

'Alternate Versions of the Same Reality'. Adapting *Under the Dome* as a SF TV Series.

Since United Artists released *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, USA, 1976), Stephen King's novels and short-stories have spawned around 60 adaptations for film and television, not including remakes and sequels. Some, such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, USA, 1994) have become classics of American cinema. Others, including *Pet Sematary* (Mary Lambert, USA, 1999) were box office hits while many, including King's own directorial effort *Maximum Overdrive* (Stephen King, USA, 1986) failed both critically and commercially. Indeed the overall impression of the adaptations across King's body of work is one of dissatisfaction, encapsulated in critic Alan Jones' reference to what he calls 'the Stephen King blandwagon'. (8). The trailer for *Overdrive* features King saying that, for once, 'I just wanted Stephen King done right,' and while the critical drubbing the film received indicates that he wasn't the man to achieve this, across forty years of adaptations spanning film and TV it seems 'doing Stephen King right' has remained a largely elusive goal.

The concept of 'doing Stephen King right' is not a simple one, and relates to arguments that have been circulating for many years in adaptation studies. For instance, one might ask if 'doing Stephen King right' means slavishly following the original narrative events of the novel or short story, or does it mean capturing some kind of 'essence' of the original work that exists beyond the narrative? Equally, if 'doing Stephen King right' is important, what exactly is the meaning of 'Stephen King' in that phrase? There are many potential avenues to follow in answering that question, but in this article I will focus upon the way in which King's writing presents a hybridisation of character drama and generic tropes that leads to what Michael Collings calls 'horror in disguise' (*Many Facets* 17). I will argue that it is this element of disguise that accounts at least in part for his extraordinary commercial success, allowing King to operate between niche literary genres of limited crossover appeal – principally horror, but also Science Fiction (SF) – and mainstream bestseller status.

For the most part the adaptations of his works have sought to occupy similar territory, the majority being clearly demarcated as horror but in such a

way as to seek broad appeal to mainstream audiences on either the big or small screen. Most of the films made from his works are big studio productions given wide releases in US cinemas, while on television the adaptations have tended to be marketed as 'Event TV', mainly mini-series broadcast during sweeps weeks on major networks, heavily promoted to achieve as big and wide an audience as possible. This has necessitated a negotiation between satisfying fans of horror while also attracting general viewers not so interested in the genre, and the results can be disappointing for genre fans. For example when Stanley Kubrick directed *The Shining* (USA, 1980) King stated that he 'set out to make a horror picture with no apparent understanding of the genre' (qtd. in Pezzotta 32) and thus, according to King, made a film that was not scary from a novel that was. Conversely when David Cronenberg made *The Dead Zone* (USA, 1983) his fans perceived it, as Chris Rodley has pointed out, 'suspiciously like a director's move towards the mainstream' (110). Reviewing the film, critic Phil Edwards complained that it lacked the 'shock value' expected by a Cronenberg project and looked like it 'could have been directed by anyone' (41). Thus, for a horror critic like Edwards, Cronenberg made a film that wasn't as challenging as his earlier works like *Shivers* (Canada, 1975) or *The Brood* (Canada, 1979) because it was based on a Stephen King book, and therefore mainstream.

On TV, after a relatively fallow period in the first decade of the 21st Century, the 2010s have seen a resurgence of interest in King, this time not in the realm of horror, but rather SF. The Syfy channel loosely based the premise of *Haven* (USA/Canada 2010-2015) on King's novel *The Colorado Kid* (1995), while in 2016 Hulu streamed an adaptation of King's time-travel conspiracy novel *11.22.63* (2011), which later aired on Fox in the UK. The most high profile SF King adaptation in this cycle, running for three seasons from 2013 to 2016, is the CBS network adaptation of his 2009 novel *Under the Dome*, which is the case study for this article. Although, as will be discussed, they are different in many ways, both the novel and series have as their basic premise an examination of the problems faced by the citizens of Chester's Mill, a small American town that is suddenly cut off from the world by a mysterious transparent dome that appears out of nowhere.

There are three key points of significance to *Under the Dome* (USA, 2013-2015) that differentiates it from many of the preceding King adaptations. The first is that *Under the Dome* is the first long-format serial drama to be officially drawn from King's work with his approval and involvement, which distinguishes it from both *Haven* and the earlier USA Network series based on King's 1979 novel *The Dead Zone* (USA/Canada 2002-2007). The second is that *Under the Dome* is SF rather than horror and the third is that it was part of a production and programming experiment by CBS to use SF to attract new audiences to the network. These elements place *Under the Dome* within the new post-1990s televisual landscape of genre-oriented cult TV and diversified programming and viewing habits outlined by, amongst others, Stacey Abbott (2010) and Jason Mittell (2015). Genres traditionally considered niche or cult, such as SF, fantasy and horror, have increasingly become, in Abbott's argument, 'a crucial market for the networks and studios ... to garner fan loyalty' (1) while Mittell's concept of complex serial dramas represent 'a new model of storytelling' on TV that is 'an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television' (17) by offering a new system of 'episodic forms under the influence of serial narration' (18). In other words, Mittell's new paradigm of post-1990s complex TV, for example SF or fantasy series such as *Battlestar Galactica* (USA, 2003-2009) or *Fringe* (USA, 2008-2013), is categorised by an interrelationship between single episode stories and longer season and even series arc narratives, and *Under the Dome* is an example of this contemporary form of serial TV. This article will argue that as the first official King-sanctioned adaptation within this new form of serial TV, a fact driven by economic imperatives of mainstream network SF TV, *Under the Dome* has been able to capture the essential hybridity of King's written work in an unprecedented way that means the series does, in fact 'do Stephen King right.'

Under the Dome was the first time that CBS broadcast a big budget drama series over the summer, outside of the standard September to May network drama season. CBS also gambled by commissioning the first season in its entirety, rather than waiting for a pilot before committing to more. They further broke with their tradition by making the show a limited season of 13 episodes, rather than their standard run of between 20 and 24. The reason for this unusual

launch date and length may lie in the fact that originally *Under the Dome* was to be produced not by CBS but by Showtime, a cable channel which had adopted the emerging 13 episode format as part of a more flexible approach to scheduling. However Showtime president David Nevins decided it was not quite the right fit, perhaps because it had not produced a SF show since *Dead Like Me* (USA, 2003-4), and seeing as Showtime is owned by CBS Corp, the project transferred to CBS (Hibberd). CBS President Nina Tassler picked up the series, opted to keep the 13 episode structure that showrunner Brian K. Vaughan and Showtime had developed, and decided to try it in the summer months.

Although risky, the strategy was partly offset by the fact that the show was executive produced by Steven Spielberg and his company Amblin Television, who in 2013 were enjoying success on TNT with the SF series *Falling Skies* (USA, 2011-2015). *Skies* follows the exploits of a group of militia in a post-apocalyptic Earth ravaged by an invading alien army. Alongside their daily struggles to survive, the series weaves a mystery narrative about why the aliens invaded and what they want with the children of Earth, whom they enslave using a biomechanical harness attached to their spines.

The result was that as a package, *Under the Dome* arrived with both genre credentials and mainstream crossover potential already in place, further aided by the presence of Vaughan, a comic book and TV writer who was one of the creative team behind ABC's runaway hit *Lost*. (USA, 2004-2010) An additional selling point was the fact that *Under the Dome* already had a huge potential audience by being based upon King's bestselling novel. Not only was King a demonstrable literary success, he also had a longstanding and mostly lucrative relationship with network TV, albeit primarily with ABC and mostly in the realm of horror rather than SF. In 1979 CBS had been responsible for the first TV adaptation of a King novel, *Salem's Lot* (USA), which was broadcast as a two part mini-series in November. Although *Salem's Lot* was well received and a ratings winner for CBS, the impetus for adapting King's work shifted to the theatrical arena. In part this was due to King's disillusionment with TV, as stated in his survey of horror, *Danse Macabre*, when he said 'the history of horror and fantasy on television is a short and tacky one' (*Danse Macabre* 239). After *Salem's Lot*, King was invited to become a kind of Rod Serling figure, hosting a show that each

week adapted of one of the short stories from his collection *Night Shift* (1978), but the deal fell through after a series of rows with Standards and Practices over what could be shown (Gagne 34). Frustrated, King walked away and vented his exasperation in print. The cinematic adaptations that followed were the kind of high-profile King-branded mainstream horror movies referred to above, starting with *Cujo* (Lewis Teague, USA) in August 1983 and ending with *Maximum Overdrive* in July 1986. *Overdrive's* critical and commercial failure brought to an end this cycle of films and led to a period in the late 1980s in which King's name no longer had the drawing power to secure large cinema audiences. Indeed the most successful film version of his work released post *Overdrive*, *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, USA, 1986), specifically did not reference King in the marketing, and also changed the title of the novella on which it was based, *The Body*.

However, in 1989 King's stock rose in Hollywood once more thanks to the success of his own scripted adaptation of *Pet Sematary*. Grossing nearly \$55m, the film demonstrated that his stories still held box office potential and shortly afterward Lorimar Telepictures and ABC announced that they were going into production on a mini-series version of King's longest novel to that point, *IT* (1986). When *IT* aired on ABC during the November sweeps in 1990 it was a huge success, the second part attracting nineteen million viewers (Von Doviak 235), and ABC then committed to a series of sweeps weeks King adaptations during the 1990s, including *The Tommyknockers* (USA, 1992), *The Stand* (USA, 1994), *The Langoliers* (USA, 1995), *The Shining* (USA, 1997) and the original screenplay *Storm of the Century* (USA, 1999). While *The Stand* was ABC's most successful mini-series since the US Civil War drama *North and South Book II* (USA, 1986), viewing figures for *The Shining* and *Storm of the Century* were disappointing (Von Doviak 251, 298) and in the new millennium the relationship with ABC declined as audiences dropped even further for the likes of *Rose Red* (USA, 2002), *Kingdom Hospital* (USA, 2004) and *Desperation* (USA, 2006).

In the midst of all this CBS had, in 1991, shown another Stephen King limited series over the summer, one that differed from those at ABC by being SF rather than horror. *Stephen King's Golden Years* (USA, 1991) was a seven-part original series, conceived and mostly written by King, which aired between July and August. It told the story of elderly janitor Harlan (Keith Szarabajka), who is

caught up in an experiment that starts to make him younger, after which he is pursued by The Shop, the shady government agency King had created for his 1980 novel *Firestarter*. *Golden Years* was cancelled after the first season owing to poor audience figures and eventually released on video in a shortened version with a hastily filmed new finale that replaced the original open ending.

Like *Under the Dome*, *Golden Years* aired in the summer because as a limited series it did not fit the September to May drama pattern of the network, and was also commissioned as a full season from the outset on the promise that King's name would be an audience draw, something *IT* had proven at ABC. In 2013, however, King's name was far less of an attraction to TV viewers than it had been in 1991. King's own status as America's bestselling author had been eclipsed, notably by James Patterson and John Grisham, and while his books still sold exceptionally well, he was not the literary phenomenon he had been in the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, ABC had abandoned its relationship with King after *Desperation* failed to find an audience and since 2006, aside from USA's *The Dead Zone* and Syfy's *Haven*, both very loosely drawn only from an original premise of King's and therefore unofficial, only one official King adaptation had appeared on TV, a version of his 2006 novel *Bag of Bones* (USA, 2011) on A&E.

Yet while King's name was undeniably less prominent on TV in 2013 than in 1991, the changes that had taken place between these years in the nature of serial drama meant *Golden Years* flopped instantly while *Under the Dome* briefly flourished. In 2013 CBS was still committed to its autumn to winter drama schedule, but thanks to the likes of Showtime and HBO, TV audiences were becoming more used to summer drama, as well as to shorter seasons of 13 and even 10 episodes, meaning that *Under the Dome* was not the anomaly that *Golden Years* had been. HBO premiered *Game of Thrones* (USA, 2011-) in April, and both *Sex and the City* (USA, 1998-2004) and *The Wire* (USA, 2002-2008) in June, while Showtime released *Weeds* (USA, 2005-2012) and *Californication* (USA, 2007-2014) in August. On the back of this break on cable from the traditional Fall to Spring programming schedule, TNT launched *Falling Skies* as a summer series in June 2011, garnering impressive audiences for a cable show. The connection via Amblin TV to this previous success was almost certainly a factor in CBS' decision

to emulate *Falling Skies* with *Under the Dome* and to once more attempt a Stephen King SF series in the summer.

The experiment with *Under the Dome* initially paid off. With audience figures of 13.5 million viewers the show, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, 'proved to all the broadcast networks that the summer could be a launch pad for big scripted drama' (O'Connell) leading CBS to follow *Under the Dome* with two other summer-launched 13 episode limited SF series, *Extant* (USA, 2014-2015) and *Zoo* (USA 2015-). *Extant*, also produced by Spielberg, involves a female astronaut who returns home after 13 months alone on a spaceship to find herself pregnant, while *Zoo* follows an investigation into a pandemic of unexplained violent animal attacks across the globe. This relationship between SF and off-season summer drama is significant. Lincoln Geraghty has stated that in recent years SF 'has been at the forefront of television's attempt to maintain a regular and devoted audience' (144) and these summer SF series, of which *Under the Dome* is a key example, represented a new strategy on behalf of CBS to package a programme for cult and mainstream viewers by co-opting a number of televisual trends. These series merge the 'quality' of the high production values found at HBO, and the mainstream character-driven narratives typical of standard 20-24 episode network programming, with the 'cult' of SF and also the 13 episode summer season counter-programming of channels like HBO and Showtime.

It is this summer broadcast and short season that distinguishes *Under the Dome* from its most obvious predecessor, *Lost*, although the parallels between them are evident. The last three seasons of *Lost* for instance also adopted the format of fewer episodes, being respectively, 14, 17 and 18 episodes which is not as short as *Under the Dome*, but noticeably less than the 20-plus episodes in seasons one to three. Additionally, as noted above, the showrunner for *Under the Dome* was Brian K. Vaughan, a writer on *Lost* from seasons three to five, and the lead director on seasons one and two of *Under the Dome* was Jack Bender, also one of the principal directors on *Lost*. Narratively both shows, like *Falling Skies*, revolve around a large group of characters facing an SF inflected mystery that confronts them with ever dwindling natural resources, and the uncovering of the mystery forms the background to the on-going character drama. In the case of

Lost this revolved around the nature of the island, with its scientific bunker, strange numbers, anachronistic polar bear and the creature known as 'smokezilla'. In *Under the Dome* the mystery is the nature of the dome itself and its relationship to a strange egg found in the woods of Chester's Mill. Abbott has argued that the labyrinthine obscurities of the meaning of the island in *Lost* was an approach 'usually discouraged by mainstream television executives as it is seen to be alienating for the casual viewer' and therefore made *Lost* 'ripe for the kind of attentive viewing and reviewing practices that are typical of the cult TV audience' (10). She argues, however, that *Lost* was an example of a televisual cult blockbuster, a hybrid that courted genre fans through an advance screening of the pilot at the San Diego Comic-Con in 2004, while reaching out to mainstream audiences through an unusual but highly successful campaign of cinema ads.

This is in keeping with Geraghty's contention that SF's place at the televisual vanguard takes the form of programs that 'either maintain a small but hardcore fanbase over several seasons or attract millions of casual viewers through hype and marketing in a relatively short period of one or two seasons' (144), but Abbott's suggestion is that through its marketing campaign *Lost* sought both audiences. This is also evident in the fact that the makers of *Lost* deliberately downplayed its SF genre affiliations and instead emphasised that the series was primarily about the characters, walking a line in which there was 'an allegiance between the show's mainstream appeal and its character-driven narrative, while the generic underpinnings are subsumed within the text so as to satisfy the cult TV audiences prepared to unlock those mysteries' (Abbott 17).

CBS' strategy with *Under the Dome* appears to similarly seek to attract both types of audiences and thus engage their own mainstream viewers whilst attracting cult audiences away from cable by emulating their programming format. Although driven by ratings, in the case of *Under the Dome* this interplay of character narrative and genre conventions also mirrors King's own writing, and as in the case of *Lost* as a cult blockbuster, commentators on King's work have argued that it is a hybridity of character and genre that is the reason for his mainstream popularity. Ben Indick suggests that 'the basic groundwork of [his] stories is their intense realism, rooted in genuine small towns as a rule, and quite average individuals, with all the familiar settings of their lives' (9) and argues

that only once this is established does King introduce the supernatural. Jonathan P. Davis comments that 'King writes about ordinary individuals with whom his readers can identify' (23) and for King, this focus on regular people has to do with the importance of character and identification. He argues, 'if ... the audience has come to like and understand – or even just to appreciate – the characters ... as real people ... blood can fly everywhere and the audience *cannot* remain unimpressed.' (*Danse Macabre* 186) Elsewhere Douglas Winter quotes King saying 'You've got to love the people ... because the more you love ... then that allows the horror to be possible ... without a concept of normality there is no horror.' (56). Even though King is considered a genre novelist, the importance of character and realism is therefore a key element of his popular appeal, as Michael Collings states; 'King's power depends on his ability to put ordinary people into extraordinary situations' and that 'the situations bring the readers into the text, while the realistically drawn characters keep the readers there.' (2006, 92).

Like *Lost*, *Under the Dome* emphasises character over mystery, although in the translation to television the series *Under the Dome* considerably increases the mystery element over the source material. King's novel is SF only through the premise of the dome's existence, and the attempt to uncover the reason why it is there forms only a slender strand within the narrative. In the book the dome is placed over Chester's Mill by a group of alien children called leatherheads, which is revealed through a vision to the town Doctor Rusty Everett as soon as he finds and touches the generator of the dome, an object the size of an Apple TV box. Running concurrent to this is the fact that the dome causes the children and some adults in Chester's Mill to have seizures during which they refer to 'pink stars falling in lines', to Halloween, and to visions of flames. Rusty surmises that in addition to emitting radiation, the generator box is 'broadcasting something else. Call it induced precognition' (King, *Under the Dome* 635), and so it transpires that the visions are not tied to the reason for the dome's existence, but are rather flashes of future events. The pink stars refer to a shower of meteors, the trails of which turn pink when viewed through the pollutants on the outside of the dome, and the flames and the Halloween references prefigure a final fire that kills most of the people in the town in late October. These visions are

enigmatic, but ultimately link to the future of the people of Chester's Mill, rather than to the origins of their entrapment.

The novel *Under the Dome* is therefore typical of King's work, in that it uses a genre premise – in this case SF rather than horror – to examine the actions of ordinary people thrust into an extraordinary situation by that premise. Traditionally those actions are polarised between good and evil people who respond either by helping or by hurting others. This is most evident in *The Stand* (1978) where the outbreak of Captain Tripps, the superflu virus that kills most of the world's population, leaves pockets of survivors who are either decent folk called by kindly Mother Abigail to come to Nebraska and then to Boulder, or those of questionable morals called by The Dark Man, Randall Flagg, to join him in Las Vegas.

In King's work therefore the genre premise, be it horror or SF, serves primarily to create a space in which the morality of the characters is questioned and their personality traits transformed into acts. In *Under the Dome* the SF dome plays little or no part in the ensuing events beyond cutting the town off from the rest of the world. What then transpires is driven mainly by the machinations of the town's corrupt second selectman, James 'Big Jim' Rennie, a thinly disguised avatar of former vice president Dick Cheney (Mulkerris). After the army attempt to blow up the dome with a missile, Jim instigates a riot at the Food City supermarket, then has the hero of the story, Dale 'Barbie' Barbara, arrested. At this point the good people of the town, those not under the sway of Big Jim, discover the generator of the dome, and rescue Barbie. Running alongside these events are Big Jim's attempts to take over the town by increasing the number of police officers and turning them into his own private militia, and also the efforts of others to expose the fact that Big Jim has been running a meth lab operation which has necessitated the theft and stockpiling of the town's supply of liquid petroleum. In the final act these narrative events come together as Big Jim's militia raid the meth lab, which is then blown up by the lab's cook. The explosion creates the foreseen conflagration inside the dome, which immolates almost all of the townsfolk and leaves behind a poisonous atmosphere in which the few survivors slowly die, until journalist Julia Shumway is able to reach out and persuade the leatherheads to lift the dome and let them live.

Under the Dome is therefore simultaneously a metaphor for a post 9/11 America in which a corrupt, frightened and evangelical leadership use a crisis to restrict civil liberties, and also a parable of global warming. As King himself points out (*Stephen King and Under the Dome*) the novel 'had such a powerful underpinning ... about what's happening with the environment and the depletion of resources, and the little town of Chester's Mill is a microcosm but we're all under the dome ... I can actually discuss these things in a small way... how this small group of people react to the depletion of resources.' Beneath the dome first heating oil, then food, then the air itself becomes scarce, owing to the scheming of corrupt officials. King describes Big Jim as 'my idea of the American despot,' (*Stephen King and Under the Dome*) and in the novel his militia is full of thugs, rapists and bullies and is fostered by a weak and inefficient group of leaders including police chief Pete Randolph and first selectman Andy Saunders. Ranged against them is a faction led by Shumway and Barbie, around whom gather citizens including Rusty Everett and his wife Linda - one of the town's more respectable police officers - and Joe, Norrie and Benny, three teenagers who find the dome's generator. These are King's good characters, ordinary people whose actions under the dome are selfless and brave.

This kind of moral polarisation is possible because the timescale of the novel *Under the Dome* is short. It is less than a week from the dome coming down to when it is lifted and so the characters have no time to change and develop. In contrast, when adapting the story for television the aim was to produce a scenario in which the time spent under the dome was potentially much longer. As King notes (*Stephen King and Under the Dome*) the idea behind the series was that the dome could be down for weeks, even months, because 'if people like the show it won't have to end after x number of pages. They can come back to Chester's Mill week after week.'

In order to do this, the show adds complexity to the characters and alters the concept of the dome itself. In terms of the characters, Barbie (Mike Vogel) for example still has a military background in the series, but is not a cook in the local diner. Instead he is a debt collector who kills Julia's (Rachelle Lefevre) husband before the dome comes down ("Pilot" 24 June 2013). Junior Rennie (Alexander Koch) is not the outright murderous psychopath that King envisages. He is

certainly a dangerous and troubled individual who kidnaps and imprisons Angie (Britt Robertson) ("Pilot"), but is also a confused young man under his father's shadow who is capable of great tenderness towards Angie, and actively seeks justice when she is murdered. Most complex of all is Big Jim (Dean Norris), who is far from being King's one-note corrupt, born-again, Humvee-driving, used-car-salesman Republican. Although he is more than capable of killing his partner in the drug business, Maxine Seagrave (Natalie Zea), and then framing and attempting to execute Barbie for the murder ("Speak of the Devil" 2 September 2013), he also offers to sacrifice himself for the good of the town when he thinks that is what the dome wants ("Curtains" 16 September 2013).

Furthermore, rather than putting the characters together into conflicting groups as the novel does, the show focuses more on setting up relationships between pairs of characters that evolve through the series. This is most evident in episode five of the first season ("Blue on Blue" 22 July 2013) where the military, as in the book, fire a missile at the dome in an attempt to break it. In King's novel the townspeople gather together in a bar to watch the strike on TV, placing the emphasis upon them as a collective. In contrast in the series the strike is a catalyst for a number of key moments between two characters; Joe (Colin Ford) and Norrie (Mackenzie Lintz) kiss for the first time, Julia and Barbie hold hands, and Junior and Angie - who has been freed by Big Jim much to Junior's anger - finally reconcile. These pairings form the backbone of the developing character drama, as Norrie and Joe, Barbie and Julia, Big Jim and Junior and Angie and Junior fight, break up and reconcile over the three seasons.

Around the characters the series also radically increases the enigma of the dome, which plays a far more active role in the lives of the people of Chester's Mill and forms, like the island in *Lost*, the on-going mystery narrative of the show. Unlike King's leatherheads, in the series the dome is generated by a strange egg, which sits inside a smaller 'minidome' and is discovered by Norrie and Joe ("Imperfect Circles" 5 August 2013). They come together, along with Joe's sister Angie, because they all suffer from seizures in the opening episodes, where they repeat the mantra from the book that 'the pink stars are falling in lines'. In the series however these are not visions of a future event, but are connected to the dome. Norrie, Joe, and Angie are three of the 'four hands', the

fourth being Junior, who together have some kind of semi-communicative relationship with the dome. When they touch the minidome together in Joe's barn it generates pink stars, which burn themselves on the inside of the walls ("Let the Games Begin" 26 August 2013). In addition the dome itself is presented as sentient, rather than inanimate. After Junior rejects the fact that he is the fourth hand, the dome creates a tornado over Chester's Mill that nearly kills Angie, only disappearing when Junior agrees to accept his place as part of the foursome ("Speak of the Devil" 2 September 2013).

A second strand to the mystery of the dome begins when Joe and Norrie show the minidome to Julia. She touches it, which leads to a second Joe appearing as an avatar for the dome itself, which tells them that 'the monarch will be crowned' ("Thicker than Water" 12 August 2013). This cryptic pronouncement is presented as having multiple potential meanings. It links to the fact that monarch butterflies are seen in their thousands on the inside of the dome and also to the monarch butterfly that Angie has tattooed on her shoulder. In addition there is a monarch cocoon inside the minidome and finally, outside the realm of nature, a monarch is also a leader, raising possible questions about who should lead the people under the dome. Once the cocoon hatches and the butterfly emerges it flies around the inside of the minidome trying to break free, turning the minidome opaque where it flies into it, which is then mirrored in the larger dome until the entire surface of both is black. Joe, Norrie, Angie and Junior touch their hands once more to the minidome which shatters, rendering the main dome translucent once more and releasing the monarch which alights on Julia, implying she is chosen by the dome to lead the people of Chester's Mill and to protect the egg. ("Curtains" 16 September 2013).

At the beginning of season two, the mysteries of the dome that are set up during the first season are largely resolved in favour of a new set of questions. The four hands' work is mostly done when they shatter the minidome, and Julia's position as the dome's chosen one is reconfigured in practical terms as she becomes a rival to Big Jim for control of the town. A new mystery for the second season begins when Julia fulfils her role as the protector of the egg by dropping it into the lake. From that exact spot a young woman emerges, who turns out to be Melanie (Grace Victoria Cox), one of an earlier group of four hands who found

the minidome in 1988 (“Heads Will Roll” 30 June 2014). A flashback reveals that Melanie was killed by one of the others after touching the egg (“Revelation” 21 July 2014) and when she reappears in the present she is mystically linked to it. For instance, Big Jim hands the egg over to a shady company, Aktion, run by Barbie’s father (Brett Cullen) for experimentation and as they experiment on it outside the dome, Melanie suffers also, feeling whatever the egg feels in the Aktion labs (“Turn” 15 September 2014). In the season two finale, Barbie leads the people of Chester’s Mill into tunnels, a monarch butterfly leading the way, and finds Melanie standing in front of a bright light telling them all to follow her and she will lead them out from the dome (“Go Now” 22 September 2014). The third season changes the mythology once again, opening with the people living outside of the dome, which turns out to be a fantasy as they are, in fact, cocooned *Matrix*-style in the tunnels where they found Melanie (“Move On” 25 June 2015). Waking up they find a new character, Christine Price (Marg Helgenberger), who is no longer human but an alien whose role it is to oversee the smooth transition of the people under the dome from humans to an alien collective, protected by the dome from another alien race which is coming to earth to seek them out and destroy them (“But I’m Not” 25 June 2015).

The mystery of the dome is therefore significantly revised and enlarged from the novel and slowly drip-fed to audiences via a series of narrative events. Each segment of the mystery – first the four hands, the monarch and the minidome, then Melanie, and finally Christine Price – runs its course during a single season and is then revised at the start of each subsequent season. The new mystery for season two for example was set up by King himself, who wrote the first episode and developed the season arc with Vaughan. King’s approach (*Stephen King and Season 2*) was to ‘try to go back and make season two bigger, give it a few more teeth, give the characters even bigger challenges’. This rationale, that ‘what you try to do is create engaging characters and an engaging situation to keep (the audience) there ... the real key ... is to present something that it is intriguing, that is mysterious,’ echoes his own approach to writing.

The structure of the series represents a balancing act, refreshing the scenario so that each season can be viewed in its own right by the casual viewer, while at the same time not changing the premise so substantially that there are

holes in the logic of the mythology. In addition the series is constructed so that while the mystery of the dome forms a series of season arcs, within that structure each individual episode takes place over one day, allowing the show to alternate between single episodes revolving around specific events and groups of episodes that form compact arc narratives. The second episode of season two for example has Big Jim and high school science teacher Rebecca Pine (Karla Crome) dealing with an infestation of caterpillars that are blighting the crops (“Infestation” 7 July 2014) while the third has Chester’s Mill beset by red acid rain (“Force Majeure” 14 July 2015). Conversely the narrative about Rennie’s drug ring is hinted at through the early part of season one and then resolved across episodes nine, ten and eleven when Maxine arrives and is ultimately shot by Rennie (“The Fourth Hand” 19 August 2013, “Let the Games Begin” 26 August 2013, “Speak of the Devil” 2 September 2013). In season two episodes six to nine similarly see development and resolution of a storyline in which Barbie escapes from the dome to his home town of Zenith, finds out his father has history with the egg, and then returns to Chester’s Mill via a red door in the back yard of his family home (“In the Dark” 4 August 2014, “Going Home” 11 August 2014, “Awakening” 18 August 2014, “The Red Door” 25 August 2014).

In this way, the series acts on multiple levels in order to attract complex TV’s various potential audiences of ‘novices’, ‘erratic viewers’ and ‘comprehensive viewers,’ as outlined by Mittell (165). It offers a variety of viewing strategies, from the cult viewer closely following the enigmatic dome mystery, to the weekly watcher drawn along by shorter, clearer arcs, to the casual viewer dropping in to see what’s been happening but still being offered in a single episode a story with a beginning, middle and end. Along with the overarching interplay of genre mystery and character drama, these multiple narrative structures form the essential strategy of *Under the Dome*.

This was the foundation of CBS’ attempt at a mainstream TV SF crossover, driven by the narrative influence of post 1990s complex TV and the practical economic success of previous SF shows like *Lost* and *Falling Skies*. It is these influences that led to King’s original story being radically reworked to the point that the series retains only the bare bones of the characters and the premise, meaning that in terms of the narrative events *Under the Dome* takes its place as

one of the least faithful adaptations of King's work, alongside the likes of *The Shining* and another SF story *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, USA, 1987). Yet in spite of these changes, because the series *Under the Dome*, like the novel (and indeed virtually all of King's books) is a niche genre premise presented with mainstream appeal, the focus on character drama within a genre premise nevertheless mirrors the hybrid nature of King's own literary style. As noted above, an attempt at mainstream appeal is nothing new for a King adaptation, but as a serial drama *Under the Dome's* revises both the characters of King's novel and the dome itself to make them more complex and thus more sustainable over an extended period. In the audio commentary on the DVD of his 1997 mini-series version of *The Shining*, King says that working with a TV network brings with it restrictions on the kind of horror imagery that can be shown, but what it provides instead is time to let the characters and the situation develop. As a long format series *Under the Dome* offers more time than any previous King adaptation to date, and while this necessitates changing much of King's narrative events, it allows an extended exploration of the interaction between character drama and genre premise essential to the novel and therefore captures, in a revised televisual form suitable for mainstream network SF, the heart of King's mainstream literary appeal.

Although the show was cancelled after its third season due to declining ratings, *Under the Dome* therefore represents an important experiment and significant step in adapting Stephen King. Instead of trying to present the beginning, middle and end of the novel, *Under the Dome*, in reworking the premise for an indefinite run, captures the very thing that make King's writings the breakout success that they are. For all of its ultimate failure as a mainstream SF TV show, as another entry in the on-going struggle to have 'Stephen King done right', *Under the Dome* occupies an important place in the history of King adaptations. Furthermore, with SF, fantasy and horror adaptations such as *Game of Thrones*, *Hannibal* (USA, 2013-15) and *Westworld* (USA, 2016-) offering increasingly challenging televisual interpretations of existing literary or cinematic texts, it is clear that in exploring this new landscape of serial television adaptation, *Under the Dome* and Stephen King have a significant role to play.

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