

The Long Walk as an Apocalyptic Horror Novel

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Abstract – apocalyptic horror is one of the genres of horror fiction. One cannot deny the significant position of Stephen King in the world of horror fiction. He has freely wandered in science, mystery, and fantasy and crime genre etc proving his mastery over the genres. King has dominated human mind and has allured film makers that many of his novels have been adopted for films. One of the powerful genres of popular fiction is apocalyptic horror novels. And king has proved his mastery over this genre too. However, he is not the first writer to deal with this kind of horror. Prior to him many writers effectively handled the genre. But the genre flourished during the 19th century. Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826) is often considered is the first work of modern apocalyptic fiction. The present paper discusses *The Long Walk* (1979) as an apocalyptic horror novel

The Long Walk published in 1979 is set in near future. In the words of Dr. S. T. Joshi the novel, 'speaks of a time when the national pastime has become a grueling . . . '(81). The novel is published under the pseudo name Richard Bachman. The story of the novel runs like this. One hundred teenage boys participate in the walking contest which is known as 'The Long Walk' or 'The Walk'. There is a condition of maintaining the speed of at least four miles per hour. The contestants have to fulfill this condition. If any contestant drops the speed for 30 seconds, he gets a warning. If the walker slows down after he gets three warnings, then he is ticketed. As the novel progresses, the term ticketed is

clarified. It is nothing but death offered by the soldiers riding in half-tracks along the road side. Thus, the slower contestants are shot dead by the soldiers. The soldiers use electronic equipment to decide walkers' speed. One of the characters named 'The Major encourages the boys and starts them on their way.

Actually, the walk begins at the Canada border in the morning on 1 May and is supposed to end down the east coast of United States unless the winner is declared. There are no facilities kept for the walkers such as steps, and rest periods. The established finish line is not at all there. The walker does not stop anywhere for any reason. The race ends only when the walker is left alive. The walkers, of course, can take help from any soldier. They also can bring anything they carry including food or clothing. The walkers are not allowed to take any help from bystanders. The winner receives 'The Prize' anything he wishes for the remaining life. The reality is that not a single past winner is survived. All the winners have died soon after the walk.

16 years old Raymond Davis Garraty is the protagonist of the novel. He is from the state of Maine. He had seen only one long walk in his life. Garraty meets many boys during the course of the walk, including Peter McVries, Hank Olson and several other boys. As they walk, they learn many things including one of the contestants Scramm is married. But when they realize that he will soon die. All the walkers agree to sue the prize to take of his pregnant widow-Cathy. After some days Garraty decides that he cannot walk further. He goes to tell Stebbins that he is about leave the contest. Garraty catches up the Stebbins to tell him this, but before he speaks anything, Stebbins collapses and dies. And Garraty is declared the winner.

Unnoticed of the celebrations going around him, Garraty keeps walking. He believes that the race is still going on. During the walk Garraty has hallucination of a dark figure. He thinks that he is another competent. In between Major comes to him. Declaring Garraty the winner, Major touches his shoulder. Garraty somehow manages to run.

The Long Walk is listed as a dystopian novel. The utopia or dystopia novels deal with social and political structure. Dystopian fiction depicts an utterly horrible or degraded society or political whereas utopian fiction depicts an ideal society. *The Long Walk* bears this characteristic of dystopian novel. King like Ramsey Campbell set his novel in the world of children. In Campbell's novels one finds that human antagonists try to finish off the lives of small children. It focused on the 'internal other'. In *The Long Walk* one can see the effective presentation of 'collective other' by King. It is the Government that plays with the life of children in the name of the game. This very idea generates horror. The care takers of people—government and soldiers- play with the lives of innocent children. Campbell blames society and social structures like families and schools that they ripe the real horror. Even Campbell blames police for the same. But King blames Government and military for being responsible to create real horrors. Soldiers represent the 'collective other'. There are many points in the novel where one can witness cruelty of soldiers. They never hesitate in killing innocent children. At one point in the novel Garraty does experience this:

It was somebody else who was being dragged off. The face was small and exhausted and very dead beneath the whipping mane of his hair (227).

And:

Two shots rang out suddenly. There was a cry, then a third shot. They looked and saw a boy in a blue sweater and dirty white clamdiggers lying face down in a puddle of water. One of his shoes had come off. Garraty saw he had been wearing white athletic socks. Hint 12 recommended them (56).

There is no monster or any traditional icons of horror involved in the novel. Yet up to some extent the novel creates horror among readers. The way King depicts killing of innocent children under the name of the competition mounds horror among readers. The depiction touches hearts of readers as the incidents are put before readers through the eyes of the protagonist.

Campbell and King seem to be worried about children and their upbringing. Both deal with the practice of the organized crime made against children. In *The Nameless* and *The Long Walk* same thing is depicted. Both novels arrest readers with fear as the purpose of the group or soldiers is not clarified. Readers come to know that the 'cult' works for its doctrine and the 'soldiers work for the order. Both cruelly play with the lives of the children. In *Pact of the Fathers* the purpose of the fathers is clarified. In short, *The Nameless* and *The Long Walk* the concealed purpose of the antagonists rouse horror.

The Long Walk is a gripping story. It also shows King's ability of dealing with mundane things and turning them into a source of horror. Boys slowly move into the world of death and madness. But all Americans watch, cheer and place bets on walkers. This is all puzzling for readers and whatever happens before the eyes of bystanders as well as characters is beyond their explanation. This inexplicability mounds horror both on characters and bystanders.

In *The Long Walk* there are many horrific episodes. They are not stereotype horror incidents. There are no images of blood-letting monsters. But King explores too much suffering of human mind and body. Olson's death is a fine example of it. King frequently uses the word horror as a touchstone in critical passages. Moreover, the writing style of King evokes horror.

The Long Walk like *The Nameless* seems to fail the atmosphere of the horror at the end of the novel. Even *The Stand* can be listed in the list of these novels. These novels have soft endings which fail to continue the atmosphere of horror that these novels built from the beginning. The end of these novels are puzzling one. At the end of the each novel the horror element either ran away or is left. In *The Nameless* the cult members flee. They are never caught by the authority. They are not at all punished. Same is the case of *The Stand* also. *The Long Walk* also ends in a puzzling manner. All these three novels have shallow endings. The end of the novel shows that horror cannot be conquered or defeated and it may turn in future as well. The novel carries tense atmosphere and horror from its beginning. This tense atmosphere grips readers. But it seems to be collapsed at the end of the novels. However, these three novels suggest that the evil human beings experience is more human than supernatural in origin. Despite the flaws, *The Long Walk* is a memorable novel as it depicts upcoming horror. Collings also mentions the same thing:

The Long Walk effects the America of the future economically, politically and socially; the walkers become sacrificial victims expended in order to ensure stability and prosperity. . . King manages to create empathy as well as sympathy for the pains Garraty and others endure during the long walk. He handles their immaturity and

emotional outbursts with restraint, while simultaneously instilling the readers with a sense of psychological horror as the walk progresses, as children in agony amid the cheers of great good crowd (32).

In short, King underlines the fact that human life is not safe in future. This very idea and the atmosphere he creates in the novel rouse endless horror.

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