

Research Article

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Ableism in the Air: Disability Panic in Stephen King's *The Stand*

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Abstract: This article uses Stephen King's 1990, uncut release of his famous 1978 horror novel *The Stand* to reveal the ways the contemporary horror genre implements the language of pandemics and contagious disease to promote ableist ideas about disability. The horror novel villainizes an antagonist as a central function of its plot. When the antagonist is an airborne disease that inflicts disability and death upon its victims, the novel can be a site of production for what I term "disability panic," a fear and disgust at the possibility of becoming disabled, and a contempt for those who already are. This article argues that *The Stand* calls attention to how stereotypes and misconceptions around illness-induced disability form in times of crisis. This article merges genre studies in horror, disability language, and rhetoric of disease in literature to uncover how King reveals that the language of the horror novel can contribute to a cultural fear and hatred of disability. This novel, though written decades ago, mimics the language of corona virus disease 2019 in current popular media. This article demonstrates how fear of airborne disease in a horror novel can increase fear of real-life pandemics and contribute to ableist views of those suffering from illness-related disability.

Keywords: Stephen King, disability, COVID-19, ableism, pandemic

1 Introduction

Stephen King is no stranger to accusations of ableism in his writing – or racism, sexism, or homophobia, for that matter. Of his 65 novels, this criticism is perhaps most prevalent surrounding the monolithic 1200-page, uncut release of *The Stand* (1990), which follows a group of survivors navigating the post-apocalyptic United States after a super flu wipes out most of the human population. Most of this criticism is not unique to King, but a common response to genre fiction more generally. Other horror, romance, fantasy, and crime authors are often accused of relying on reductive stereotypes as a replacement for character building or critical engagement with identity. *The Stand*, while wildly successful and adapted into both a film and TV show, received mixed reviews from activist groups due to the book's large cast of characters, most of whom are almost exclusively defined by their race, gender, or ability (Paquette, 2012, p. 40). The two central protagonists of the novel, Mother Abigail and Nick Andros, are both visibly disabled; Nick begins the novel as deaf and mute and later becomes blind in one eye, while Mother Abigail is almost entirely immobile at 108 years old. These disabilities are central to both characters' appearance, personality, and motivations, while also generating plot events. The rest of the cast is marked by disability as well: minor characters grapple with depression, cognitive disabilities, and addiction for the entire 1200 pages, often very simply to either produce a shock factor or provide a barrier to be overcome. King's one-dimensional portrayal of disability in this text is so extreme that one critic, Susan Paquette, even remarked, "Stephen King marks the downfall of the generation and the death of the literate reader in America" (Paquette, 2012, p. 5).

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Like King's fictional pandemic, the recent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has also been a generator of ableist language and ideology. King's extended novel, which predates the COVID-19 pandemic by 30 years, follows survivors attempting to rebuild society after a super flu pandemic decimates 99.4% of the world's population in a matter of weeks. Government, infrastructure, and social relations are completely destroyed in the wake of the deadly virus. Coincidentally, the book's film adaptation received a rebooted miniseries in 2020, just before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The parallels between this fictional horror story and the developing COVID crisis were certainly eerie, but they extended beyond the basic concept of the global pandemic. The ableism that King was bashed for in the 90s reappeared in COVID-19 discourse, through the formation of what I term "disability panic." King uses similar language in *The Stand* to describe the public's response as they grapple with the super flu. He describes people fleeing their cities to avoid the super flu as "stricken with fear, panic-stupid ... too crazy to understand" (King, 1990, p. 246). King tracks the progression of a global pandemic from a justified fear of bodily harm to all-out panic, rife with misunderstanding and illogical terror of people with disabilities. Disability panic describes the process through which fear of a direct threat to one's body-mind evolves into a totalizing fear and hatred of anything signifying disability. The characters in King's novel are repeatedly put in potentially disabling or life-threatening situations. Over time, they begin to project these negative feelings and associations onto representations of disability and the disabled characters around them. Through his use of common, ableist horror genre tropes and antagonizing language of illness and disability in a deconstructed, post-apocalyptic setting, Stephen King reveals how quickly fear for one's own safety and well-being can transform into a universal aversion to any body-mind state considered disabled.

King admits that his intense focus on ability and the body in *The Stand* was both his way of reacting to a near-fatal car crash he survived shortly before writing the book and as an interpretation of the modern world's flaws. In an analysis of *The Stand*, critic Sharon Russell identifies several places in the novel where King indirectly comments on topics of the late twentieth-century United States, like secrecy and censorship within the government, naïve belief in mankind's ability to master nature, and a lack of human connection creating a culture of selfishness (King, 1990, pp. 65–66). Importantly, King considers how this selfishness and the instability of the modern world affect human response in times of crisis. These scenarios play out in classically horrific and very bodily ways. King focuses his descriptive powers primarily on scenes of illness, death, and violence. He lingers on flu patients, spending pages describing their swelling, fever sweats, expulsions of pus, vomit, and mucus until they take their wheezing last breaths. During the initial phases of government collapse, King nods at contemporary racial tensions by including a brief televised scene of flu-stricken black soldiers executing their white commanders. The novel also features grotesque, whole-page illustrations of mass human decay. Critic Ben Goldstein explains, "King put the entire horror genre on his back. He refreshed all the classic scary story tropes ... and found fertile soil in modern anxieties" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 4). To articulate his own personal and political perspective, King uses typical horror imagery to shock and disgust the reader in a gesture toward broader social commentary.

While he does often rely on racist, sexist, or ableist stereotypes, King sometimes uses them intentionally to draw the reader's attention to their function in the real world. In the case of *The Stand*, I argue that King uses ableism on purpose to show how characters can fall into disability panic as a response to an extreme circumstance. King uses the super flu to predict how humans might react in a global health crisis: fear and concern for their own body-mind will evolve into selfish or irrational stigmatization of disability and contempt for people with disabilities.

2 Disability in Horror

King relies on some of the most recognizable representations of disability in order to signal meaning to his readers. As Cheyne (2019) unpacks in her study on disability in genre fiction, "[i]n horror, disabled characters are frequently monstrous perpetrators of evil acts or vulnerable victims" (pp. 27–28). The disabled characters in *The Stand* fall primarily into the latter category of the pitiful or vulnerable horror victim. While the central

villain, Randall Flagg, is able-bodied and even possesses extreme, supernatural strength and power, the two protagonists are visibly disabled, presumed fragile, and both ultimately die. While she is universally understood as the group's leader, Mother Abigail is 108 years old, requires assistance to move, and does not contribute to the labor of the newly forming society. Likewise, Nick requires writing instruments to communicate with others. King, like other horror authors, relies on "[d]epictions of disabled people as victims" that "resonate with and reinforce conceptualizations of disabled people as helpless or vulnerable, already victims of circumstance or change" (Cheyne, 2019, p. 31). Abigail and Nick are pitied by their peers, who choose them as leaders due to disabilities that represent innocence or moral purity. The others instinctually rally around them protectively and look to them as a sort of divine goodness. Mother Abigail confirms this sentiment when she feels herself becoming power-hungry, and immediately condemns herself to death for her wicked impulses. While they survived the pandemic, they are still disabled, victims of circumstance, and the rest of their posse understands them to be natural emblems of goodness in contrast to Randall Flagg's domineering presence of evil and destruction.

King highlights Abigail's and Nick's disabilities even further through their interactions with his newly inaccessible, post-apocalyptic world. The two both gain superpower-like abilities as a result of engaging with their disabling world. Mother Abigail can suddenly control others' dreams, and Nick radiates a natural leadership ability and can also detect bombs (Lopez, 2020). This heightening of one ability at the expense of another is a common trope in horror called "supercripping," creating the "disabled hero" (Wendell, 1996, p. 251). To use Sami Schalk's definition, supercripping describes moments when a disabled person's newfound abilities or powers "operate in direct relationship with their disability" (Schalk, 2016, p. 81). As the shutting down of infrastructure makes Abigail even less mobile, and Nick loses his eye and injures his leg, they become superhuman in other areas as a sort of compensation. King doubles down on these characters as disabled caricatures by highlighting their struggles in a post-apocalyptic world and setting them apart from others as morally good and slightly superhuman. Readers are primed for disability panic, as the novel's representation of disability marks the protagonists as struggling but important, guiding the characters around them and informing the entire plot of the novel.

In this new, inaccessible world, disability panic begins when the characters start to believe disability is a worse outcome than death. This line of thinking is in large part a response to witnessing 99.4% of the world dying. Death has become a mundane, everyday experience, and most of the characters have lost their entire families or support networks. Dead bodies litter the streets and lose their shock value over time. In addition, the reality of the new world is frightening. The idea of dying could appear peaceful compared to the uncertainty and danger of the new world. The narrator at one point says of a member of the "good guys," Stu Redman, "[h]e was not crazy about the idea of dying, but the thought of having no more pain or worry was a great relief" (King, 1990, p. 370). The ableist conflation, or the idea that disability automatically equals pain and suffering, encourages this preference for death over disability (Reynolds, 2017, p. 150). The ableist conflation assumes that one can never grow accustomed to disability and that disabled lives cannot be valuable, enjoyable, or generative. After Nick is attacked and blinded in one eye, he reproduces this harmful perception to the reader: "Blind and deaf, he waited for what might happen next and reflected that if Ray Booth had gotten his other eye, all of life would be like this. If that had happened, he believed he would have shot himself in the head days ago and had done with it" (King, 1990, p. 414). Even though Nick has lived his entire life as deaf and mute, he is not immune to internalized ableism and feels that he would rather kill himself than learn to adjust to blindness. Disability panic in this novel in part stems from the ableist conflation: because the characters are numbed by overexposure to death and constantly in a state of fear for their safety and health, they equate death with peacefulness and conflate disability with pain and suffering to assume that a disabled life would not be worth living.

In the uncertain, post-virus landscape, the survivors' immediate fear of the flu often slips into disability panic, a fear of any and all conditions that signal disability. One woman, Fran, is pregnant and recognizes her condition as disabling in the new world. She purposely conceals her pregnancy from the others for fear that they will chastise or abandon her for being pregnant, which in this context represents a disabling condition that will inhibit her ability to travel and work. She becomes paranoid about any physical impairments, fearing that any perceived weaknesses in the new world could mean abandonment, suffering, or death. When a man

in her group, Mark, contracts appendicitis, Fran thinks, “[s]ickness was the thing they were all most afraid of,” yet she is not talking about the super flu anymore (King, 1990, p. 529). They know Mark does not have the super flu, so “sickness” here stands in for any illness or disabling condition. Her fear of sickness is a direct panic response to an inaccessible world. As the narrator explains, “[i]t made her feel ill to think about it. She could not remember when ... she had been so badly frightened. There’s no doctor in the house. How true it was. How horribly true ... somebody had forgotten the safety net” (King, 1990, p. 530). When she reaches a point of despair at Mark’s death after the group attempts an appendectomy, she wails, “[h]aving your appendix out is supposed to be nothing!” to which one of her peers replies, “[w]ell, maybe not in the old days, but it’s sure something now” (King, 1990, p. 539). By creating a world where contemporary medicine and accommodations to create disability access are scarce or nonexistent, King positions illness and disability as the ultimate threat, far surpassing the peaceful and now mundane reality of death.

One way that this fear of bodily harm can start to slip into disability panic is due to dramatic language used to describe the vague concepts of illness, suffering, and pain associated with disability. As Elizabeth Outka argues, “Illness and pain are often difficult to characterize – by which I mean both difficult to describe and difficult to turn into tangible characters” (Outka, 2019, p. 26). This very lack of easy characterization presents a creative challenge to authors. With no obvious or predetermined set of associations, writers can use a variety of metaphors to articulate the fear, pain, suffering, illness, degradation, and other negative results associated or sometimes conflated with illnesses or disabilities. Since illness and pain tend to evade easy characterization, their prescribed associations tend to invoke new linkages, many of which add a sense of doom to the already negative concept of disability. The intangibility of illness allows for dramatization once they are linked to negative metaphors with their own implications beyond those of illness.

Negative associations are often exacerbated further when the origin of the disability (in this case, a deadly virus) is unclear or mysterious. Susan Sontag argues, “[a]ny disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious” (Sontag, 1978, p. 6). King’s super flu is airborne and 99.4% fatal, making contagion invisible but nearly inevitable. Despite this inevitability, however, the characters of the novel blame others when they fall sick, assigning moral blame to those who pass on the virus. Campion, the low-level security guard working on a secret government project, especially receives blame for the pandemic, as he is the first person to escape the lab where the virus broke loose. Hap, Joe Bob, and Vic sit together at a gas station at the beginning of the novel right after the three are exposed to Campion and his infected family. The three each become paranoid when they start catching “colds,” and start to distrust both Campion and each other. Hap sneezes, and Joe Bob says, “[y]ou want to watch that,” when Vic interrupts: “[m]aybe it ain’t a cold.” In response, they all silently “turned to him. Vic looked frightened ... Hap looked at him, scared, and tried to remember what all his reasons had been ... Before that guy Campion had shown up, he had been fine. Just fine” (King, 1990, p. 26). Starkey, the commander in charge of the secret government project, also becomes enraged at Campion, framing him as the reason for the pandemic, even though Campion was a low-level official, and the virus was a product of a top-secret federal experiment he knew nothing about. Starkey thinks to himself, “[b]y the time someone decided the Shop ought to handle it, this happy asshole – this happy *diseased* asshole – had gotten to Texas, and when they finally caught him he wasn’t running anymore” (King, 1990, p. 32, emphasis in original). Starkey ignores the negligence of the federal government (a faceless entity) and pins the blame for the super flu’s spread on a terrified man who tried to escape. By calling Campion an asshole when he, too, was simply trying to save himself, Starkey creates an idea that Campion’s illness is both morally and physically contagious. A terrified man trying to escape the disease with his family is recharacterized as a “happy diseased asshole” in an attempt to assign responsibility. Since the virus has no clear progenitor, Campion becomes the scapegoat. Campion serves the others’ need for a concrete outlet through which to vent fear and frustration towards the more abstract concepts of government and illness.

Characterizing flu patients as victims also plays a role in generating disability panic. To situate those with an illness or disability as natural victims strengthens fear, disability becomes synonymous with an innocent, helpless, and totalizing identity. The idea of a victim also necessarily implies an aggressor, creating an unbalanced power dynamic between the disabled and the disabler. As Sontag (1978) argues, “[v]ictims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt” (p. 99).

Caricatures of disabled victims stand in relation to a guilty party, situating the virus as the assailant. In some cases, the reality of the disabling factor can even be overshadowed by the panic it produces. When talking about her own experience with cancer, Sontag (1978) laments that “the very reputation of this illness added to the suffering of those who have it” (p. 100). She even notes, “etymologically, patient means sufferer. It is not suffering as such that is most deeply feared but suffering that degrades” (Sontag, 1978, p. 125). The victim/assailant complex does the double work of exaggerating the victim’s suffering and degradation *and* the assailant’s power to victimize. The growing gulf of language that victimizes patients while aggrandizing an illness creates panic through its ability to characterize people by their disease and overstate the illness’s power.

3 Illness as Horror Antagonist

Throughout *The Stand*, especially before information about the super flu is widely known, King characterizes the virus as a dangerous entity, almost with its own agency and agenda for terrorizing victims. When Larry reaches New York towards the beginning of the novel, chaos has broken loose, but he does not yet know why. He succinctly states all that he knows: “All the stories were the same. Their friends and relatives were dead or dying” (King, 1990, p. 232). Without a cause for the mass deaths around him, he begins to imagine the ominous looming of illness and death as a monster. After he hears an anonymous voice across Central Park shouting, “Monsters coming now!” Larry begins dreaming about a physical monster chasing after him and causing the death and destruction around him. At one point, he is so distraught and anxious that he wakes up in the middle of the night in his hotel room, “convinced that the suite’s door, which he had triple-locked, would burst inward and that the monster-shouter would be there ... not a human being at all but a gigantic troll-thing with the head of a dog and saucer-sized fly eyes and champing teeth.” The next morning, he encounters the “monster-shouter” face-to-face, realizing “he was only a crazy old man” who “[ran] in terror” at the sight of Larry. Larry then admits that his “opinion of [the monster-shouter] had swung from extreme terror to utter boredom and mild annoyance” (King, 1990, p. 232). Larry’s fear of the unknown illness manifests as an imagined physical monster with the agency to chase and attack him, the victim. Larry’s experience echoes Sontag’s understanding of how perceptions of a disease can cause suffering. While Larry does not contract the super flu, he envisions the virus as a malicious attacker, himself as a helpless victim, and suffers terror and degradation that is completely independent of any symptomatic suffering the virus might cause.

In the context of both COVID-19 and King’s super flu, language positing illness as a foreign invasion similarly intensified a sense of disability panic. In the late nineteenth century, germ theory replaced miasma theory as the dominant model of contagion. Miasma theory assumed that air itself could turn noxious and spread diseases. Germ theory, however, discovered the existence of microorganisms that contained the disease and could spread to human bodies in several ways, especially through the air or contact with bodily fluids. Germ theory pinpointed illnesses within an external antagonist invading the home or body. While this understanding helped to externalize the concept of illness, it still did not render illness any more visible or tangible. Outka (2019) argues, “absent a tangible enemy, illness can also inspire a search for a scapegoat” (p. 27). She further explains that pandemic literature, especially about the Spanish Influenza, has historically caused readers to “envision a materialized enemy.” The Spanish Flu did not actually originate in Spain, however. As Ida Milne explains in her book on the flu and war in the early 1900s, the Spanish Influenza originated during the First World War, but its source was not initially known. Governments on both sides of the global conflict censored news outlets from reporting on influenza rates and deaths for fear that this would alert enemies to potential weaknesses. Spain, which was not involved in the war, freely reported its growing numbers. The blame for the “mystery disease” was simply attached to the only country that was talking about it (Milne, 2018, p. 1). During the height of the Spanish Flu epidemic, countries quickly adopted the idea that the flu was Spain’s fault, expanding the blame to foreign ethnic groups and immigrants more generally: “Crowded immigrant populations, Jews, and Germans were, in some places, blamed for the outbreak. The flu’s very nickname, the ‘Spanish Flu,’ potentially carried, in Britain and the United States, a sense of foreign taint” (Outka, 2019, p. 27).

The most recent example of this is, of course, the Trump-initiated American nicknaming of COVID-19 as the “China Virus.” Unlike the reporting issues that gave the Spanish Flu its misnomer, the World Health Organization did formally locate the origin of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China (CDC, 2023). However, characterizing the virus as the weapon of a foreign country reinforces “us vs. them” mindsets and transforms anxiety and hatred of a virus into anxiety and hatred of an entire country, nationality, or ethnicity. In an analysis of 12 different national polls, a group of researchers for *Health Affairs* tracked a stark increase in violent and hateful behavior towards the Asian American community after the emergence of COVID-19 was traced to a Chinese origin. The FBI alone “documented a 77 percent increase from 2019 to 2020 in hate crimes against Asian people living in the US” (Findling et al., 2022, para. 2). Foreign invasion metaphors help to make illness and disability a more concrete character. Instead of being angry towards an invisible, intangible concept, one can project anger onto a group of individuals.

In some cases, the idea of a foreign invader can be escalated until the illness is described with blatantly militaristic language. The mysteriousness of illness that Sontag identifies creates confusion. This confusion was especially pertinent when journalists were trying to write about the influenza outbreak of 1918 as the First World War was happening. Outka (2019) argues that this confusion “can lead to frantic attempts to identify other characters – enemies, scapegoats, and heroes – to combat the confusion ... It was hard, first, to characterize a familiar disease like influenza as the enemy it turned out to be. The war provided far more compelling enemies” (p. 27). When the virus first escapes, Starkey personifies the virus as a spying enemy. He still refers to it as “Blue,” its military code name. He also expresses anger towards the virus, not just for its deadliness, but for its initial presentation as a mild respiratory illness. He thinks, “Blue spread in such sneaky common-cold disguise” (King, 1990, p. 130). Describing the virus as purposely sneaky and capable of donning a disguise presents it as a covert agent of war rather than a microscopic pathogen. Later, when lonely New York City survivors Rita and Larry first meet, she speaks proudly of her late husband, likening his stroke to a heroic military death. “He died with his tie on. Do you think that could be our generation’s equivalent of that old saying about dying with your boots on? Harry Blakemoor died with his tie on. I like it” (King, 1990, p. 239). Rita attempts to create a more solid narrative to understand her husband’s death, rather than the “random unfairness” of a stroke or the super flu (Charon, 2008, quoted by Outka, 2019, p. 27). Throughout the novel, the characters continually personify the virus as an agent with its own will, a mighty foe that is more tangible and, therefore, less embarrassing to die from than an invisible, random illness. By assigning agency and intent to the virus, the characters in the novel try to make sense of the seemingly random loss and chaos around them.

4 Disability and Rebuilding

Disability panic is also exacerbated in the novel when the characters begin to consider disability as antithetical to successfully rebuilding society. In the horror genre, many authors rely on “a cultural association between disability and fear: the notion of the disabled person as a frightening or sinister figure, or of disability itself as fearful” (Cheyne, 2019, p. 33). I use the example of Nick’s fear of Tom Cullen, a man he finds on the highway who has a cognitive disability. In this case, Nick is not afraid of Tom, but of Tom’s disability as a hindrance to Nick’s plans. When Nick first meets Tom Cullen on the side of a highway during his cross-country trek, they struggle to understand each other due to Nick’s muteness and Tom’s illiteracy. This battle for mutual understanding turns into fear and resentment on Nick’s part. Nick is afraid that Tom’s disability will slow them down or put them in danger on their journey across the country and becomes angry at himself and Tom as a result. Nick thinks, “a deaf-mute and a man who was mentally retarded? Of what possible use could they be to each other? Here you got one guy who can’t talk and another guy who can’t think” (King, 1990, p. 407). While both men have survived the flu pandemic, King creates a scenario in which their disabilities and the anxieties that surround them heighten the danger. As Siebers (2008) explains in his theory of disability, “the ideology of ability makes us fear disability” (p. 9). Nick perceives Tom as dangerous and unproductive; even though he has found a strong, hardworking companion, the presence of another disabled character increases the situation’s

precariousness. This fear response to intellectual disability was present during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to comorbidities, structural vulnerabilities, and physician biases that understood people with intellectual disabilities (IDs) as having a lower quality of life or even being less deserving of life, those with IDs were at a higher risk of dying from COVID-19 than others (Chicoine et al., 2022, pp. 390–393). Just as those with IDs were sometimes overlooked by physicians during the pandemic to detrimental effect, Tom's disability is unrelated to the pandemic or his physical ability to work or travel with Nick, but the presence of a disability signals a fear response.

Disability panic that comes from understanding disability as both worse than death and hindering the goals of the emerging world reflects a startlingly eugenic line of thinking that is common in the horror genre. The post-Darwinian theory of degeneration cautions against modern advancements in medicine and accommodations that improve accessibility. The theory of degeneration states, "the effects of civilization, industrialization, and modernization might in fact be weakening so-called superior races and classes" (Smith, 2011, p. 7). In this framework, accessibility is discouraged as it allows for the survival and reproduction of those with disability or other "inferiorities." After the super flu, the world of *The Stand* is stripped of all the accessibilities and medicines of the modern world, leaving a primitive environment in which a Darwinian survival of the fittest scenario plays out. Chapter 38, for instance, is entirely dedicated to what King names the "second epidemic" (King, 1990, p. 350). This chapter is written as series of disconnected vignettes that all illustrate the tragic death of a person who is immune to the super flu but dies anyway through suicide or succumbing to an injury, all under the logic that these individuals were unfit for the bleak realities of the new world. The narrator even states, "in a strictly Darwinian sense, it was the final cut – the unkindest cut of all, some might have said" (King, 1990, p. 350). The first wave of the epidemic outright killed anyone who was genetically inferior and could not fight the super flu. The second wave of the epidemic killed other types of inferiors: those with any number of mental or physical disabilities that rendered a person unfit for the rough-and-tumble new world.

The eugenic process in *The Stand* reaches its climax as Tom Cullen, Mother Abigail, and Nick Andros all die during their fight to restore goodness to the world. Tom is slaughtered after he is sent to spy on the "bad guy" society forming in Las Vegas. Mother Abigail wanders off for spiritual healing after she feels that her work is done. Nick dies in a direct confrontation with the novel's antagonist, Randall Flagg, who hopes to remake society into an authoritarian nightmare. Nick's death is symbolic martyrdom, allowing the rest of the "good guys" to succeed and reestablish order at the cost of his personal sacrifice. Mother Abigail and Nick are both vulnerable, disabled, innocent protagonists who invoke sympathy from the reader, yet their status as disabled ultimately marks them as unfit for the new world. As Russell (1996) explains, "Nick Andros is the closest to Mother Abigail on a goodness scale ... If Mother Abigail dies after her job is finished, Nick dies as a martyr who inspires the others" (p. 70). The disabled, unfit characters must die so that their stronger, able-bodied counterparts may thrive.

5 Conclusion: King and COVID-19

Eerily, King's theoretical pandemic-induced ableism accurately predicted much of the discourse around ability sparked during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Forbes* writer Purlang (2022) argues that, beyond issues of institutionalization, care standards, poorly implemented COVID protocol, and unequal vaccine access, the very discourse of COVID became eugenic: "whatever current form of COVID is under discussion can be regarded as at least a little less worrying *because it mainly sickens and kills elderly, chronically ill, and disabled people*" (para. 8, emphasis in original). COVID restrictions were lifted based on the needs and risk factors for an ideal, able-bodied citizen that had access to vaccines and adequate healthcare. COVID panic dissipated only when it was no longer a threat to the able-bodied. Those with disabilities that made them more vulnerable to serious illness or death were sacrificed so the able majority could resume a sense of normalcy.

While the COVID-19 pandemic did not wipe out 99.4% of the world's population or completely reset the world order, the "survival of the fittest" language of *The Stand* may sound familiar. I turn to Melinda Hall, who

attempts to recuperate King's work as moving beyond a reduction of disability and identity (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 35). She argues that King does not perpetuate ableism himself, but uses his novels to point out the ableism already woven into our society and ways of thinking. For King, "the horror genre becomes a vehicle for encountering the normal as horrible in the very act of its exclusions" (Hall, 2016, para. 36). While I do not think Stephen King always approaches disability with understanding and respect in his writing, *The Stand* does mimic the ableism that already exists in American culture: think back to news reports of overflowing hospitals, and debates about who deserved the limited supply of ventilators – those at the highest risk of death, or those with the highest chance of survival? Medical providers were forced to make decisions about whose lives were most worth saving. Many factors that influenced these decisions like old age, ability, and assumed future quality of life were foreshadowed by character decisions and viewpoints expressed in *The Stand* decades ago. Some of the arguments in favor of loosening COVID restrictions revolved around a need to achieve herd immunity. The thought process went something like, *If the elderly or immunocompromised are going to die of COVID anyway, we're delaying the inevitable. I already had COVID – I shouldn't have to stay inside and stop living my life because of other people.* Able-bodied people were quickly pitted against those whose disabilities prevented the reconstruction of the world we missed. Disability came to signal stagnation or weakness in a country that was traumatized by COVID and, quite frankly, desperate to move on.

The dramatized ableism of *The Stand* is perhaps not quite as far from reality as we might believe or hope. As we reach a time when most COVID restrictions are lifted, vaccines are widely distributed, and infection and mortality rates are declining, it is easy to consider things "back to normal." However, I urge you to remember the disability panic that very recently gripped the world and so quickly turned people with different levels of health and ability against each other. Fear of a real, dangerous reality can quickly spiral into eugenic thinking, xenophobia, and resistance towards building a more accessible world. While *The Stand* is not an outright rallying cry for disability justice, King used a fictional scenario to identify what COVID later revealed to us in real life: the "horrible" hidden within the normal, just waiting for the next crisis.

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