

# 11/22/1963

## By Stephen King

### (Discussion Questions)

#### About the Author:

Stephen King was born in Portland, Maine in 1947 and grew up in Durham, Maine. He attended the University of Maine at Orono, where he wrote a weekly column for the school newspaper, *The Maine Campus*. He was also active in student politics, serving as a member of the Student Senate, and supporting the anti-war movement. King graduated from the University of Maine at Orono in 1970, with a B.A. in English. He married Tabitha Spruce in 1971.

King sprang onto the literary scene with the publication of *Carrie* (Doubleday, 1974) which was later made into a movie. The success of *Carrie* allowed him to leave his high school teaching position and write full-time. Other bestselling novels followed including *The Shining*, *The Stand* and *The Dead Zone*.

Stephen King is known as a prolific writer of horror, suspense, science fiction and fantasy. His books have sold more than 350 million copies worldwide and many of his literature has been adapted to the screen and television. As of 2011, he had written and published 49 novels, including seven under the pen name Richard Bachman, five non-fiction books, and nine collections of short stories.

#### Book Summary:

*Winner, 2012 Thriller Award for Best Novel*

Dallas, 11/22/63: Three shots ring out. President John F. Kennedy is dead.

Life can turn on a dime—or stumble into the extraordinary, as it does for Jake Epping, a high school English teacher in a Maine town. While grading essays by his GED students, Jake reads a gruesome, enthralling piece penned by janitor Harry Dunning: fifty years ago, Harry somehow survived his father's sledgehammer slaughter of his entire family.

Jake is blown away...but an even more bizarre secret comes to light when Jake's friend Al, owner of the local diner, enlists Jake to take over the mission that has become his obsession—to prevent the Kennedy assassination. How? By stepping through a portal in the diner's storeroom, and into the era of Ike and Elvis, of big American cars, sock hops, and cigarette smoke... Finding himself in warmhearted Jolie, Texas, Jake begins a new life. But all turns in the road lead to a troubled loner named Lee Harvey Oswald. The course of history is about to be rewritten...and become heart-stoppingly suspenseful.

Here is a link You Tube Video Stephen King gave about 11/22/1963:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=5zZ2EnrxCsw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=5zZ2EnrxCsw)

## Discussion Questions:

1. What were your general impressions of the novel - did you enjoy it? Why or why not?
2. Have you read other books by this author?
  - a) If so, how does this compare to the author's other work?
  - b) If not, will you be reading other books by Stephen King?
3. In this novel, any time you travel back in time, it's to the exact same day and time. Thus, everything is reset with the future as a clean slate. What do you think about the time travel rules Stephen King has set up in this novel?
4. Stephen King was a teacher before he became a full-time writer. Do you think this influenced his characterization of Jake?
5. 11/22/63 is filled with historical research—it twins real events with events and characters from King's imagination. Did you learn anything surprising about the actual events leading up to the Kennedy assassination while reading this novel?
6. How would you describe Jake—what kind of man is he? Why does Jake agree to go back in time? At this stage in your own life, would you be willing to travel back to the past? What conditions would you require to do so?
7. Describe the kind of world that Jake of 2011 finds himself in when he arrives in 1958? What changes have 50 years made in our culture? What has not changed? Do you...would you...prefer to live in one era over the other?
8. What does Jake's first stop in Derry, Main, have to do with Dallas, Texas? Why does King inject this subplot into the main plot? What is the point he wants to make regarding the events in Derry? Is Derry necessary to the plot—or does it drag down the novel's pace?
9. In King's novel, Jake has knowledge of the future behavior of certain people. The janitor's father, who is destined to commit a horrific crime, is a jovial and well-liked man prior to that crime...but because of his foreknowledge, Jake sees only a horrible man. If you knew what someone would do in the future (good or bad), how might that change your interactions with them in the present? Would you feel compelled to try to change their behavior before it happened? Would you consider murder as an ethical choice to un-do something horrible?
10. Jake is the narrator and one of the main characters of the book. He is characterized as a good and decent man, someone who cares deeply for others. And yet, he is willing to commit murder and also make money by using his knowledge of the future. What do these things say about Jake's character? Did his willingness to stretch morality change how you felt about him? Do you think his "bad" acts make him less likable or trustworthy?
11. What about George's sports betting? Is it a fair way to make a living? It's certainly not honest, but then again...why not? Has Jake's moral compass shifted somehow, now that he's George Amberson?

12. One of the themes in *11/22/63* is about traveling back in time and un-doing the past to change the future. If you could go back to the past, what year would you want to visit and what historical event would you like to change? Based on the idea of the Butterfly Effect, what effects do you think those changes would have on the future?
13. Why does Sadie sense that there's something odd about George?
  - a) What are some of the ways that George's knowledge of the future betray him?
  - b) Why doesn't George tell Sadie who he is?
  - c) How would you handle such information if you were told that the person you loved came from the future?
14. What makes George (and the author) conclude that Oswald acted alone? What do you think? Have you done any prior reading that would make you agree or disagree that Oswald as the lone gunman?
15. *11/22/63* deals with traveling back more than 50 years into the past. But what about time travel into the future? If you could travel 50 years into the future, would you? If not, why not?
16. If things had been different and Sadie had been able to go to the future, how do you think she would have handled it?
17. How is the Yellow Card Man significant? What does he symbolize?
18. Jake encounters an eerie resistance to changing the past. He notes that "history repeats itself" and there are certain "harmonies" which weave through his life. At one point another character tells Jake "everything happens for a reason." When Jake returns to 2011 after saving Kennedy, he finds a world much different - and not better - than the world in which Kennedy was assassinated. What do you think - do things happen for a reason? Is there a harmony to our world, even when bad things happen?
19. Jake seems destined to be with Sadie, but he must make a decision at the end of the book which changes the course of their relationship. Did you like the ending? Could King have ended his book another way?
20. King paints a dire portrait of the world at large in the 50s and 60s—the geopolitics and existential dread of nuclear war. Yet in many ways, the centerpiece of the novel is George's relationship with Sadie—the detail of their small, beautiful romance. Why would King choose to juxtapose the grand scale with the quotidian of everyday life—and an intimate love story at that?
21. Do the events in the novel—transporting Jake from 2011 to 1958, moving him from Maine to Texas, and putting him near the Oswalds—seem at all plausible? Is King able to construct his plot in such a way that it makes sense? Or is the entire construct too preposterous to be enjoyable or taken seriously as literature?
22. If you could go back in time to one particular day in your life, what day would that be?

23. If you could bring one thing back from 1963, what would it be?
24. Stephen King has set his novel in a very detailed 1950s. Have you read any other time travel novels that truly have felt as if they were transporting you to that time or place with a similar level of detail? (Hint: Timeline)
25. In the afterword, Stephen King says that his son suggested the ending that was published. However, the original ending was very different. You can find the original, [unpublished ending](http://www.stephenking.com/other/112263/112263.html) (<http://www.stephenking.com/other/112263/112263.html>) on Stephen King's website.

## **A Conversation with Stephen King about 11/22/1963**

(from: <http://112263book.com/book-clubs/>)

### **Where were you when JFK was assassinated?**

When I got the news I was in a hearse. I was a tuition kid in a little town and there was no bus service to the high school where we went. So our parents clubbed together and paid a guy who had a converted hearse, which he turned into a kind of school bus, and we went back and forth in that.

We didn't get the news that Kennedy had been assassinated in school. But when we got into the hearse to go home, the driver, Mike, had the radio on for the first time in living memory. We heard that Kennedy had been killed. Mike, who was kind of silent, spoke up. "They'll catch the son of a bitch who did that and somebody will kill him." And that's exactly what happened.

### **When and why did you decide to write a novel about the Kennedy assassination?**

I tried to write this novel in 1973 when I was teaching high school. At that time it was called *Split Track* and I wrote fourteen single-spaced pages. Then I stopped. The research was daunting for someone who was working full-time at another job. Also, I understood I wasn't ready—the scope was too big for me at that time. I put the book aside and thought someday maybe I'd go back to it.

I'm glad that I didn't go forward with it then. In 1973 the wound was still too fresh. Now it's going on half a century since Kennedy was assassinated. I think that's about long enough. I recently saw Robert Redford's film *The Conspirator* about the Lincoln assassination. That was a hundred fifty years ago, but it's still kind of a shock to see the president of the United States assassinated by a lone gunman.

### **How does having a modern character going back in time affect the way you depict the 1950s, as opposed to simply setting a novel then?**

Jake Epping, my main character, makes several different trips into the past—every trip takes him back to two minutes before noon on September 19, 1958, and every trip is a complete reset. Little by little he gets used to it, but the contrast between his twenty-first-century sensibility and the world of that late fifties and early sixties is jarring in a way that *Mad Men* isn't. And sometimes it's pretty funny, as when Jake gets caught singing a risqué Rolling Stones tune and tries to convince his girlfriend that he heard a song containing the lyrics "she tried to take me upstairs for a ride" on the radio!

We're pretty well anchored in the present, the world that we live in as it is now—a world where there's four-dollar-a-gallon gasoline, where men and women have a certain equality, where there's an African American president, where we have computers. When you first go back to 1958, the trip is jarring. Yet the longer Jake stays, the more he feels at home in that particular world. Eventually, he doesn't want to leave it. He's gotten fond of his life at a time when you didn't have to take your shoes off at the airport.

The act of writing is almost an act of hypnosis. You can remember things that are not immediately accessible to the conscious mind. I felt extremely challenged as I began this book. Could I really capture the sense of what it was like to live between 1958 and 1963? But writing, like anything imaginative, is an act of faith. You have to believe that those details will be there when you need them.

The more I wrote about those years, the more I remembered. I used research when I fell short but it was amazing how much came back to me—the sound coins made when you dropped them into the machine when you got on the bus; the smell of movie theaters when everybody was smoking; the dances, the teenage slang, books that were current, and the importance of the library in research. There's a funny sequence where Jake needs to find somebody and is very frustrated; if he had his computer he could simply run a search engine and get what he needed in two or three minutes. There weren't Jetways then; you walked out of a terminal and mounted the steps to get on a TWA plane. Now, TWA doesn't exist anymore, but that's the airline carrier that brought Lee Harvey Oswald back to Texas.

**When researching the music of the day, do you listen to those songs as you write?**

I've always been a pop music fan. I have a good grasp of music between 1955 and now—it's just one of the places where my head feels at home. It's also one of the indicators of how American life changes and what's going on at any particular time.

One of the epigrams for 11/22/63 is "dancing is life," and dancing is something that has always interested me. It's symbolic in so many ways of the courting ritual. The changes in dancing mirror the changes in the way we court and love and live over the years. I went to YouTube to watch videos of dances from the fifties and the sixties and that was an interesting thing, to watch people do the Stroll and the Madison, the Lindy Hop, Hell's a Poppin'—fantastic stuff. I'm crazy about music and I'm crazy about dancing and some of that's in the book.

I listen to music all the time. Not when I'm composing fresh copy, but when I'm rewriting or editing, I've always got it on and it's always turned up really loud. I also have certain touchstone songs that I go back to—they drive my wife, my kids, my grandchildren crazy. I'm the sort of guy who will play Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" twenty-five times until I discover the song was written by Dolly Parton and then I listen to the Dolly Parton version forty times.

The music that made the biggest impression on me was rock 'n' roll from the early fifties. I tried to get into the book the excitement that the kids felt to hear someone like Jerry Louis, Chuck Berry, or Little Richard. The first time you heard Little Richard your life changed. The first time I heard Freddie Cannon do "Palisades Park" I thought to myself, "This makes me feel so happy to be alive."

**References:**

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