

The Importance of Being Bachman

by Stephen King

This is my second introduction to the so-called Bachman Books—a phrase which has come to mean (in my mind, at least) the first few novels published with the Richard Bachman name, the ones which appeared as unheralded paperback originals under the Signet imprint.

My first introduction wasn't very good; to me it reads like a textbook case of author obfuscation. But that is not surprising. When it was written, Bachman's alter ego (me, in other words) wasn't in what I'd call a contemplative or analytical mood; I was, in fact, feeling robbed. Bachman was never created as a short-term alias; he was supposed to be there for the long haul, and when my name came out in connection with his, I was surprised, upset, and pissed off. That's not a state conducive to good essaywriting. This time I may do a little better.

Probably the most important thing I can say about Richard Bachman is that *he became real*. Not entirely, of course (he said with a nervous smile); I am not writing this in a delusive state. Except... well... maybe I am. Delusion is, after all, something writers of fiction try to encourage in their readers, at least during the time that the book or story is open before them, and the writer is hardly immune from this state of... what shall I call it? How does "directed delusion" sound?

At any rate, Richard Bachman began his career not as a delusion but as a sheltered place where I could publish a few early works which I felt readers might like. Then he began to grow and come alive, as the creatures of a writer's imagination so frequently do.

I began to imagine his life as a dairy farmer... his wife, the beautiful Claudia Inez Bachman... his solitary New Hampshire mornings, spent milking the cows, getting in the wood, and thinking about his stories... his evenings spent writing, always with a glass of whiskey beside his Olivetti typewriter.

I once knew a writer who would say his current story or novel was "putting on weight" if it was going well. In much the same way, my pen-name began to put on weight.

Then, when his cover was blown, Richard Bachman died. I made light of this in the few interviews I felt required to give on the subject, saying that he'd died of cancer of the pseudonym, but it was actually shock that killed him: the realization that sometimes people just won't let you alone. To put it in more fulsome (but not at all inaccurate) terms, Bachman was the vampire side of my existence, killed by the sunlight of disclosure.

My feelings about all this were confused enough (and *fertile* enough) to bring on a book (a Stephen King book, that is), *The Dark Half*. It was about a writer whose pseudonym, George Stark, actually comes to life. It's a novel my wife has always detested, perhaps because, for Thad Beaumont, the dream of being a writer overwhelms the reality of being a man; for Thad, delusive thinking overtakes rationality completely, with horrific consequences.

I didn't have that problem, though. Really. I put Bachman aside, and although I was sorry that he had to die, I would be lying if I didn't say I felt some relief as well.

The books in this omnibus were written by a young man who was angry, energetic, and deeply infatuated with the art and craft of writing. They weren't written as Bachman books per

se (Bachman hadn't been invented yet, after all), but in a Bachman state of mind: low rage, sexual frustration, crazy good humor, and simmering despair.

Ben Richards, the scrawny, pre-tubercular protagonist of *The Running Man* (he is about as far from the Arnold Schwarzenegger character in the movie as you can get), crashes his hijacked plane into the Network Games skyscraper, killing himself but taking hundreds (maybe thousands) of Free-Vee executives with him; this is the Richard Bachman version of a happy ending.

The conclusions of the other Bachman novels are even more grim. Stephen King has always understood that the good guys don't always win (see *Cujo*, *Pet Sematary*, and —perhaps— *Christine*), but he has also understood that mostly they do. Every day, in real life, the good guys win.

Mostly these victories go unheralded (MAN ARRIVES HOME SAFE FROM WORK YET AGAIN wouldn't sell many papers), but they are nonetheless real for all that... and fiction should reflect reality.

And yet...

In the first draft of *The Dark Half*, I had Thad Beaumont quote Donald E. Westlake, a very funny writer who has penned a series of very grim crime novels under the name Richard Stark. Once asked to explain the dichotomy between Westlake and Stark, the writer in question said, "I write Westlake stories on sunny days. When it rains, I'm Stark."

I don't think that made it into the final version of *The Dark Half*, but I have always loved it (and *related* to it, as it has become fashionable to say). Bachman—a fictional creation who became more real to me with each published book which bore his byline—was a rainyday sort of guy if ever there was one.

The good folks mostly win, courage usually triumphs over fear, the family dog hardly ever contracts rabies; these are things I knew at 25, and things I still know now, at the age of 25×2 . But I know something else as well: there's a place in most of us where the rain is pretty much constant, the shadows are always long, and the woods are full of monsters. It is good to have a voice in which the terrors of such a place can be articulated and its geography partially described, without denying the sunshine and clarity that fill so much of our ordinary lives.

In *Thinner*, Bachman spoke for the first time on his own—it was the only one of the early Bachman novels that had his name on the first draft instead of mine—and it struck me as really unfair that, just as he was starting to talk with his own voice, he should have been mistaken for me. And a mistake was just what it felt like, because by then Bachman had become a kind of id for me; he said the things I couldn't, and the thought of him out there on his New Hampshire dairy farm—not a best-selling writer who gets his name in some stupid *Forbes* list of entertainers too rich for their own good or his face on the *Today* show or doing cameos in movies—quietly writing his books gave him permission to think in ways I could not think and speak in ways I could not speak. And then these news stories came out saying "Bachman is really King," and there was no one—not even me—to defend the dead man, or to point out the obvious: that King was also really Bachman, at least some of the time.

Unfair I thought then and unfair I think now, but sometimes life bites you a little, that's all. I determined to put Bachman out of my thoughts and my life, and so I did, for a number of years.

Then, while I was writing a novel (a *Stephen King* novel) called *Desperation*, Richard Bachman suddenly appeared in my life again. I was working on a Wang dedicated word processor at that time; it looked like the visiphone in an old Flash Gordon serial. This was paired with a marginally more state-of-art laser printer, and from time to time, when an idea occurred to me, I would write down a phrase or a putative title on a scrap of paper and Scotch-tape it to the side of the printer.

As I neared the three-quarter mark on *Desperation*, I had a scrap with a single word printed on it: REGULATORS. I had had a great idea for a novel, something that had to do with toys, guns, TV, and suburbia. I didn't know if I would ever write it—lots of those “printer notes” never came to anything—but it was certainly cool to think about.

Then, one rainy day (a Richard Stark sort of day), as I was pulling into my driveway, I had an idea. I don't know where it came from; it was totally unconnected to any of the trivia tumbling through my head at the time. The idea was to take the characters from *Desperation* and put them into *The Regulators*. In some cases, I thought, they could play the same people; in others, they would change; in neither case would they do the same things or react in the same ways, because the different stories would dictate different courses of action. It would be, I thought, like the members of a repertory company acting in two different plays.

Then an even more exciting idea struck me. If I could use the rep company concept with the *characters*, I could use it with the plot itself as well—I could stack a good many of the *Desperation* elements in a brand-new configuration, and create a kind of mirror world.

I knew even before setting out that plenty of critics would call this twinning a stunt... and they would not be wrong, exactly. But, I thought, it could be a good stunt. Maybe even an illuminating stunt, one which showcased the muscularity and versatility of story, its all but limitless ability to adapt a few basic elements into endlessly pleasing variations, its prankish charm.

But the two books couldn't *sound* exactly the same, and they couldn't *mean* the same, any more than an Edward Albee play and one by William Inge can sound and mean the same, even if they are performed on successive nights by the same company of actors. How could I possibly create a different voice?

At first I thought I couldn't, and that it would be best to consign the idea to the Rube Goldberg bin I keep in the bottom of my mind—the one marked INTERESTING BUT UNWORKABLE CONTRAPTIONS.

Then it occurred to me that I had had the answer all along: Richard Bachman could write *The Regulators*. His voice sounded superficially the same as mine, but underneath there was a world of difference—all the difference between sunshine and rain, let us say. And his view of people was always different from mine, simultaneously funnier and more coldhearted (Bart Dawes in *Roadwork*, my favorite of the early Bachman books, is an excellent example).

Of course Bachman was dead, I had announced that myself, but death is actually a minor

problem for a novelist—just ask Paul Sheldon, who brought Misery Chastain back for Annie Wilkes, or Arthur Conan Doyle, who brought Sherlock Holmes back from Reichenbach Falls when fans all over the British Empire clamored for him. I didn't actually bring Richard Bachman back from the dead, anyway; I just visualized a box of neglected manuscripts in his basement, with *The Regulators* on top. Then I transcribed the book Bachman had already written.

That transcription was a little tougher... but it was also immensely exhilarating. It was wonderful to hear Bachman's voice again, and what I had hoped might happen *did* happen: a book rolled out that was a kind of fraternal twin to the one I had written under my own name (and the two books were quite literally written back-to-back, the King book finished on one day and the Bachman book commenced on the very next). They were no more alike than King and Bachman themselves. *Desperation* is about God; *The Regulators* is about TV. I guess that makes them both about higher powers, but very different ones just the same.

The importance of being Bachman was always the importance of finding a good voice and a valid point of view that were a little different from my own. Not *really* different; I am not schizo enough to believe that.

But I do believe that there are tricks all of us use to change our perspectives and our perceptions—to see ourselves new by dressing up in different clothes and doing our hair in different styles—and that such tricks can be very useful, a way of revitalizing and refreshing old strategies for living life, observing life, and creating art.

None of these comments are intended to suggest that I have done anything great in the Bachman books, and they are surely not made as arguments for artistic merit. But I love what I do too much to want to go stale if I can help it. Bachman has been one way in which I have tried to refresh my craft, and to keep from being too comfy and well-padded.

These early books show some progression of the Bachman *persona*, I hope, and I hope they also show the essence of that *persona*. Dark-toned, despairing even when he is laughing (despairing *most* when he's laughing, in fact), Richard Bachman isn't a fellow I'd want to be all the time, even if he *were* still alive... but it's good to have that option, that window on the world, polarized though it may be.

Still, as the reader works his or her way through these stories, he/she may discover that Dick Bachman has one thing in common with Thad Beaumont's alter ego, George Stark: he's not a very nice guy.

And I wonder if there are any other good manuscripts, at or near completion, in that box found by the widowed Mrs. Bachman in the cellar of their New Hampshire farmhouse.

Sometimes I wonder about that *a lot*.

—Stephen King

Lovell, Maine

April 16, 1996