

Review: 'Billy Summers' by Stephen King

By Jeff Strickler
Star Tribune

Like Stephen King's other books, "Billy Summers" is full of monsters. But they're not the paranormal type usually associated with the horrormeister. These monsters are murderers, mobsters, rapists and thieves — in short, wrongdoers of every stripe.

Take the title character. Billy is a hit man who has been summoned to a small Southern town by a mob boss, Nick, with a job offer. The target is Joel Allen, a former mob henchman who has been arrested on multiple charges. The mob is worried that he'll try to trade his inside information about their organization for a lighter sentence.

It's a tricky assignment. Allen is in protective custody, so the only access Billy will have to him is when he's led up the steps of the courthouse for his arraignment. But Allen's bulldog of a

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By Stephen King
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lawyer is throwing one wrench after another into the legal process, making it impossible to tell if Billy is going to have to wait a few days, weeks or even months to get his shot.

In a small town, there's no way a stranger can lurk around the courthouse without raising curiosity. Billy's best approach is to become one of the townspeople and blend in to the point where — he hopes — he's no longer noticed.

His cover story is a handy one for himself and King. He claims to be an author struggling to concentrate on his novel. With his deadline approaching, his agent has told him to hole up in the small town until his manuscript is finished. So he takes an office in a building that overlooks the courthouse.

This works for Billy because it explains why he needs to remain secluded in privacy. When he gets bored playing games on his computer, he actually does start to write a book. And this part works for King because it gives him a chance to brood over the nature of creativity — "writing is a kind of war, one you fight with yourself" — while also providing the venue for a novel within a novel.

Adding to Billy's stress is his growing distrust of Nick. With the bulk of his fee coming after he makes the hit, Billy is certain that Nick wouldn't hesitate to betray him to avoid having to make the payment. "Sooner or later, bad people do bad things," Billy reasons.

Ironically, he never applies that logic to himself. That's because he doesn't think he's a bad person. On the contrary, he thinks he's providing a valuable service to society by eliminating people who deserve to be



Scribner/TNS

eliminated. "He basically sees himself as a garbage man with a gun," is how King describes him. Which puts the reader in a delicate position. King does such a good job of getting us to bond with Billy that we find ourselves hoping for a successful assassination.

King also deserves applause for resisting the urge to pander to readers' short attention spans. Thanks in large part to Hollywood, thriller fans these

days expect something — or someone — to be blown up as soon as the story starts. But King falls back on traditional pacing, taking time to define the characters and establish the situation before launching the action.

We're 150 pages into the novel, and Billy still hasn't even set eyes on Allen. But don't worry; there are still more than 300 pages to go, and King has plenty of mayhem on his mind.

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