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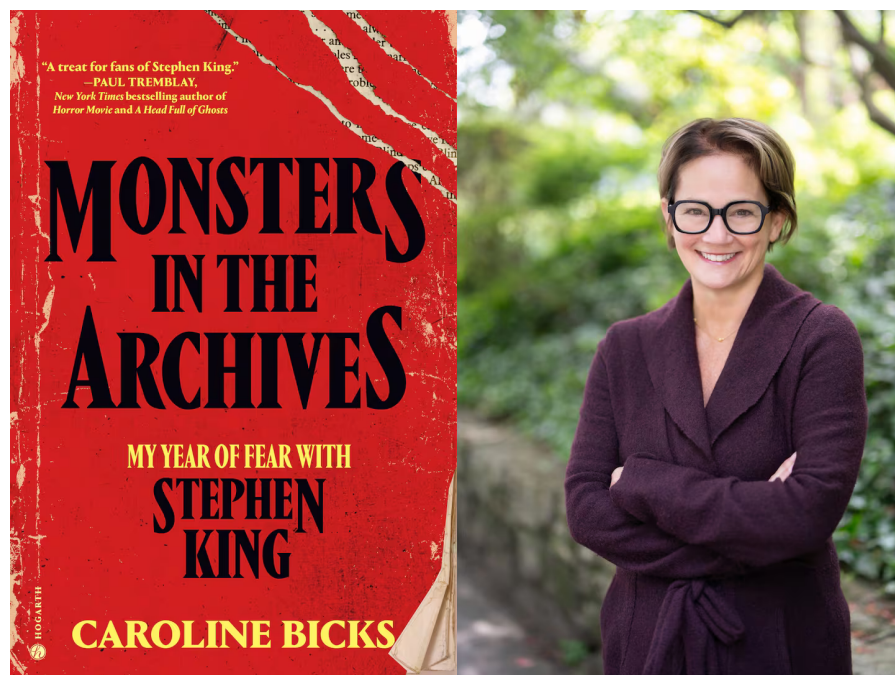


SIGN IN

A Shakespearean scholar spent a year in Stephen King's private archive. Now she's sharing what she found.

While researching her new book, "Monsters in the Archives," author Caroline Bicks found The Bard and King had more in common than one might think.

By **Kate Tuttle** Globe Correspondent, Updated April 28, 2026, 6:00 a.m.



Author and scholar Caroline Bicks (right), the University of Maine's inaugural Stephen E. King Chair in Literature; her new book, "Monsters in the Archives" peers into King's private archives. HOGARTH; LEAH RAMUGLIA

As a tenured professor at Boston College, Caroline Bicks already had her dream job. But when she heard that the University of Maine was seeking a Shakespearean scholar to serve as its inaugural Stephen E. King Chair in

Literature, Bicks jumped at the chance. After all, King was one of her first loves as a reader; at 12, she scared herself silly reading the short stories in [“Night Shift”](#) before bedtime. It was around the same time she had started reading Shakespeare, Bicks writes in [“Monsters in the Archives: My Year of Fear With Stephen King.”](#) and both writers “had enormous claims on my imaginative life.”

Despite being told not to expect any contact with the author, four years into the job, Bicks got a phone call from King himself, offering to meet. He spoke to her classes about his writing process, the importance of how words sound (read all your drafts aloud, he told them), and the absolute necessity of reading voraciously.

“It was magic,” Bicks writes of King’s visit.

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What followed was even more extraordinary: a sabbatical year in which Bicks became the first scholar to spend months in the King archive located in the family’s large Victorian Bangor home, poring over the drafts of five novels that had so terrified and thrilled her as a young teenager: [“Carrie,”](#) [“Salem’s Lot,”](#) [“The Shining,”](#) “Night Shift,” and [“Pet Sematary.”](#) Bicks’s new book blends literary scholarship and personal inquiry to explore the craft, artistry, and man behind the books that invented modern American horror writing.

How did it feel to be the first person to spend so much time in these archives?

It was such a gift. I think they trusted me because I made it really clear that this was a project for me about appreciating the language and how he crafted these iconic works. I stuck to the five that had scared me the most when I was a teenager. I didn’t want to write an academic book; I wanted this to be a book that could reach a lot of people. The overriding mystery for me that I wanted to get at was why was his language still sticking in my head 40 years after reading these stories and why did it continue to stick in people’s heads?

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It was wild to see the notes between King and his copy editor, especially when he’s defending the use of words that are non-

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standard or sort of strange. And he keeps saying, “look, this is just what sounds right here.”

As a Shakespearean, I was especially attuned to that. Shakespeare’s language is meant to be heard, right? And I thought, wow, there’s a whole layer here to his writing that I didn’t even anticipate that I would find, which was really intentional, careful thinking about the sounds of words.

As the process went on, you were also talking with King about what you found in the archives.

That was another layer of magic for me, getting to talk to the person whose works have touched me so much. I can’t talk to Shakespeare, but I can talk to Stephen King.

What was the most surprising thing you found in the archives?

Every time I went in there, there was another layer to discover about his writing process — whether it’s the alternative ending to “The Shining,” which was such a shock to me. That’s a draft that has never been talked about because nobody’s seen it.

When I discovered that first draft called “The Shine,” and saw that he had divided it into acts and scene numbers, as a Shakespearean, obviously I was like, “oh my ... is this a Shakespearean play?” And then when I found out that indeed he had been imagining a Shakespearean tragedy when he imagined “The Shining,” that was very profound for me.

Because King is so prolific and so popular, there’s sometimes a feeling that he can’t be producing work of high literary quality. Have you encountered people who are surprised you went from Shakespeare to King?

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If they’re thinking that, they haven’t said it to me! But what I would say back is, who do you think Shakespeare was writing for? He was writing for popular audiences. In so many ways, he and King are similar in that they weren’t necessarily taken seriously when they were writing.

I mean, I think King now is getting more of his due. He’s lived longer. He’s got a chance to see his legacy. He’s impacted every major horror writer now. And you can be a popular writer and a brilliant writer. Those aren’t mutually exclusive.

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Did you ever feel like you were kind of cheating on Shakespeare when you were spending so much time with King?

If anything, I was paying tribute to Shakespeare at the same time. King's clearly influenced by Shakespeare's stories. And another surprise for me was, in talking to him, but also seeing all these drafts, how he's so well-read. He knows everything, high, low, in-between. I was reading one of his earliest novels that he wrote when he was 18, "The Long Walk," which was turned into a movie this year. It's a brilliant novel and he's quoting Andrew Marvell, a 17th-century poet. So when I say he's the real deal, I mean that in so many ways. He is a true man of letters.

The kind of horror that King produces, a lot of it is about "not just thinking the unthinkable, but writing it down," as he writes in an introduction to "Pet Semetary." There's something magical about how he writes fear and dread in everyday settings: family, home, small towns.

There's absolutely something magical in that. One of the most moving parts of this book for me was when I re-read "Night Shift," which is that collection of short stories that has "The Boogeyman," which is like the ur-scary story for me. But I had forgotten or didn't even notice that that collection ends with a story that is loosely based on his own mother's death.

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King's own mother died when he was 26; he was by her bedside. And I was really moved by something that I came across that he wrote in 1991: "When my mother's dying was done, I wrote this story. The characters were my dolls. The story, while fictional, was my therapy. I have never enjoyed re-reading it but at times I do ... because my mother's death was also a part of my life. And, you know, writing it made me feel better. If there is a stronger moral justification for the reading and writing of stories, I have never found it."

In that vein of writing and reading as a way to heal, did you find that confronting King's work up close made you less fearful?

I feel less alone in my fear. The power of really great horror writing like his is that it taps into your humanity and it makes you feel again. And I feel like we've all been siloed off from our emotions over the last decade. Everything's just been getting harder and harder. I don't know if I became less of a scaredy cat, but I feel a little less lonely.

Interview was edited and condensed.

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Caroline Bicks will be in conversation with Elizabeth Graver for “Monsters in the Archives” April 30 at 7 p.m. at Brookline Booksmith 279 Harvard St.

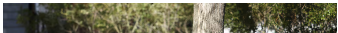
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