

Adelaide: Stephen King's dirty little secret?

The Somerton Man has baffled Adelaide and beyond for seven decades with the cold case a possible influence of a book by one of the world's most popular writers.

By Michael X Savvas —

At Adelaide Writers' Week in 1984, special guest Salman Rushdie, more renowned for his writing than his diplomacy, described Adelaide as "the perfect setting for a Stephen King novel or horror film". Although King has not taken Rushdie's hint to set a book in Adelaide, King did transplant a 1948 Adelaide cold case, the Somerton Man, into Maine, United States, in his 2005 book, *The Colorado Kid*. Or did he? Apart from King's book, other intriguing bookish connections to the Somerton Man have emerged.

On the morning of December 1, 1948, a neatly dressed man (slacks, tie, white shirt etc.) was discovered dead, propped against the Somerton Beach seawall. He was aged around 40 to 45. A cigarette pack was found on him and food (possibly a pasty) was in his stomach. All signs of identification had been removed from his clothing and person. Many have theorised that the man was a Russian spy. Coroners at the time suspected he was poisoned. In King's *Colorado Kid*, a dead man wearing grey slacks and a white shirt is found in the morning on Hammock Beach, Maine, in 1980, propped against a litter basket. He was around 40, with a cigarette pack on him, food in his stomach and no ID. He had a coin with Cyrillic writing (possibly, inevitably Russian), and there was speculation about him having Cold War links. A further similarity between the cases is that the circumstances behind both deaths remain mysteries.

And yet, King describes a single-origin source for *The Colorado Kid*: Maine.

Paul Lawson knows something of producing Somerton Man likenesses. At almost 100, he is one of two people still alive who were involved in the original

investigation. In 1949, he assisted detectives by creating a plaster bust from the actual John Doe's upper body. He also witnessed the strange reaction of Jo Thomson, a nurse and person of interest, upon seeing the bust in the police's presence. Thomson originally denied knowing the Somerton Man, but in later life she admitted knowing his identity (without revealing details).

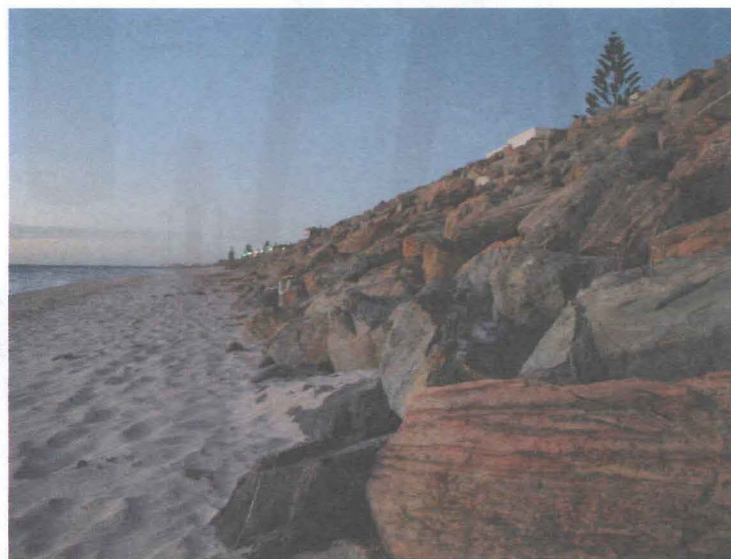
Lawson views the case depicted in *The Colorado Kid* as "very similar. It would almost appear that it was taken from the Somerton Man story. It is doubtful that a chap could write so much without knowing something of the original."

Adelaide University's Professor Derek Abbott, a leading Somerton Man investigator, says, "If King wrote his story in 2005, it's not impossible that he had read about the Somerton Man. There are a lot of similarities but marked differences. Caricatures have a lot of differences, but you can always recognise who they're based on, and *The Colorado Kid* does seem to be a caricature of the Somerton Man. I see all 'fake news' stories as caricatures. There are inaccuracies and distortions, but the story is true in some sense, even though the details might not be."

King claims that a newspaper feature article about a woman found dead on one of Maine's island beaches inspired his story. When referring to the woman in his (since lost) newspaper 'source', he says that a drawing of her bright red purse struck his eye. Yet King's focus on this vivid detail may actually be a literary technique, known as the trick of particularity. Crime writer Dorothy Sayers coined this term in 1947 to explain the importance of creating specific, memorable details to make fictional worlds seem even more real.



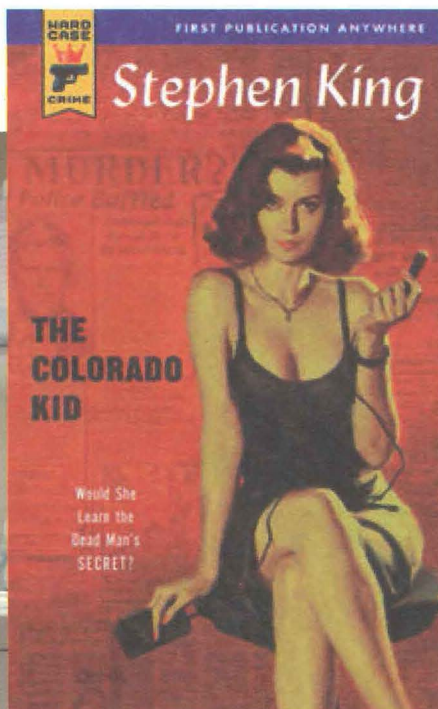
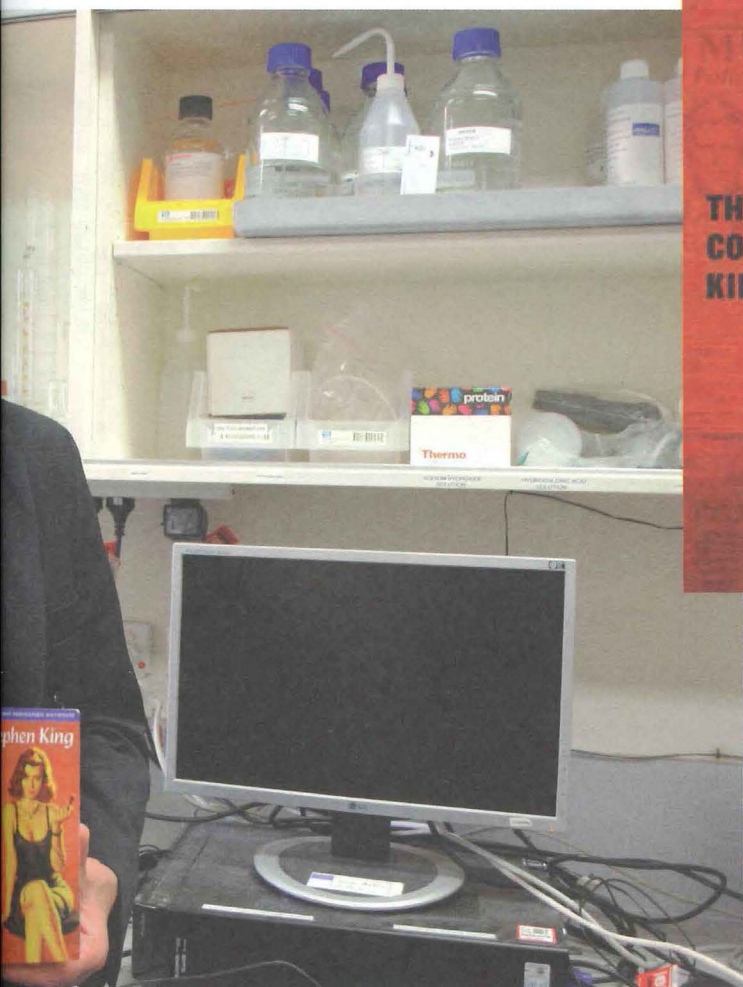
Prof. Derek Abbott



Also, King mentions his inspiration for *The Colorado Kid* in the book's afterword. Fiction readers expect writers to give them truths in a novel but to be truthful in forewords and afterwords. To break this agreement on such hallowed ground as an afterword is brilliant play and reflects King's message in *The Colorado Kid* that mystery can be more important than 'reality'. On this, *The Colorado Kid's* cover portrays a typically flame-haired femme fatale (more associated with 1940s film noir), yet no such character exists in the book. Also, the book is published by the Hard Case Crime Imprint, which is misleading. Although engaging, the novel has about as much hard-boiled menace as a Jaffa

being rolled down a cinema aisle.

Apart from the King thing, the Somerton Man has other literary connections. One of the case's main puzzles in the case is that the man had the words 'Tamam Shud' on a tightly rolled piece of paper inside his trousers fob pocket. The words, meaning 'finished the end' in Persian, were from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Almost eight months after the discovery of the body on the beach, the copy of the Rubaiyat that the words Tamam Shud were removed from was handed to police. On the back cover were was a series of pencilled letters resembling a code (never solved), which led to further ponderings about the Somerton



Man being a spy. Also on the cover was the phone number of Jo Thomson, the nurse who lived only a few minutes' walk from where the Somerton Man was discovered.

Abbott says that Thomson, who some believe was a spy herself, read philosophical authors such as Elias Canetti and Theodor Adorno, German-language writers who were politically to the left. Furthermore, Abbott learnt from Thomson's friends that her favourite book was *Howards End*. Says Abbott, "When I watched the film version, I fell from my seat. One

character has a child out of wedlock, and the child is around one when a man comes to the house. Another man shows his disapproval by taking a sword out of his sheath and deliberately hitting him with the flat of a sword. And the guy dies nevertheless. The autopsy report says the guy had a pre-existing weak heart and died from fright. The Somerton Man probably came to Jo's house to see his son. Possibly something accidental happened, and it's obvious the Somerton Man had a pre-existing condition. Did the man Jo eventually marry scare off the Somerton Man, who then died from an arrhythmia?"

Abbott's latest push to exhume the Somerton Man's body for DNA extraction is gaining momentum. DNA matching could reveal that Rachel Egan, Abbott's wife, is actually the Somerton Man's grand-daughter. If an exhumation allows the man a proper tombstone and gives relatives closure, it's worth supporting. It still won't answer what happened to our man, but it may partly sate our paradoxical impulses to both solve mysteries and to enjoy speculating on them without really wanting them cleared up.

Dr Michael X Savvas is an editor and senior lecturer

OUR NEW HOME
IN McLAREN VALE

MITOLO

TASTING ROOM | OPEN DAILY 10-5PM
RESTAURANT BOCCA DI LUPO
LUNCH THURS-MON | DINNER FRI-SAT
WEDDINGS & EVENTS IN THE ARBOR

141 McMURTRIE RD, McLAREN VALE SOUTH AUSTRALIA
BOOKINGS 8323 9304 | RESTAURANT@MITOLOWINES.COM.AU
WWW.MITOLOWINES.COM.AU

BOCCA di LUPO



<https://www.adelaidereview.com.au>

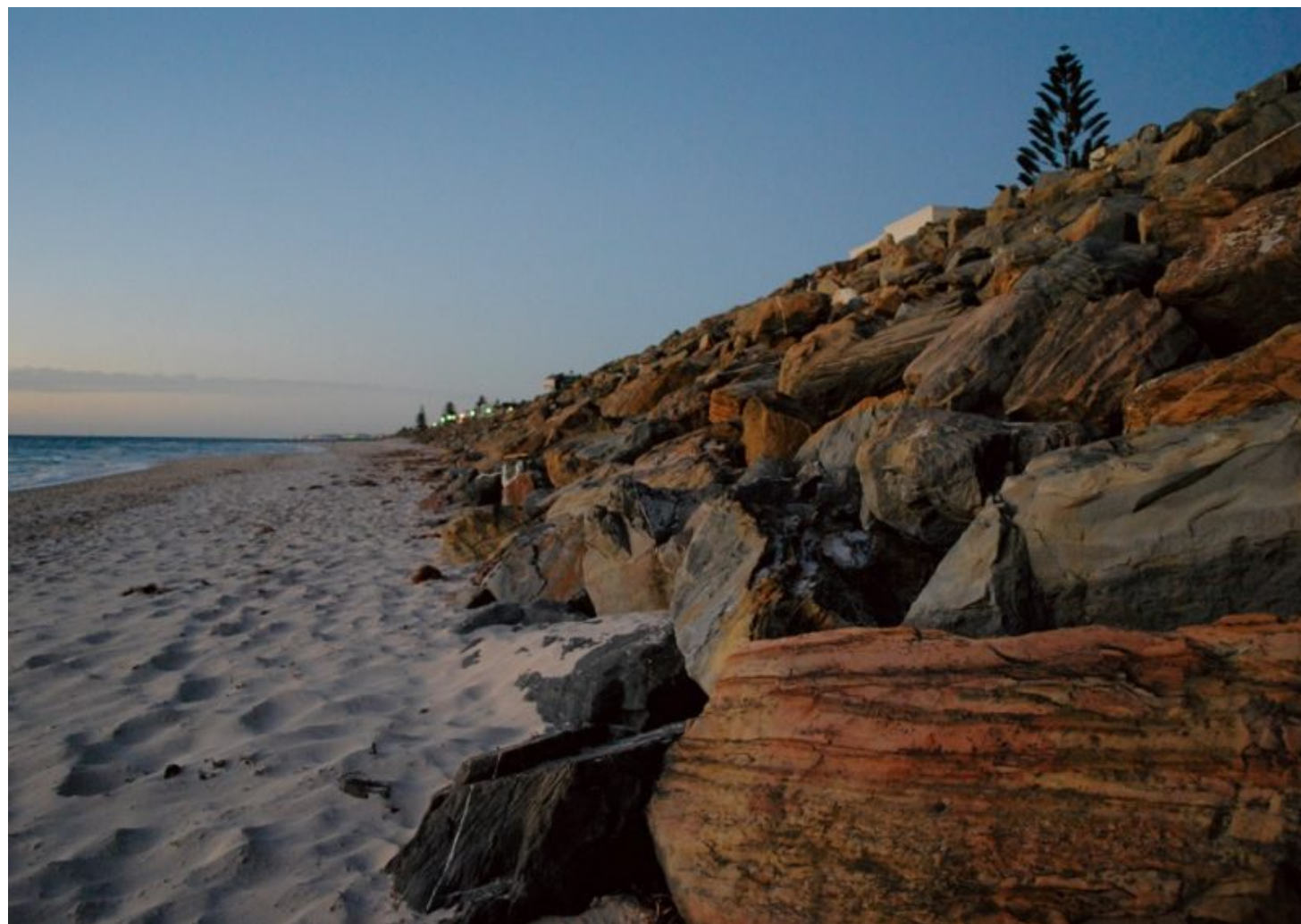
THE ADELAIDE
R E V I E W <https://www.adelaidereview.com.au>



BOOKS ([HTTPS://WWW.ADELAIDEREVIEW.COM.AU/CATEGORY/ARTS/BOOKS/](https://www.adelaidereview.com.au/category/arts/books/))

Adelaide and the Somerton Man: Stephen King's dirty little secret?

APRIL 23, 2018 by [MICHAEL X SAVVAS \(HTTPS://WWW.ADELAIDEREVIEW.COM.AU/WRITERS/MICHAEL-X-SAVVAS/\)](https://www.adelaidereview.com.au/writers/michael-x-savvas/)

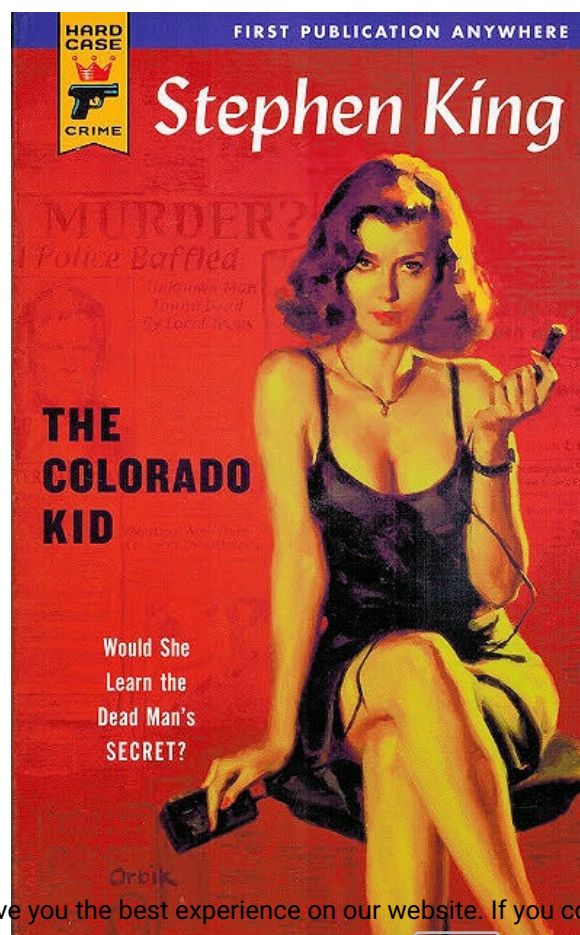


We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue to use this site we will assume that you are happy with it.

The Somerton Man has baffled Adelaide and beyond for seven decades with the cold case a possible influence of a book by one of the world's most popular writers.

At Adelaide Writers' Week in 1984, special guest Salman Rushdie, more renowned for his writing than his diplomacy, described Adelaide as "the perfect setting for a Stephen King novel or horror film". Although King has not taken Rushdie's hint to set a book in Adelaide, King did transplant a 1948 Adelaide cold case, the Somerton Man, into Maine, United States, in his 2005 book, *The Colorado Kid*. Or did he? Apart from King's book, other intriguing bookish connections to the Somerton Man have emerged.

On the morning of December 1, 1948, a neatly dressed man (slacks, tie, white shirt etc.) was discovered dead, propped against the Somerton Beach seawall. He was aged around 40 to 45. A cigarette pack was found on him and food (possibly a pasty) was in his stomach. All signs of identification had been removed from his clothing and person. Many have theorised that the man was a Russian spy. Coroners at the time suspected he was poisoned. In King's *Colorado Kid*, a dead man wearing grey slacks and a white shirt is found in the morning on Hammock Beach, Maine, in 1980, propped against a litter basket. He was around 40, with a cigarette pack on him, food in his stomach and no ID. He had a coin with Cyrillic writing (possibly, inevitably Russian), and there was speculation about him having Cold War links. A further similarity between the cases is that the circumstances behind both deaths remain mysteries.



We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue to use this site we will assume that you are happy with it.

And yet, King describes a single-origin source for *The Colorado Kid*: Maine.

Paul Lawson knows something of producing Somerton Man likenesses. At almost 100, he is one of two people still alive who were involved in the original investigation. In 1949, he assisted detectives by creating a plaster bust from the actual John Doe's upper body. He also witnessed the strange reaction of Jo Thomson, a nurse and person of interest, upon seeing the bust in the police's presence. Thomson originally denied knowing the Somerton Man, but in later life she admitted knowing his identity (without revealing details).

Lawson views the case depicted in *The Colorado Kid* as "very similar. It would almost appear that it was taken from the Somerton Man story. It is doubtful that a chap could write so much without knowing something of the original."



Paul Lawson

Adelaide University's Professor Derek Abbott, a leading Somerton Man investigator, says, "If King wrote his story in 2005, it's not impossible that he had read about the Somerton Man. There are a lot of similarities but marked differences. Caricatures have a lot of differences, but you can always recognise who they're based on, and *The Colorado Kid* does seem to be a caricature of the Somerton Man. I see all 'fake news' stories as caricatures. There are inaccuracies and distortions, but the story is true in some sense, even though the details might provide."

OK

King claims that a newspaper feature article about a woman found dead on one of Maine's island beaches inspired his story. When referring to the woman in his (since lost) newspaper 'source', he says that a drawing of her bright red purse struck his eye. Yet King's focus on this vivid detail may actually be a literary technique, known as the trick of particularity. Crime writer Dorothy Sayers coined this term in 1947 to explain the importance of creating specific, memorable details to make fictional worlds seem even more real.

Also, King mentions his inspiration for *The Colorado Kid* in the book's afterword. Fiction readers expect writers to give them truths in a novel but to be truthful in forewords and afterwords. To break this agreement on such hallowed ground as an afterword is brilliant play and reflects King's message in *The Colorado Kid* that mystery can be more important than 'reality'. On this, *The Colorado Kid's* cover portrays a typically flame-haired femme fatale (more associated with 1940s film noir), yet no such character exists in the book. Also, the book is published by the Hard Case Crime Imprint, which is misleading. Although engaging, the novel has about as much hard-boiled menace as a Jaffa being rolled down a cinema aisle.

Apart from the King thing, the Somerton Man has other literary connections. One of the case's main puzzles in the case is that the man had the words 'Tamam Shud' on a tightly rolled piece of paper inside his trousers fob pocket. The words, meaning 'finished the end' in Persian, were from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Almost eight months after the discovery of the body on the beach, the copy of the Rubaiyat that the words Tamam Shud were removed from was handed to police. On the back cover were was a series of pencilled letters resembling a code (never solved), which led to further ponderings about the Somerton Man being a spy. Also on the cover was the phone number of Jo Thomson, the nurse who lived only a few minutes' walk from where the Somerton Man was discovered.



Professor Derek Abbott

Abbott says that Thomson, who some believe was a spy herself, read philosophical authors such as Elias Canetti and Theodor Adorno, German-language writers who were politically to the left. Furthermore, Abbott learnt from Thomson's friends that her favourite book was *Howards End*. Says Abbott, "When I watched the film version, I fell from my seat. One character has a child out of wedlock, and the child is around one when a man comes to the house. Another man shows his disapproval by taking a sword out of his sheath and deliberately hitting him with the flat of a sword. And the guy dies nevertheless. The autopsy report says the guy had a pre-existing weak heart and died from fright. The Somerton Man probably came to Jo's house to see his son. Possibly something accidental happened, and it's obvious the Somerton Man had a pre-existing condition. Did the man Jo eventually marry scare off the Somerton Man, who then died from an arrhythmia?"

Abbott's latest push to exhume the Somerton Man's body for DNA extraction is gaining momentum. DNA matching could reveal that Rachel Egan, Abbott's wife, is actually the Somerton Man's granddaughter. If an exhumation allows the man a proper tombstone and gives relatives closure, it's worth supporting. It still won't answer what happened to our man, but it may partly sate our paradoxical impulses to both solve mysteries and to enjoy speculating on them without really wanting them cleared up.

We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue to use this site we will assume

OK

Dr Michael X Savvas is an editor and senior lecturer that you are happy with it.

2 Comments

Sort by Oldest



Add a comment...

**Jill Chamberlain Cooke**

So, Jo Thomson is the grandmother of Prof Abbott's wife. That's what this article is stating. Right? If not, what's being insinuated is very confusing.

Like · Reply · 10w

**Charels Edwards**

Yes. A recent program on Radio National set out the relationship much more clearly.

Like · Reply · 1 · 9w

**Greg Marshall**

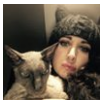
It's all clear to me. Great read.

Like · Reply · 1 · 9w · Edited

**Krista Nicholas**

Yes that is correct. Derek Abbott is the husband of Jo Thompson's granddaughter.

Like · Reply · 2w

**Margarita Zelenskaya**

Fantastic article! It was interesting to learn about literary connections. Very intriguing explanation.

Like · Reply · 1 · 9w

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

TAGS: [BOOKS \(HTTPS://WWW.ADELAIDEREVIEW.COM.AU/TAG/BOOKS/\)](https://www.adelaidereview.com.au/tag/books/), [SOMERTON MAN \(HTTPS://WWW.ADELAIDEREVIEW.COM.AU/TAG/SOMERTON-MAN/\)](https://www.adelaidereview.com.au/tag/somerton-man/), [STEPHEN KING \(HTTPS://WWW.ADELAIDEREVIEW.COM.AU/TAG/STEPHEN-KING/\)](https://www.adelaidereview.com.au/tag/stephen-king/)

Related

We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue to use this site we will assume that you are happy with it.

OK