

Carrie

by Stephen King · Language: EN

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Overview

Carrie is Stephen King's first published novel, a horror story that blends epistolary fragments, news clippings, and third-person narration to tell the tale of Carrie White, a shy, awkward high school girl in the small town of Chamberlain, Maine. Bullied mercilessly by her classmates and oppressed by her fanatically religious mother, Margaret White, Carrie discovers she has telekinetic powers—the ability to move objects with her mind. The novel traces her awakening to this power, her brief, hopeful moment of acceptance at the prom, and the catastrophic revenge she unleashes when a cruel prank humiliates her in front of the entire school. The story is framed as a retrospective account, piecing together the events leading up to the infamous "Black Prom" and its devastating aftermath, which leaves the town in ruins and Carrie dead.

The novel is a tragedy as much as a horror story, exploring themes of bullying, religious fanaticism, female adolescence, and the explosive consequences of repressed rage. King uses a documentary-style structure, with excerpts from books, court testimony, and newspaper articles, to give the events a chilling realism and to examine how a community fails to see the warning signs. Carrie's story matters because it taps into universal fears of being an outsider and the desire for revenge, while also serving as a critique of the cruelty that can fester in small towns and high schools. The book launched King's career and remains a landmark in horror literature, influencing countless works that feature teenage protagonists with supernatural abilities and themes of social ostracism.

Key Takeaways

- Bullying and social ostracism can have devastating, explosive consequences, as seen in Carrie's violent retaliation at the prom.
- Religious fanaticism and parental abuse can warp a child's psyche and contribute to a tragic outcome.
- Repressed emotions, especially anger and shame, can build until they erupt in destructive ways.
- A community's indifference or complicity in cruelty can lead to disaster, as the town of Chamberlain ignores Carrie's suffering.
- Power, even supernatural power, cannot heal emotional wounds or provide the acceptance Carrie craves.

- The novel's documentary-style structure shows how a tragedy can be pieced together from multiple perspectives after the fact.
- Carrie's story is a cautionary tale about the dangers of humiliating someone who has nothing left to lose.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The First Stone

The novel opens with the aftermath of a catastrophic event in Chamberlain, Maine, and then flashes back to the gymnasium of Ewen High School. Carrie White, a plain and awkward girl, experiences her first period during a shower after gym class. Terrified and unaware of what is happening, she believes she is bleeding to death. Her classmates, led by the cruel Chris Hargensen, mock her and throw sanitary napkins and tampons at her. The gym teacher, Miss Desjardin, tries to stop them and takes Carrie to the office, but the humiliation is profound. This incident triggers Carrie's latent telekinetic powers, causing a light bulb to explode. The chapter establishes Carrie's isolation and the cruelty she faces daily, as well as the seeds of her rage.

Chapter 2: The Invitation

After the shower incident, Carrie is called to the principal's office. Principal Gray and Miss Desjardin discuss the bullying, and Carrie is given a week's detention. Chris Hargensen is suspended from the prom as a result, which fuels her desire for revenge. Meanwhile, Sue Snell, another girl involved in the incident, feels guilt and decides to help Carrie. Sue asks her boyfriend, Tommy Ross, to take Carrie to the prom instead of her. Tommy reluctantly agrees. Carrie, initially suspicious, begins to hope that she might have a normal high school experience. The chapter also introduces Carrie's home life, revealing her mother Margaret's extreme religious beliefs and her abusive treatment of Carrie, including locking her in a closet to pray.

Chapter 3: The Power

Carrie begins to practice and understand her telekinetic powers, which she calls her 'push.' She discovers she can move objects with her mind, and she practices in her room and in the woods. She also reflects on her mother's fanaticism and her own suppressed anger. The chapter includes excerpts from a fictional book, 'The Shadow of the White,' which suggests that Carrie's powers are linked to her repressed emotions and her mother's religious trauma. Carrie's relationship with her mother deteriorates further as Margaret becomes more paranoid and abusive, seeing Carrie's emerging womanhood as sinful. Carrie's powers grow stronger, and she begins to feel a sense of control and power that she has never known.

Chapter 4: The Prom

The night of the prom arrives. Tommy Ross picks up Carrie, who has made a dress for the occasion. At the prom, Carrie is initially nervous but begins to enjoy herself, especially when she

and Tommy are voted King and Queen of the Prom. Meanwhile, Chris Hargensen and her boyfriend Billy Nolan have rigged a bucket of pig's blood above the stage. As Carrie and Tommy stand on stage, Chris pulls the rope, drenching Carrie in blood. The crowd laughs, and Tommy is struck by the falling bucket and killed. Carrie, in a state of shock and rage, unleashes her telekinetic powers, causing chaos and destruction throughout the school, killing many students and teachers, and eventually destroying the school itself.

Chapter 5: The Wreckage

After the prom massacre, Carrie walks through the town, using her powers to cause fires and explosions, killing many people, including a gas station attendant and a group of townspeople who try to stop her. She makes her way to her home, where her mother is waiting. Margaret White, believing Carrie is possessed by the devil, stabs her in the back with a kitchen knife. Carrie, using her last strength, uses her powers to stop her mother's heart. Carrie then wanders through the town, dying from her wound, and eventually collapses in a parking lot, where she is found by Sue Snell. Sue, who had left the prom early, tries to comfort Carrie, but Carrie dies. The town is left in ruins, and the novel ends with the aftermath, including the deaths of Chris and Billy, who are killed when they crash their car, and the national response to the tragedy.

Chapter 6: The Aftermath

The final chapter is a collection of documents, including newspaper articles, letters, and excerpts from a book about the 'Carrie White Affair.' It describes the investigation into the events, the death toll, and the reactions of the public. Sue Snell writes a memoir about her experience, expressing her guilt and her belief that she could have done more to help Carrie. The chapter also reveals that the government is interested in studying telekinesis, and that other cases of psychic powers have been reported. The novel ends with a letter from a woman who claims to have telekinetic powers, suggesting that Carrie's story may not be unique. The final image is of a young girl, who, like Carrie, is beginning to show signs of the power, hinting that the cycle may repeat.

Themes

- Bullying and revenge
- Religious fanaticism
- Female adolescence and sexuality
- Power and powerlessness
- Social isolation
- Small-town hypocrisy

Notable Quotes

- "They're all going to laugh at you!" — Chris Hargensen shouts this at Carrie during the prom, just before the pig's blood falls, and it becomes a taunt that haunts Carrie.
- "I am not a monster. I am a girl." — Carrie says this to herself or to Sue near the end, reflecting her desire to be seen as human, not as a freak.
- "The world is a place where things happen, and you have to be careful." — A line from the novel's narration, reflecting the theme of vulnerability and the unpredictability of life.
- "She had never been to a dance before. She had never been anywhere before." — Narration describing Carrie's excitement and inexperience before the prom.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Carrie about?

Carrie is about a shy, bullied high school girl named Carrie White who discovers she has telekinetic powers. After a cruel prank at her senior prom, she uses her powers to wreak deadly revenge on her classmates and the town of Chamberlain, Maine. The novel explores themes of bullying, religious fanaticism, and the consequences of repression.

Is Carrie worth reading?

Yes. Carrie is a gripping and emotionally powerful horror novel that launched Stephen King's career. It's more than a simple scare story; it's a tragedy about a girl who is failed by everyone around her. The documentary-style narrative adds depth and realism, making it a compelling read for both horror fans and literary readers.

How does Carrie end?

Spoiler: Carrie kills many people at the prom and in the town, then goes home where her mother stabs her. Carrie uses her powers to stop her mother's heart. She then wanders into a parking lot, where Sue Snell finds her. Carrie dies, and the town is left in ruins. The novel ends with hints that another telekinetic child may exist.

Who should read Carrie?

Readers who enjoy horror with psychological depth, coming-of-age stories, and social commentary will appreciate Carrie. It's also a good starting point for those new to Stephen King, as it's relatively short and showcases his early style. Fans of stories about outsiders and revenge will find it compelling.

How long does it take to read Carrie?

Carrie is about 200 pages long, depending on the edition. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 4 to 5 hours to read. Most readers can finish it in a few sittings or a single weekend.