 46)

Even through the mists of pills, hallucinogens, cocaine and alcohol, King was as productive as ever in terms of his writing. This snapshot from King's early career points to the ways in which his creativity and use of psychoactive substances may have worked to complement one another. Both helped to reinforce a cocoon that protected him from the painful realities of both his external and inner worlds. Nevertheless, he soon found that not even the magical illusions associated with his writing and substance abuse could detain the bitter winds of objective reality as well as the terrors of his internal experience. In his memoir, King proposes that the death of his mother was one of the major factors that propelled his drinking habits to another level. Lamenting Ruth's burial service, King (2000a) writes, 'I gave the eulogy. I think I did a pretty good job, considering how drunk I was' (p. 94).

With his mother gone, King found himself escaping as deeply into the bottle as he ever had. More and more, the struggling young writer found himself unable to deny the startling reality that his addictions were beginning to wreak serious havoc on the world around him. But on the other hand, King was enraptured by fantasies of the power in alcohol and cocaine for enhancing his creativity, improving upon his nature. He was terrified that if he stopped using substances, he would be left without the rocket fuel he needed to be propelled

towards success as a writer. It is not difficult to see why King might have come to embrace such beliefs. After all, there was a constant supply of alcohol and drugs running through his bloodstream when he created the ideas that evolved into his most famous and acclaimed novels. In the beginning, his substance abuse never seemed to slow him down in terms of his writing and productivity. In fact, King's initial use of cocaine most likely added fuel to the fire that had been burning inside him since childhood. 'With cocaine, one snort, and it owned me body and soul,' King said. 'It was like the missing link. Cocaine was my on switch, and it seemed like a really good energizing drug. You try some and think, "Wow, why haven't I been taking this for years?"' (Rogak, 2008, p. 96).

Once cocaine was thrown into the mix, however, the downward spiral of King's substance abuse began spinning further down at an alarming rate. King recounts writing *The Tommyknockers* in 1986, often working until midnight with his heart pounding and cotton swabs stuck up his nose 'to stem the coke-induced bleeding' (King, 2000a, p. 97). In *On Writing*, King (2000a) describes the state of mind in which he composed some of his most notoriously spine-tingling novels:

At the end of my adventures I was drinking a case of [pints of beer] a night, and there's one novel, *Cujo*, that I barely remember writing at all. I don't say that with pride or shame, only with a vague sense of sorrow and loss. I like that book. I wish I could remember enjoying the good parts as I put them down on the page. (King, 2000a, p. 99)

Inevitably, King's once faithful chemical allies slowly began to turn their backs on him one by one. King's wife, Tabitha, reports a number of occasions in which she emerged from her bedroom in the morning to find her husband passed out on the floor beside his writing desk in a pool of his own vomit. As the substances King abused took their toll, even his seemingly immortal creativity gradually began to suffer. Yet he could not stop using. In the following passage from his memoir, King reflects on how he reinforced his denial and rationalisations regarding his drinking and drug abuse over the years of his addiction:

Alcoholics build defenses like the Dutch build dikes. I spent the first twelve years or so of my married life assuring myself that I 'just liked to drink.' I also employed the world-famous Hemingway Defense. Although never clearly articulated (it would not be manly to do so), the Hemingway Defense goes something like this: as a writer, I am a very sensitive fellow, but I am also a man, and real men don't give in to their sensitivities. Only *sisy*-men do that. Therefore I drink. How else can I face the existential horror of it all and continue to work? (King, 2000a, pp. 93–96)

By the late 1980s, King says he was coming very close to allowing his demons to get the better of him. King eventually came to a point in his

addictions when he felt 'evicted from life.' He no longer wanted to drink, but he did not want to be sober, either. His family and friends decided to intervene and eventually gave him an ultimatum, which ruled out the possibility of his continuing to drink and drug while living in the house with his wife and children. With this, King faced the realisation that he might have forgotten what it was like to be sober: 'What would happen to me without dope? I had forgotten the trick of being straight' (King, 2000a, p. 96). The question that had loomed over Stephen King's head for years finally came crashing down upon him along with the ultimatum: would he still be able to write if he gave up the drinking and the drugs?

In early sobriety, King was horrified to find that his greatest fears were coming true while attempting to write under the deafening silence of his newly sober mind. 'He couldn't. The words wouldn't come, his sentences were complete gibberish, and each letter might as well have been a hieroglyph' (Rogak, 2008, p. 159). Although this period of time was relatively quiet for King in terms of his publishing, he soon rediscovered the inner voice that had shaped his fiction for so many years and returned to his normal level of productivity. King realised that he no longer needed his chemical companions to weave a spellbinding tale and has since written some of his most popular and beloved works, including *Dolores Claiborne*, *The Green Mile* and the epic *Dark Tower* book series.

Looking back on the progression of his addiction after over a decade sober, King often reflects on the link between his inner demons and those that rose to the surface in his earliest novels. For example, King (2000a) cites *Misery* as one novel into which he spun his growing desperation about cocaine's hold over his fantasised talent as a writer. The book tells the story of Paul Sheldon, a famous writer who is kidnapped and held captive by a psychotic fan. Sheldon's '#1 fan' Annie uses various means of violence and torture to coerce her favourite author into writing the stories the way *she* wants them to be. Commenting on Annie as the metaphorical villain, King (2000a) writes: 'Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie's pet writer ... I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to work anymore if I quit drinking and drugging' (p. 98).

There is one novel in particular that King attaches great significance to in his coming to the realisation that he was an alcoholic. In his memoir, King (2000a) reveals that he wrote *The Shining* without realising until years later that he had been writing about himself. *The Shining's* main protagonist, Jack Torrance, has been called an 'amalgam of King's personal fears at the turning point of his career' (Winter, 1984, p. 48). Like King at the time, this fictional character was terrified of failing as a writer and being unable to support his wife and son. Moreover, Torrance was teaching high school English to scrape by and developing a progressively voracious drinking habit. The closer Torrance gets to feeling like his writing career has failed, the tighter alcohol fastens its grip over him. King later reflects on the realisation that he had been

unconsciously writing about himself, battling his inner demons through a careful construction of Torrence's innermost conflicts. King reflects on how the downward spiral of his life at the time became reflected in Torrence and his increasingly precarious trajectory in the *The Shining*:

[*The Shining*] seemed to be primarily a story about a miserable, damned man who is very slowly losing his grip on his life, a man who is being driven to destroy all the things he loves. For much of the three or four months it took me to write the first draft of the novel ... [I had no company but my] fears that my chance to be a writer had come and gone, fears that I had gotten into a teaching job that was completely wrong for me, fears most of all that my marriage was edging onto marshy ground and that there might be quicksand anyplace ahead. (King, 2000b, p. 62)

It was through the story's main protagonist Jack Torrence that King voiced his first cries for help as an addict. Asking for help directly from friends and family was not an option for him. He told himself he could always handle it because 'a real man always can' (King, 2000a, pp. 93–96). So instead, as King puts it, '[The addiction] began to scream for help in the only way it knew how, through my fiction and through my monsters' (King, 2000a, pp. 95–96).

## Conclusion

King's efforts at achieving mastery over his deepest fears resulted in *both* the creation of his most critically acclaimed novel *and* the precipitation of his self-destruction. Both his writing and his substance abuse offered illusory promises of omnipotent control over himself and the world, taking himself out of his own skin and making reality the place he *needed* it to be. In his creativity and addictions, King pursued fantasies of transforming *who* he was, *where* he was and what he could do about it. Both King's creative energies and substance abuse brought him to life with a euphoric sense of omnipotence, while simultaneously serving as omens of potential disaster. Could he really achieve omnipotent victory as a world-famous fiction writer – or would he fail himself and his loved ones, becoming nothing more than a pathetic, alcoholic English teacher and 'wannabe' writer? And King's conflicts regarding his addictions were not so different for him. Did he possess the 'strength' to function as a successful writer, husband, father and man while still chasing the seductive thrills and temptations of cocaine and alcohol? Or would his family and talent abandon him as he crawled deeper into his own personally fashioned grave, courtesy of his addictions. In fantasy, these two dimensions of King's life – his creativity and his substance abuse – protected him from his greatest fears while simultaneously overcoming them. And thus, the two behaviours became powerfully entwined in their tantalising offerings of omnipotence – a synergistic union that would be forever superior to the sum of its parts.

While King's writing and substance abuse transformed his inner and external worlds in the numerous ways I have described above, there would never be enough words to heal the early wounds he had incurred. While both forms of omnipotent control provided King temporary relief from his inner suffering, the rebound impact was devastating at times. When he experienced the power of his creative energies waning, his compensatory use of substances escalated. But as I explicated above, this omnipotent formula only appeared to work for so long. In his frantic efforts to outrun his fears, King's focus on his writing became as obsessive as his use of substances. The pangs of withdrawal were just as painful in the face of 'writer's block' as those he experienced in attempting to abstain from the drugs upon which he had become dependent. Reflecting on both the healthy and unhealthy aspects of his creative impulses, King (as cited in Norden, 1983) states:

I have a marketable obsession ... The arts are obsessional, and obsession is dangerous. It's like a knife in the mind ... In some cases ... the knife can turn savagely upon the person wielding it. Art is localised illness, usually benign ... [but] sometimes terribly malignant. (p. 26)

### Notes on contributor

Dustin Kahoud, Psy.D., received his doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Long Island University, Post Campus, and is a credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselor (CASAC). He has taught courses on addictions in undergraduate and graduate programs at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Adelphi University, and specialises in the treatment of addictions in his clinical practice. He has a background in creative writing and continues to research and write about the relationship between creativity and substance abuse.

### References

- Freud, S. (1920/1961). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 18). Beyond the pleasure principle. London: Hogarth Press.
- King, S. (1981). *Danse macabre*. New York, NY: Gallery Books.
- King, S. (2000a). *On writing: A memoir of the craft*. New York, NY: Scriber.
- King, S. (2000b). *Secret windows: Essays and fiction on the craft of writing*. New York, NY: Book-of-the-Month Club.
- Norden, E. (1983, June). The Playboy interview: Stephen King. *Playboy Magazine*, 30(6).
- Platt, C. (1983). *Dream makers* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Berkley Books.
- Rogak, L. (2008). *Haunted heart: The life and times of Stephen King*. New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books.
- Winter, D. (1984). *Stephen King: The art of darkness*. New York, NY: New American Library Books.