

On the Road and Going Nowhere Fast

THE SPEED QUEEN

By Stewart O'Nan
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By Jay A. Fernandez

THIS BOOK is like a joy ride, a spirited yet strangely dispassionate road trip along the contours of one woman's mind, lasting just long enough to feel the exhilaration of the open road, the surprises and freedom of zipping through an unfamiliar landscape, but not long enough to shake an ominous feeling of desperation or to need the rest stops. Which is good, because Marjorie Standiford doesn't let you take one. She doesn't have the time.

Marjorie is talking. At this stage, that's all she can do. She's on Oklahoma's death row, inching toward midnight on the day of her execution and speaking into a tape recorder, explaining how she became the Speed Queen and ended up where she is. She's doing this for two reasons. One, she has to combat the lies put forth in her accomplice and former lover Natalie's bestselling book on how they became the Sonic Killers. And, two, because the

rights to her story have been purchased by the only person who could possibly write the book that would gather a large enough audience to set the record straight—the unnamed, but unmistakable, Stephen King (unnamed due to a real-life rights squabble—the novel's original title was "Dear Stephen King").

Now while this plot device is unique in conception and provides some humor as Marjorie gives the Master of Horror tips on his writing, it is mostly a distraction. If the reader can ignore this peripheral conceit and simply tune in to Marjorie's voice, he or she will be better for it. Listening to her speak is like scanning the radio horizon, skipping from station to station, picking up pieces of confession, bitterness, memory; her voice will make or break it for the reader.

The Master of Horror has sent her 114 questions, and Marjorie—in her slightly amused, rambling, no-nonsense, girl-next-door lilt—is answering them. Sometimes detached, often hedging on her culpability, she wavers between "Why write it if you're going to get it wrong?" and "You can make up whatever story you want." She flits about, describing her childhood, the death of her pet dog, the regretful loss of her virginity, the numerous jobs and firings for theft, and a typical mother-daughter relationship defined by mutual incomprehension: "Every time I came home I thought things might be different. It only took a

few minutes to find out I was wrong." And when she meets Lamont, the handsome bad boy with a "car like an animal," she has found an apt companion for her reckless enthusiasms.

Weaving in and out of this historical traffic is her fascination with motion and the blur of landscape: "I've always moved a little faster than the rest of the world. . . I don't always stop to think, I just want to go." It takes speed to bring her and the lethargic greater world into sync, and even in prison the illusion of movement is a comfort. In her cell she imagines driving: "I open up my atlas and I've got the Roadrunner pegged at 110, headed for the Grand Canyon, the high desert empty on both sides, snow in the ditches. I'm cruising through Albuquerque, the neon of the motels shimmering off the hood. It's like they haven't caught me. No one knows where I am." In her mind she cruises the middle America of drive-in eateries and Tex-Mex food, of Monument Valley and the Cadillac Graveyard, of red dust and endless fences.

The only other thing that can alleviate her perpetual restlessness is drugs—more often than not speed, which Lamont supplies on demand. "I could feel it heating in my veins like neon. The rush came through me like wind from a semi. It was like slam-shifting gears. It was like being the hood ornament on a runaway truck." It is the Great Wide Open of landscape and anony- —Continued on page 5

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mous freedom, coupled with her growing drug addiction, that fuels her fate and eventually leads to the first of her confinements.

There, Natalie appears like Marjorie's long-lost soul sister. They share the same backgrounds, the same attitude, the same wicked desire for speed. And it's not long before they share the same bed. Marjorie quickly falls prey to Natalie's deceptive games and begins experimenting with her "whole backpack full of toys," but it becomes clear all too soon that Lamont also has a hand in Natalie's grab-bag. Things start to go south, or, rather, west, after their collective drug-dealing and tenuous moneymaking schemes take an ugly turn, causing Marjorie to comment, "Nothing's heavier than money."

On the run, it begins to dawn on Marjorie that her total embrace of that American ideal of unencumbered freedom and surrounding beauty can be a dangerous mirage. "The night hypnotizes you, the lines holding the car on the road, the reflectors tricking your eyes. Cattle trucks passed the other way, deadheading, lit up like UFOs . . . Around three in the morning, in the middle of the desert, a railroad gate swung down in front of us and a Sante Fe engine blared past, hauling a long line of gondola cars. An hour later I had to wait for it again. It was like we were going nowhere." It's as if there is no real escape from that corrupted modern

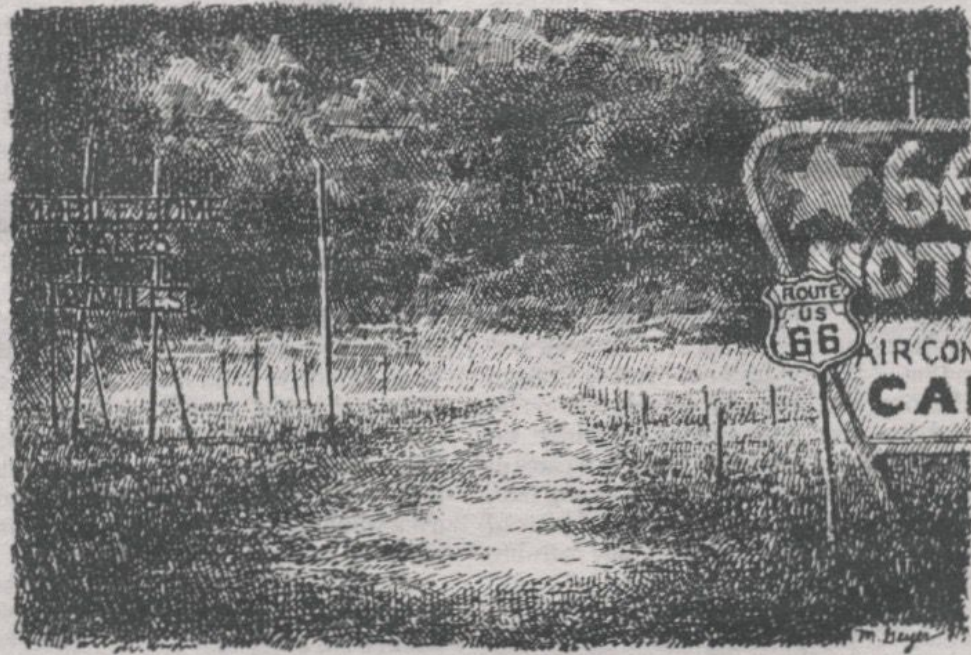


ILLUSTRATION BY M. GEYER FROM "THE SPEED QUEEN"

nightmare of Oprah overload and fast-food fanaticism, pop-culture paranoia and small-town suffocation. All the while, the growing tension created by Marjorie's distrust and jealousy of Natalie and Lamont's intimacy is as constant as the dead-end road their lives are barreling down.

control, even when his considerable writing talent outpaces the ambition and scope of his story, he remains at the front of the contemporary literary pack. And you just know, with that creative engine humming under the hood, that at any moment he could put his foot to the floor. ■

To be sure, it will end in a seemingly unavoidable explosion of violence.

Named one of America's Best Young Novelists by Granta in 1996 on the numerous strengths of his two previous novels, *Snow Angels* and, most notably, *The Names of the Dead*, O'Nan has switched gears with his current work. While *Names* is dense, lyrical and brooding, *The Speed Queen* is literature on fast forward: truncated, fragmented, edgy, reveling in its manic momentum. Rumor has it that he wrote it while living along Route 66, and, indeed, it reads like a feverish tour of the Midwestern psyche on, well, speed.

Unfortunately, O'Nan has taken Marjorie's "Just tell a good story" to heart and left it at that—its depth is negligible compared with the spiraling intensity of *The Names of the Dead*. Even if *The Speed Queen* represents O'Nan in good form—flawless storytelling, laser-like detail, trenchant commentary—in the end, though Marjorie is not forgettable, the novel itself probably is. Not to worry. The great thing about O'Nan is that even when he's in cruise