

Teacher's notes

The Breathing Method

by Ira Levin



SUMMARY

T Stephen King, the world's highest earning author, published *The Breathing Method* in 1982 as part of a collection of stories called *Different Seasons*. The collection was intended to show more subtle sides of the author's creativity than he had so far shown in his horror writing. However, *The Breathing Method* is still as terrifying as most of King's other work.

The Breathing Method is interesting for being a story told within a story. The background narrative begins in New York City in the 1970s. David Adley, an older man who has worked in the same law firm for many years, pays his weekly visit to his club. This is a strange, old-fashioned gentleman's club, where the members often tell each other stories. Particularly frightening tales are told on the Thursday night before Christmas — the traditional season of ghost and horror stories.

The Breathing Method itself is the story that Adley hears on this particular night. It is a bizarre tale, told by a doctor. It is about the time in 1935 that an unmarried pregnant woman went to see him, and how he taught her his new 'breathing method' to use during labour — with unforeseen and terrifying results.

ABOUT STEPHEN KING

Stephen King was born in Maine, in the north-eastern United States, in 1947. His father left the family a few years later. Donald King, a vacuum cleaner salesman, went out to buy a packet of cigarettes when King was two and never returned.

Stephen and his brother, David, were raised by their mother. But King's father was also a strong influence on the writer. He left boxes and boxes of stories. He had sent stories to *Argosy* and *Blue Book* — cult magazines at the time. A lot of them were science fiction and horror stories, recalls King.

As a child, Stephen loved tales of science fiction and horror. He began writing his own unusual fiction while he was still in high school and published his first story, 'I Was a Teenage Graverobber', in an amateur magazine.

He went on to the University of Maine and began selling stories at college. He didn't make enough money from his writing to support himself and a young family until the

publication of his first novel, *Carrie*, in 1973. He sold the paperback rights to this now famous book for \$400,000. He has since published more than thirty best sellers.

In some ways, King's life has strangely shadowed his fiction. Like his author hero, Paul Sheldon, in *Misery*, his fame has brought him danger. He has received threatening letters from disturbed 'fans' and his own house has been attacked. In June 1999 he was involved in an incident with uncanny links to *The Breathing Method*: he suffered a near fatal road accident. He was hit by a van while out walking near his home in Maine, USA, and spent many months in recovery.

A number of King's stories have been made into films. They include *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *The Body* (a story from the same collection as *The Breathing Method* which was filmed as 'Stand By Me'), *Misery*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

There are several interesting themes in *The Breathing Method*. One is the art and origins of story-telling itself. *The Breathing Method* is a story told in a strange place. The timelessness and other-worldliness of David Adley's club creates an air of mystery that prepares the reader for the weird tale that Dr McCarron tells. The stories are told around the fireplace, and before each one is told, the teller throws a packet of powder into the fire which bursts into flames of unusual, and even unknown, colours. It seems that King is suggesting that stories such as he tells come from some very odd corners of the human mind, and of human experience.

A main theme of Dr McCarron's tale itself is the role of women in American society in the early part of the twentieth century. The story is related in an exclusive men's club, which women are not permitted to attend. It is very much a man's world, and quite representative of mainstream US society during the story's 1930s setting. At that time, American women had only just been given the vote (in 1920) and there were still major limits on women's participation in the workplace. A woman's place was still considered to be in the home.

As for sex and childbirth outside marriage, attitudes

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were still very conservative in the 1930s compared to our own age. It was considered disgraceful, especially for a woman of the educated classes, to be pregnant out of wedlock. (Even in 1969, at the height of the Western 'sexual revolution' a survey showed that sixty-eight per cent of Americans believed that sex outside marriage was wrong.) Thus, Sandra Stansfield's courage and honesty, and her pride in her pregnancy, would have been remarkable for her time.

Dr McCarron's 'breathing method' is also based on fact. In 1933 a British obstetrician, Grantly Dick-Read, wrote a book entitled *Natural Childbirth*. The book presented his theory that excessive pain in labour is a result of muscular tension arising from fear of giving birth. He felt that pregnant women should be taught how to breathe and relax during labour. The idea that women could, and should, have more control over childbirth was revolutionary. The Lamaze method, one of the more popular methods of childbirth preparation, was introduced by Fernand Lamaze, a French doctor, to reduce the pain and tension of labour. One of the main exercises alternates deep chest breathing with quick shallow breathing, exactly like that taught by Dr McCarron to his mysterious, and single, patient.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Ask students to look at the cover of the book. What city is pictured on the front cover? What do they know about New York? Ask students to look up horror in their dictionary. Then ask them to read the back cover describing Stephen King as 'the master of horror'.

Put students into small groups to discuss the following:

- Many of King's books have been made into films. Have you seen any of these: *Carrie*, *Misery*, *The Shining*? How would you describe them?
- What do you think makes a good horror story?

ACTIVITIES WHILE READING THE BOOK

Chapter 1

Put students into groups. Ask each person to tell a ghost story to the rest of the group. Groups then choose the story they liked best and retell that one to the whole class. (A variation on this is, after the stories have been told to the class, to have students go on to write their stories

down, in groups. After groups have the first few lines down on paper, the teacher collects each story and gives it to a different group to continue. Three or four 'swaps' should be enough. Then give each story back to the original group for corrections. Tell the students that they have to listen carefully to each of the stories as they are being told.)

Chapter 2

- Put students into pairs and ask them to make a list of ways that western society's view of women has changed since the 1930s.
- Ask the pairs to join another pair (pyramid discussion), compare their lists and add anything that is on the other pair's list, but not on theirs.
- Put two headings on the board: 'Positive changes +' and 'Negative changes -'.

Ask students what changes they have listed. Ask them to tell you which heading to write them under.

Chapter 3

Put students into pairs. Ask them to make a list of three questions that they would like to ask Stevens. When they have finished their lists, ask them to exchange lists with another group and write answers to the other group's questions.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Put students into groups. Ask them to work together to write notes for a different ending for the story. (These should be brief summaries, not long and detailed.) When they have finished, ask them to describe their endings to the whole class. Ask the class to vote for the ending they like best. (Note: Groups cannot vote for their own story.)

Glossary

It will be useful if your students know these new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapter 1

- author** (n) the writer of a book, report, etc
billiards (n) a game played on a cloth covered table in which balls are hit with a long stick (a cue)
drown (v) to die from being under water for too long
Martini (n) an alcoholic drink
overcoat (n) a long thick coat worn over other clothes in cold weather
publisher (n) a person or company whose business is to arrange the writing, printing and sale of books, etc
suspect (v) to think that something is probably true or likely
tale (n) a story

Chapter 2

- delivery room** (n) a room in a hospital where babies are born
pregnant (adj) having an unborn baby growing inside your body
roar (n) a deep loud noise made by an animal such as a lion
statue (n) an image of a person or animal in stone or metal
vitamin (n) a natural substance found in food that is necessary for good health
womb (n) the part of a woman's body where her baby grows before it is born



Student's activities

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Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

- 1 Read the Introduction. Who says the words 'I have a feeling, Dr. McCarron, sometimes quite a strong feeling, that something terrible is going to happen to me'?
- 2 Look at the picture on page vi. Where do you think this place is? Is it in a large or small town? In which country? What kind of place do you think this is? Who is the man standing at the top of the stairs? What time of year is it?
- 3 Look at the picture on page 5. This picture is a room inside the place on page vi. Look at the words above the fire. What do you think happens in this room? Do you think both men and women come here? Why do you think that?

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTER 1

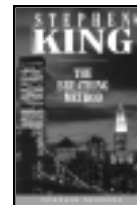
Pages 1-13

- 1 At what date and/or time do things happen in the story? Put the correct 'time words' against each sentence. Choose from the list below.

5.30 pm 23rd December 197- November 196-
8.10 pm 1911 8 o'clock 10th December 196-
Thursday 1935 1946 1951
the Thursday before Christmas

 - (a) _____: David Adley and his wife move into their apartment.
 - (b) _____: David Adley starts work at the law company.
 - (c) _____: his boss invites him to the club for the first time.
 - (d) _____: the date of Edward Gray Seville's first book.
 - (e) _____: the date of Edward Gray Seville's last book.
 - (f) _____: David goes to the club for the second time.
 - (g) _____: the best day for stories at the club.
 - (h) _____: the day when there is always a special 'tale for Christmas' at the club.
 - (i) _____: the date, at the start of the story, when David goes to the club to hear a special Christmas tale.
 - (j) _____: the time when he phones for a taxi.
 - (k) _____: the time when he wants the taxi to arrive.
 - (l) _____: the time when the taxi arrives.
- 2 Which of these sentences are true or false?
 - (a) David Adley and George Waterhouse are good friends.

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- (b) Emlyn McCarron invites David to play cards.
 - (c) David lived on a farm when he was a child.
 - (d) There are strange books on the shelves.
 - (e) David is afraid when he goes back to the club.
- 3 Describe the character of David Adley. Is he a brave, careless man, or a quiet, careful one? Use facts about him from pages 1-13 to explain your answer.
 - 4 Name five things that are strange about the club.
 - 5 What are the words above the fireplace in the club? What do you think they mean?

Pages 14-20

- 1 There are two stories which are told on these pages.
 - (a) From the events below, which are from Peter Andrews's story, and which are from Gerard Tozeman's story? (b) Put the events from each story in order.
 - (i) He was responsible for thousands of his soldiers getting killed.
 - (ii) Now the map he had pointed at had become part of his face.
 - (iii) He called out in the night 'His head! His head is still speaking in the ground!'
 - (iv) The man began to laugh, then scream.
 - (v) The plan would only result in even more soldiers being killed.
 - (vi) He said 'I've shot it and pushed my knife into it, and I can't kill it'.
 - (vii) An American General called Carruthers was thought to be mad.
 - (viii) He said 'I must talk to Joe. There's something in the back of my car'.
 - (ix) A bomb fell, and killed Carruthers.
 - (x) After hearing the story, David dreamt about it for weeks.
 - (xi) Carruthers was pointing to a map, explaining another mad plan.
 - (xii) A man came in. His shirt was covered with blood.
- 2 Tell each of the stories again. Finish them properly and explain everything that is not explained in the book. Think of a title for each story.
- 3 John Hanrahan's wife receives a lot of money from the club. How does she receive so much, do you think? (Think about how many 'members' there usually are at the club.) Why do you think the club members want to give her money?

CHAPTER 2

Pages 20-30

- 1 What is important about these dates in the story?
 - (a) 20 March 1900 (b) 1926 (c) 1929 (d) April 1935



Student's activities

- Work in pairs. Act out this conversation between Mrs Davidson, Dr McCarron's nurse, and Miss Stansfield.
Student A: You are Mrs Davidson. You do not have a good opinion of Miss Stansfield. You are cold to her, then she wants to pay all her bills. Your opinion changes.
Student B: You are Miss Stansfield. You know what Mrs Davidson thinks of you. You want to pay all your bills. Tell her what you want to do.
- Why does Miss Stansfield pay all her bills now?
- Why doesn't Dr McCarron ask Miss Stansfield all the questions he wants to know the answers to?

CHAPTER 2 Pages 30–39

- Dr McCarron describes women crying and screaming in American delivery rooms. (a) Why does he think they behaved like this? (b) Do you think having a baby is painful? Do you agree that it might be painful only because women believe it is?
- You are Dr McCarron, talking to a patient. You describe your 'Breathing Method' and how it works, and explain why you think it's a good method. Either write what you say, or act out the conversation with another student.
- If you were going to have a baby, would you like to use the Breathing Method instead of pain-killing drugs? Explain why/why not.
- You are the doctor who sent Dr McCarron's book back with a red line through the part about the Breathing Method. Write the note (about one paragraph) saying why you think the Breathing Method is 'rubbish'.
- Why does Dr McCarron think Miss Stansfield is the 'perfect person for the Breathing Method'?
- What do you think is going to happen to Miss Stansfield? Describe exactly what you think will happen.

CHAPTER 2 Pages 39–48

- In the story, what happens at these times on the evening before Christmas Day?
(a) 6:00
(b) 6:30
(c) 6:40
- Put these events in the correct order.
(a) He turns her body over and it's still breathing. —
(b) The taxi turns right round again and hits the bottom of the statue. —
(c) After an hour in the taxi, Miss Stansfield's contractions come more quickly. —
(d) Miss Stansfield's taxi comes across the Square towards the hospital building. —
(e) He saves the baby. —

- The taxi driver and the ambulance driver both try to stop, but can't. —
 - Miss Stansfield decides to leave early for the hospital. —
 - The taxi turns right round and starts travelling backwards. —
 - He realises that her head was cut off in the accident. —
 - At the same time, an ambulance comes from the side of the hospital. —
 - She calls a taxi, but it comes to Mrs Gibbs' house late. —
 - The ambulance comes off the statue and hits the taxi. —
 - At the same time, Miss Stansfield is thrown through the back, right-side window of the taxi. —
 - The ambulance turns round and hits Harriet White's statue. —
 - Miss Stansfield lies on her side. —
 - Dr McCarron accidentally kicks Miss Stansfield's head. —
 - The taxi driver sees a hole in the traffic, and goes through it fast. —
 - The taxi tears in two and its left side is badly damaged. —
- How do you feel about what happens to Sandra Stansfield? Do you think this is really the way the story should end? Why?/Why not?

Chapter 3

- How do you think Dr McCarron feels after telling his story? Why?
- You are Dr McCarron. The Harrisons, who took Miss Stansfield's baby, send you a card every Christmas. They have asked you to write a letter to Miss Stansfield's son on his 21st birthday. In this letter you must: (a) describe Miss Stansfield to her son, (b) explain who she was, and (c) in only a few words, say how the son was born - but you must hide the most horrible facts: you must not upset the son.
- What would Stevens say if David Adley asked: 'Where do all these things come from? ... And, Stevens - where are we AT THIS SECOND?' Imagine that he decides to tell David the truth.

Activities after reading the book

- Do you think 'The Breathing Method' is a good title for Dr McCarron's story? Why or why not?
- What happens the next time David Adley goes back to the club after hearing 'The Breathing Method'? Has anything changed? Do you think he tells a story?
- Did you enjoy the book? Why?/Why not?
- Have you had an experience that you can't explain, or visited a place that made you feel very strange? What was it like? Tell the story.

