



The Body

Stephen King



About the author

Stephen King is the highest-earning author in the world. Since selling his first book in 1973, he has published over thirty novels, of which there are more than 150 million copies in print. He earns \$2 million a month from book sales and film returns. All this was achieved from poor beginnings and King's is a success story that could itself have come from the pages of fiction.

King was born in 1947 in Portland, Maine, the American state where *The Body* is set. His father, a merchant seaman, deserted the family in 1950, and Stephen and his brother David were raised alone by their mother. Early on in life, King became addicted to radio horror tales and science fiction films. According to one report, he was 'oversized and ungainly' as a boy and 'predictably chosen last' in team games. At high school, he began to write stories, and at the University of Maine took creative writing courses.

After college, King worked in a launderette until he found a teaching position. From 1971 to 1973, while he taught at a secondary school in Hampden, Maine, he continued to write, often in the school's boiler room, with a child's desk against his knees. By then he was married, had a child and was weighed down with bills. But in 1973 he sold his first novel, *Carrie*. When his publishers, Doubleday, told him that paperback rights to the book had been sold for \$400,000 he was freed from teaching and able to devote himself full-time to writing.

Summary

The Body is quite different from most of Stephen King's other work, in that it is not a horror story, although it does contain one or two nasty moments. It was originally published as part of a collection of tales called *Different*

Seasons (1982), a book in which King wished to show the different side of his imagination.

The semi-autobiographical story concerns four young boys, growing up in a poorer area of 1960s Maine, in the northeast corner of the United States. The boys, Gordie Lachance, Vern Tessio, Chris Chambers and Teddy Duchamp, are all about to turn thirteen. When they hear about the death of another boy, who was walking in the forest miles from his home, they cannot resist the temptation to go and look for his body, though they know the journey will be long and dangerous. The adventure becomes a turning point in all their lives as they face the dangers and wonders of the forest and some of the bigger questions of their lives to come.

Full of the atmosphere of a teenage summer, *The Body* is both an adventure story and a portrait of four boys on the first step of their journey into adulthood.

Chapter 1: The narrator of the story (Gordie Lachance) remembers seeing a dead person when he was twelve years old. That memory stays with him today.

Chapter 2: Gordie (Gordon) is in a tree house with Teddy Duchamp and Chris Chambers on the last Friday of the summer holidays. Vern Tessio, the fourth member of their club, arrives. He has news about a body that has been found in the forest. He suggests they go see it.

Chapter 3: Gordie recalls hearing that a boy their age (Ray Brower) has been missing for three days. He had been picking wild fruit in the forest.

Chapter 4: We learn how Vern found out about the body. He overheard his older brother Billy (who is part of a gang) talking about the body to a tough guy named Charlie. The two had been out in the forest when they accidentally came across the body of a boy. They did not tell the police because they had driven out to that location in a stolen car.

Chapter 5: The boys think they will need to walk about thirty miles to find the body. When they find the body, they will report it to the police and become famous. They plan to leave that day (Friday) and camp overnight in the forest. They will tell their parents they are camping in Vern's back field.

Chapter 6: Gordie has no problem getting permission. His older brother died five months ago, and his parents do not pay much attention to him.



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Chapter 7: Gordie meets Chris. Chris shows Gordie that he is taking along his father's gun. Chris says his father is drunk and will not miss it.

Chapter 8: The boys start on their journey. They realise they will need water and food. They plan to go to the dump for water. Teddy tries to play a dangerous game by stepping in front of a train but Gordie stops him.

Chapter 9: The dump is closed and the boys climb the fence to get water. They worry about meeting Milo Pressman, the manager of the dump, and his dog, Chopper. (The dog has as a reputation for being fierce.) They flip a coin to decide who will leave to buy food. Gordie loses the toss.

Chapter 10: Gordie returns with food. He enters the dump and gets chased by Chopper and an angry Milo. Teddy teases Chopper. Milo insults Teddy by talking about Teddy's father's psychiatric problems.

Chapter 11: Chris tries to make Teddy feel better about Milo's comments. Vern says they are going to see a dead body, so maybe they should not have a good time.

Chapter 12: The boys cross a railway bridge that was not made for walking across. Vern and Gordie narrowly avoid getting hit by a train.

Chapter 13: Chris tells Gordie that changes are coming at school as Gordie starts taking courses that will prepare him for college while the others take shop courses. Chris talks about his family's bad reputation and about being betrayed by a teacher. He says that friends can drag a person down.

Chapter 14: The boys set up camp and Gordie tells a story. Gordie thinks about the body alone in the forest.

Chapter 15: The boys wake up to the sound of loud screaming. They are not sure what it is and take turns guarding the camp. Gordie dreams about Chris being dragged under the water by Vern and Teddy.

Chapter 16: The sun comes up and Gordie has a special moment when he sees a deer alongside the railway tracks. A train goes by and wakes up the other boys.

Chapter 17: The boys jump into a pool of water to cool off. It is full of leeches.

Chapter 18: The boys realise they still have a long way to go before they will get to the body.

Chapter 19: While the boys continue their journey, a gang of six (including Billy and Charlie who saw the body first) are travelling by car to that same location. They also plan to be heroes by discovering the body.

Chapter 20: The boys find the body in the midst of a terrible thunderstorm. It seems the boy was trying to get out of the way when a train hit him.

Chapter 21: Ace Merrill, the leader of the gang, and five others (including the brothers of Chris and Vern) arrive. They plan to take the body but the boys talk back. Chris pulls out the gun and threatens Ace.

Chapter 22: Vern and Teddy run off and leave Chris and Gordie to face the gang. Ace and the gang leave with the threat that they will get the four boys later.

Chapter 23: Chris decides they should leave the body in the forest. Gordie wonders about Ray Brower and the missing bucket of fruit.

Chapter 24: The boys get back to town early Sunday morning. Chris worries that Teddy and Vern will tell others but Gordie suggests this will not happen for a long time and that Teddy and Vern will almost forget everything that happened.

Chapter 25: Gordie sees his mother on Sunday morning. She only talks about missing his dead brother.

Chapter 26: The police get an anonymous call from Ace about the location of the body. Neither group gets credit for finding it. All four boys are beat up at different times but the story about their meeting the gang in the forest never gets out. Teddy and Vern find new friends.

Chapter 27: Gordie thinks about the deaths of his three friends. Vern is killed in a fire at a house party. Teddy drives drunk and dies in a car accident. Chris studies hard alongside Gordie and goes on to graduate school. Chris dies trying to break up a fight between two strangers. Meanwhile, Gordie becomes a writer and writes this book.

About the film

The Body was filmed in 1986 as *Stand By Me* with the late River Phoenix as Chris Chambers.

Background and themes

Many of the ingredients that now characterise what we think of as a Stephen King novel can be found in King's first novel *Carrie*: small-town New England, usually thought of as a quiet, conventional part of America, becomes the arena for a battle of good versus evil. Psychic powers or some supernatural creature – or both – cause a series of horrible events in what was an ordinary, sleepy town.



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In fact, New England – where some of the first European settlements in North America were established in the seventeenth century – is no stranger to the supernatural. When most of America was still the home of so-called Indian ‘savages’, the fragile colonial settlements lived in fear of the wildness beyond their fences. The forests became a symbol of evil and the unknown – the horror of untamed nature.

In 1960, the year in which *The Body* is set, the New England forests were still quite extensive. Since then, the city suburbs and roads have forced them back, but in 1960, according to King ‘it was still possible to walk into the woods and lose your direction and die there’.

The mysteries of these forests play a large part in *The Body*, since it is there that the four young heroes of the book decide to go to undertake their life-changing quest. As they travel further from civilisation, the boys have to rely on their own personal resources, and must grow up to face what comes. However, as well as terrors and the harsh realities of life, the wilderness reveals its secret wonders. Their journey to see another boy’s dead body becomes a journey out of innocence.

The Body is set at the beginning of a decade in which America, too, was shaken out of its innocence. 1960 was the year that John F Kennedy was elected president, on a wave of optimism. But only three years later, the youthful promise that he symbolised to so many was ended when he was shot. The shock of Kennedy’s assassination was tremendous. Many Americans were confused by the seeming irrationality of the event. From 1962 onwards, the American military increased its presence in Vietnam. But at the same time protests against the war grew in strength as America’s youth grew in a new self-confidence. Those who entered their teenage years in the sixties were entering an era when the culture and values of the young would be totally different from those of the parents.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 **Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of this book. *What can you see? What do you expect to see? What kind of feelings do you get from this picture?* Write the students’ ideas on a chart.

I see ...	I expect to see ...	I feel ...

- 2 Guess:** Have students look at the title of the story (*The Body*). Ask them to imagine what might happen in the story. Have them share their thoughts in a group. (Have them look at the extended name on the title page, *Fall from Innocence: The Body*. Does this give them further ideas?) Write down possible story ideas on the board.
- 3 Group work:** This story is about four twelve-year-old boys. In groups, have students think back to when they and their friends/classmates were twelve years old. *What words can you use to describe a twelve-year-old boy? What do twelve-year-old boys like? What do twelve-year-old boys hope for?* Have them write down their ideas in a chart.

I am a 12-year-old boy.		
I am ...	I like ...	I hope ...

Have students share their ideas in class. Do they see lots of differences among boys at this age? How might they compare the characteristics, interests and hopes of boys at this age to girls?

Introduction

Before reading

4 **Guess:** Stephen King is famous for writing horror stories. This story has elements of horror and is based on King’s childhood. Put students into groups. Have them discuss what things may have happened in King’s childhood that made him into a writer of horror stories. Then have students read the Introduction.

In groups, have them list important facts they have learned about King. Have them share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Chapters 1–6

Before reading

5 **Discuss:** The opening sentence of the book is: ‘The most important things are the hardest things to say.’ Is this the same for children and for adults? What kind of ‘important things’ might be hard for a twelve-year-old boy to talk about?

After reading

6 **Pair work:** In pairs, have students research one of the boys. Have them complete a chart outlining the boy’s relationship with his family. Have them consider how this might affect the boy’s behaviour during the story.

Name of boy	
Family members (and characteristics)	
Relationships (How does the family get along?)	
Thoughts about boy (relating to story)	



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As a class, complete a chart that outlines the main points of all four boys. Have pairs of students provide their ideas for each boy.

- 7 **Guess:** Think about the boys' plans to see the body. What problems could they have on this journey? Discuss ideas as a class. Write them down on a chart that can be referred to later.

Chapters 7–9

While reading

- 8 **Role play:** Read Chapter 7. Think about Chris's plan to bring along the gun on the journey. Get students to plan and dramatise a role play between Chris and Gordie.

Student A: You are Chris. Give reasons why you want to bring along the gun.

Student B: You are Gordie. Explain to Chris why it might not be a good idea. What could happen?

After reading

- 9 **Discuss:** Talk about the significance of 'that moment' from Chapter 8 on page 15 when Gordie is looking down the railway track with the town behind him. *What might Gordie be thinking about? Why will he never forget that moment?*

- 10 **Write and discuss:** As a class, discuss Teddy's moment on the railroad tracks and Gordie's response. *Do you remember a daring/exciting/scary experience from your childhood? (It could be something you experienced or observed.) What happened? How did you feel?*

Have students write a paragraph describing an event: *I'll always remember the time I ...*

Let students know they will have a short time to write their paragraph and they will be sharing it with others. Teachers may want to read aloud a paragraph that they have written as an example.

After writing, have students place their paragraphs on desks around the classroom. Have students go from desk to desk and read each other's work. They can write a short response at the end of the paragraph before moving onto the next. At the end, have students collect their paragraphs and read the comments. Have them share their thoughts and experiences with the class.

- 11 **Pair work:** Think about Gordie's statement on page 19: 'I never had any friends later like the ones I had when I was twelve. Did you?' Have students remember a special friend they had when they were young.

Write down a few things you remember about your friend. What did he or she look like? What are some characteristics about your friend? What did you like to do together? Are you still friends with this person today? Do you know what this friend is doing?

Have students complete a chart and talk about the friend with a partner.



Chapters 10–11

After reading

- 12 **Artwork:** Read the line that begins Chapter 10 on page 20. 'Words mean different things to different people.' Gordie describes what the word 'summer' means to him. Choose a word that has meaning to them, such as *school, family, my hometown, my grandma's house*. Have them write that word in the centre of a page and then draw pictures and/or write words or expressions that represent that word to them.

- 13 **Discuss:** At the end of Chapter 10 on page 25, Gordie says he looked at Milo Pressman 'and I suddenly felt sorry for him. He looked exactly like a schoolboy locked in the school playground by mistake ...' As a class, discuss what Gordie means by this comment. What kind of advice could they give Milo Pressman?

Chapters 12–14

After reading

- 14 **Write:** Imagine you are Gordie. You are writing in your diary that night about crossing the railway bridge. What would you write? Thinking back on it, how would you feel?

Dear Diary,

Today I ...

- 15 **Role play:** Think about Chris and his future studies. Have students imagine a conversation between Chris and a guidance counsellor (or teacher) who wants to help him plan his upcoming classes at school and his future career.

Student A: You are Chris. What concerns do you have? What do you see happening in your future? What do you want to happen?

Student B: You are a school guidance counsellor (or teacher). What do you know about Chris? What questions do you want to ask him? What kind of advice can you give him?

Write down your thoughts. Present your dialogue to the class.

Chapters 15–18

Before reading

- 16 **Guess:** The boys are sleeping in the dark forest. What could happen in the night? Have students share their ideas. Write their suggestions on the board.



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While reading

- 17 **Group work:** Read the first section of Chapter 15 to the line on page 41: 'It was the sort of scream you might expect from a woman who was dying in extreme pain and extreme fear.'
Discuss in groups: *What can be making this sound? What can the boys do? What will the boys do? What will happen?*
Share your ideas as a class.

After reading

- 18 **Check:** Compare your thoughts in activities 16 and 17 with what actually happened. Discuss the boys' response to the events the next morning.
- 19 **Discuss:** Why doesn't Gordie tell anyone about the deer? Why does he think it was the best part of the trip? Why does Gordie remember the deer at difficult times in his life?
- 20 **Read carefully:** In pairs, have students list what they have learned about leeches by reading Chapter 17. Have them share their facts together. How would they feel if they were the boys? Have any of them seen leeches?

Chapters 19–21

Before reading

- 21 **Check:** Think about what will happen from now until the end of the story. Have students check their guesses from activity 7 after reading Chapters 1–6. Have their ideas changed?

While reading

- 22 **Group work:** After reading Chapter 19, discuss Gordie's line from page 52: 'The big things in life should never be easy; they should be marked in some way as important'. What difficult events had turned this trip into 'a serious matter'. Make a list of the boys' difficulties.

After reading

- 23 **Guess:** On page 51, we learn that Chris, Vern and Teddy are going to die young. (Note that they don't die in this story.) Ask students in small groups to guess what might happen to each of these boys. Also have them make guesses about the types of jobs or schooling the boys might have in the next few years.
- 24 **Role play:** Put students into groups of four (with each taking the role of one of the boys). Ask them to imagine a conversation the young boys have six months later. Have them role play the conversation with each of them taking the role of one of the boys. Have them discuss how they honestly felt when they discovered the body.
Example:
Student A (as Gordie): So, Vern, what did you think when you first saw the body?
Student B (as Vern): At first, I felt excited! We walked a long way to find it ...

- 25 **Write:** On page 60, Gordie says he could have had a 'reasonable argument' with Ace but instead he said, 'Go to hell, Ace.' Imagine what Gordie could have said to Ace. Write your thoughts in a letter to Ace from Gordie.
Ace,
I met you in the forest last Saturday. I wanted to write you a letter to explain my feelings ...
- 26 **Check:** Look again at your guesses from activities 7 and 21. Check what you thought could happen in the story opposite what actually happened.

Chapters 22–27

While reading

- 27 **Guess:** Before reading Chapter 26, guess what will happen: to the body of Roy Brower; to the four boys; to the friendship of the four boys.

After reading

- 28 **Discuss:** Look again at the conversation between Gordie and Chris in Chapter 24 on pages 68–69. When the boys get back into town, Gordie would probably like to tell Chris that he loves him, but he cannot. Why? Is it because they are both boys? Would it be different for two boys today?
- 29 **Group work:** In groups, discuss the parents' response to the boy's late return on Sunday morning. Discuss the following: *What did the parents of each of the boys say or do (if anything) about their late return? How do you think the boys would feel about their response? How would you feel if you were the boys?*
- 30 **Check:** Look at your guesses from activity 23. Did any of the students guess correctly? Was there anything in the story that could have helped them guess what happened?

Extra activities

- 31 **Discuss:** In groups, talk about the effects the adventure had on the boys' friendships. Do they think things would have been different between the boys later if the boys had not had this adventure together? What did they learn about each other on this journey?
- 32 **Pair work:** Have students return to the partner they worked with in activity 6. Have them look at their original chart and check the thoughts they had about the boy they researched. Were they surprised by the boy's actions in the story or did they predict them? As a class, have students share their ideas about all the boys.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.