

Altering the course of history

Stephen King's new novel travels back in time to stop Lee Harvey Oswald

11/22/63, by Stephen King.
Scribner, 849 pp., \$35.

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Special to Newsday

Thirty-five-year-old Maine high school teacher Jake Epping, the protagonist of Stephen King's new novel, is having a dull time of it since his wife got sober and left him for another guy. He fills his spare time teaching a GED class and hanging around Al's Diner, where the famous Fatburgers are so affordable that people wonder if they're not Catburgers.

Then, two things happen. First, a lame janitor at the high school who's in Jake's class hands in an essay, as forcefully told as it is poorly spelled, which reveals that on Halloween night in 1958, his father murdered his mother and his siblings and left him physically and mentally damaged for life. Though Jake has announced on page one that he's "never been what you'd call a crying man," this essay moves him to tears. And "everything that followed — every terrible thing — flowed from those tears."

In classic King style, teasers like this come early and often.

Next, Jake's restaurateur friend, Al, calls him over to explain that there's a hole in time located in the back of his diner, where you can walk right through to the morning of Sept. 9, 1958. Al is in the final stages of cancer, so he wants to hand over his pet project to Jake. Turns out he's

been hanging around in the past, trying to stop Lee Harvey Oswald from shooting President Kennedy. (And while he's there, he buys hamburger meat at 1958 prices and brings it back.)

Let me stop here to say that it takes a skillful storyteller to make 849 pages feel like a reasonable length for a novel — and for me, the fact that these pages are about time travel and the Kennedy assassination were not selling points. But King is the kind of yarn-spinner who could keep you sitting at a campfire all night and half the next day even if you had someplace else to be. Some say he needs a tougher editor; I think he has worked with the doorstop-sized novel so frequently that he makes the length seem natural.

Jake takes Al's vintage greenbacks and his list of World Series and boxing results, and heads into the past. As Al explains, no matter how long he stays there, it will be only two minutes later when he returns. Sure enough, Jake is able to change history — on his first visit he hangs out through Halloween and kills the janitor's father, though not before the drunken madman takes out one of his three kids. Not to worry, Al says when Jake gets back to the present,

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The Kennedys arrive at Love Field in Dallas; the main character in Stephen King's "11/22/63" finds that history is not easily changed.

he can try again. Every time he goes through the portal, there's a complete reset, so any changes he's made on a past visit are erased.

But it's not easy. As Jake soon learns, the past doesn't want to be changed, and every time he gets close to a major history-changing moment, things start to go very, very wrong for him. Flat tires, muggers, stomach viruses — the past will try anything to be left alone. Of course, this does not stop our hero, who becomes as obsessed with the mission as Al was, until he learns just why the past is so determined

to take him down.

My favorite part of the book is a long section in which Jake moves to the small town of Jodie, Texas, where he hangs out for several years monitoring Oswald's activities and waiting for the big show. This section is filled with nostalgia for the cars (made of metal), music (made with instruments) and food (made of food) of the period, if not for its institutionalized racism, uptight mores and universal cigarette smoking. Jake, going by the name George Amberson, takes a job at the local high school, falls in love with the sexy librarian, makes

many more friends than he has in the present and, in a totally "Glee"-like turn of events, recruits members of the football team to star in the school play.

All this is interspersed with action that intelligently probes the conspiracy and lone-gunner theories and makes a detailed study of Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina. But if 849 pages still sounds like too much, you can wait for the upcoming Jonathan Demme film, pegged as "Back to the Future" with politics — and, if it's true to the book, gruesome slasher scenes and cigarettes, too.