The Institute

Dominick Grace

Stephen King. *The Institute*. Scribner, 2019. Hardback. 576 pp. $30.00. ISBN 9781982110567.

THE Institute, Stephen King's most recent novel, is one of his few books that might arguably be regarded as SF, or at least SF-adjacent. King's work usually falls squarely into the horror category, but SF tropes occasionally assume central roles in his books (e.g. though clearly horror, *The Tommyknockers*' monsters are the aliens—or the ghosts of aliens—associated with a spacecraft that has been buried for millennia, a plot device many will recognize). Of these, the most frequent are paranormal abilities such as telepathy, telekinesis, precognition, and other powers of the mind, which are usually permitted in SF despite having little in the way of scientific justification. Indeed, King's career began with *Carrie* (1974), ostensibly horror but focusing on a teen-aged girl with telekinetic powers, rather than on fantastical creatures or monsters. *The Institute* is another such novel, this time focusing on children possessed of telekinetic or telepathic power who are being kidnapped and dragooned into the service of a shadowy organization for ends that remain obscure until well into the book, providing a modicum of expense. Surprisingly, the organization in question is not The Shop, as long-time readers might have anticipated, since it was The Shop who came after pyrkinetic Charlie McGee in *Firestarter* (1980) and who turned up to mop up at the end of *The Tommyknockers*.

Thematically, though, the novel most clearly hearkens back to *The Dead Zone* (1979). Johnny Smith, that novel's protagonist, acquires a precognitive ability that allows him a glimpse onto a potentially apocalyptic future, one that he decides to prevent by assassinating Greg Stilson before he can become President and begin a nuclear war. Smith's solo mission is institutionalized in this latest nov el, as the unnamed Institute kidnaps children with paranormal abilities and experiments on them (in ways that effectively amount to torture) in order to use their precognitive abilities to foresee potential future catastrophes and then their telepathic and telekinetic abilities to kill those who will cause said catastrophes. Doing so quickly uses up these children, effectively destroying their conscious minds, leaving behind only shells whose remaining mental powers serve as the battery for weaponized telepathy and telekinesis.

The idea of using precognitive abilities (or of other ways of gathering information, such as time travel) to engage in first-strike prevention is far from new in SF. Nor is the

idea of children with special abilities being used (whether with their consent or without) being trained to intervene in world events—Marvel's X-Men perhaps being the pre-eminent example. King's take on these ideas is perhaps less original than it is a synthesis of possibilities. He uses it to comment on the extent to which ostensibly good ends can be used to justify increasingly horrifying means. The argument Institute leader Mrs Sigsby, among others, makes, is that the work they do has saved the world multiple times, because by combining the knowledge they glean from precognitives with the powers they can exploit and enhance in the telepathic/telekinetic children, they can use those mental powers to kill those who would create disasters.

However, King's focus is on children who have been kidnapped, and who have also usually also had their families murdered during the kidnapping—protagonist Luke Ellis has been represented in the media as a runaway who slew his family, as a way not only of eliminating parents who would look for a lost child but also as a way of tainting Luke should he ever escape. Their training is often indistinguishable from torture. As a result, readerly sympathy is clearly aligned with them, to make the figures running the Institute (and, we can assume, those running the numerous other facilities around the world, that we learn about later in the book) come across as monstrous. And since for much of the book, we do not know why these children are being used the way they, we are readers are further encouraged to side with the children. Furthermore, all the characters on the side of the Institute, with one exception, are depicted, to a greater or lesser extent, as sociopathic or otherwise morally corrupt. That their essentially evil (for want of a better word) behavior may itself be caused by or at least enhanced by toxic psychic contamination bleeding into their own heads as a side effect of the experimentation and exploitation they inflict on the children may be read as a metaphor for how power corrupts.

King therefore largely games the system, leaving little room to consider whether the ends do indeed justify the means. Here, they clearly do not. In the current world of rising nationalism and authoritarianism (and King is vocally anti-Trump) this is not necessarily a bad message. It's just not a very subtle one. But then, King has never been renowned for his subtlety.