

## “11/22/63” (Book Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

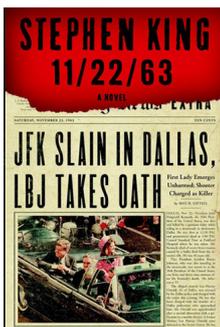
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The idea of scooting back in time to alter some catalytic historical tragedy is a standard sci-fi plot device, a wad of gum chewed over by dozens of different writers throughout the years. Arguably, none of these scribes packed a chomp quite as mighty as that of Stephen King, who now makes his own statement on the subgenre with his latest novel *11/22/63* (Scribner). Can King’s recent winning streak carry over and freshen up a truly tired old saw like the meddling, idealistic time traveler out to hijack the past?

*11/22/63* is the story of Jake Epping, yet another addition to King’s long line of appealing Everyman narrators. Jake is puttering through a modest teacher’s life in small-town Maine when he is granted access to an inexplicable portal, one that happens to vent into a sunny September afternoon in the year 1958. Jake is drawn into a scheme to take a kind of cosmic mulligan with President John F. Kennedy’s 1963 assassination, and stop Lee Harvey Oswald and any possible co-conspirators before the course of history is set on that bleak day in Dallas. Jake decides to first undertake a test run by attempting to prevent a heartbreaking murder in Derry—that doomed plague-ship of a town featured in King’s novels *IT*, *INSOMNIA* and others. Here, in the book’s most nervy and thrilling passages, Jake discovers at a painful cost that the fabric of time is very resistant to tearing.



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Despite the harsh lesson, Jake heads down to Texas, still resolved to reclaim the nation's destiny. His plan is to bide his time before making any intervention, in order to first determine if Oswald was indeed assisted in his murderous mission. The story of Jake-vs.-Oswald becomes intertwined with a domestic melodrama, as Jake settles into the comforts that surround his past persona. King casts a sweet nostalgia around Jake falling in love amidst an enticing and distracting backdrop of school plays and picnics—but all the while, the black cloud of Jake's dual life looms threateningly over his simple '60s idyll as the 22nd of November rolls ever closer.

With 11/22/63, King revisits the style of his short story “The Life and Death of Jack Hamilton,” fictionalizing true events and people while bolstering the writing with facts and substantial research. It's reminiscent of James Ellroy's dark and cynical “Underworld USA Trilogy,” a series for which King has publicly professed his admiration. The focus is on a wealth of detail surrounding Oswald's sad and twistedly quixotic quest; Oswald himself is sketched with a seething contemptuousness by King and represented as an angry, abusive dupe with severe mommy issues. King doesn't let the pseudo-reality interfere with some deliciously escalating suspense; 11/22/63 is masterfully taut as Jake battles Oswald, the calendar and one very defiant universe. King has a blast in agitating some of the expected implications of time travel: Can Jake minimize the damage to other factors in the past? Can he maintain his precarious cover story in such an alien era? Will his changes ultimately backfire and make things worse?

Witness how driven and economical King's style has become late in his career, and from an author once pummeled on a regular basis by critics for a, shall we say, forgiving attitude when editing his work. This 850-plus-page slab, along with King's recent and similarly bulky UNDER THE DOME, absolutely soars by. A necessary stretch of exposition forces the book to taxi around the runway during the early chapters, but once Jake hits the past with purpose, 11/22/63 is breathlessly aerodynamic. This is also one of King's least horrific tales in the traditional sense, safe to pass onto Grandma for Christmas. (King has promised his upcoming SHINING sequel DR. SLEEP will rectify this dry spell.)

As good this one is, some longtime King fans might take 11/22/63 as a milk run—entertaining, but never verging into the unpredictable. For those who worship the immensity of King's imagination and the exhilaratingly weird concoctions of which it is capable, 11/22/63 is a bit of stagnation. Fango readers should enjoy it for what it is, and meanwhile hope that King deigns to get a little freakier with us when DR. SLEEP arrives.



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