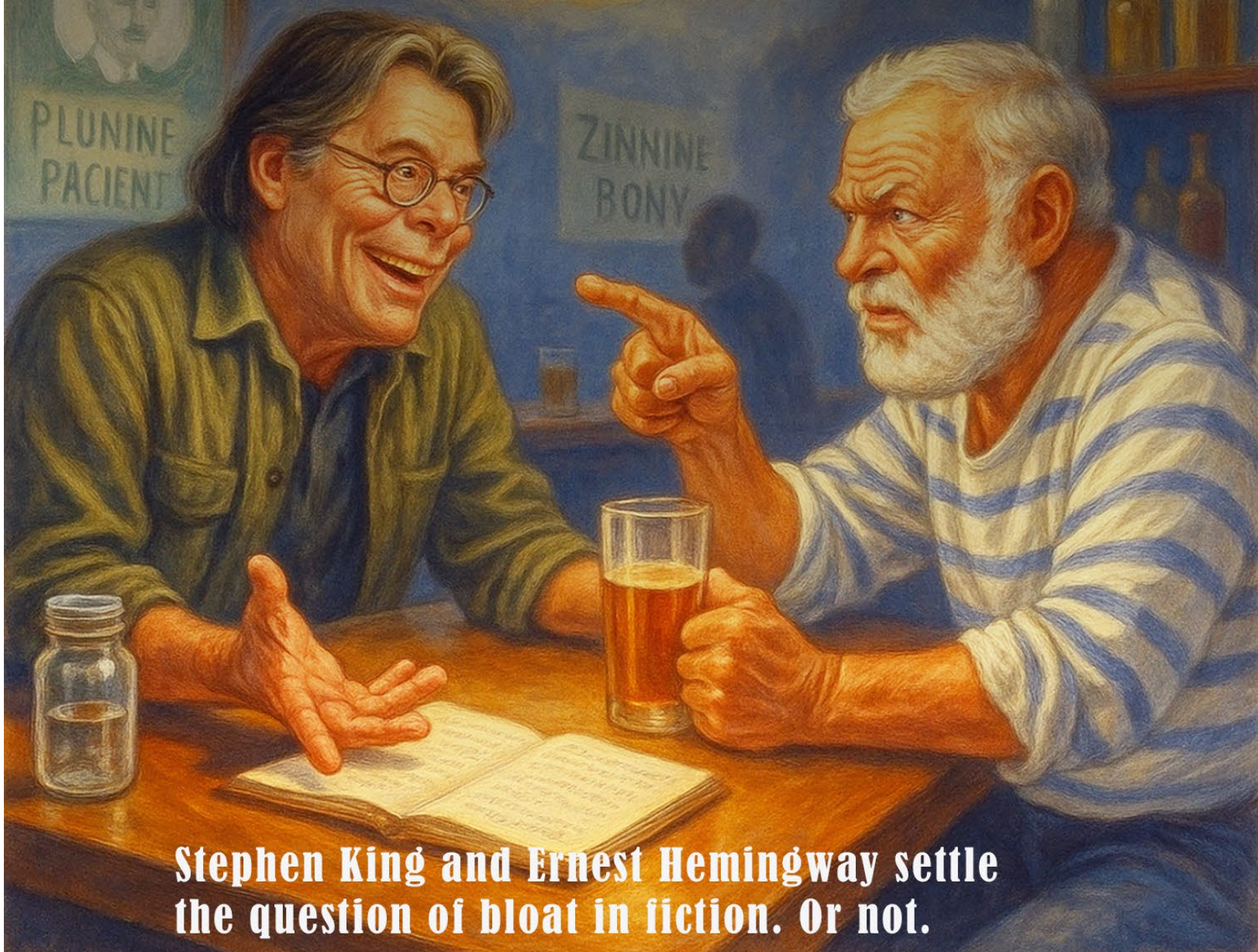


VERBOSITY & VINE



**Stephen King and Ernest Hemingway settle
the question of bloat in fiction. Or not.**

In a smoky bar somewhere in the multiverse where reality has broken down, where the dead the living sip dark spirits and argue about craft, Ernest Hemingway sits in a rumpled white shirt gripping a whiskey glass. Beside him, in his usual flannel and wearing Coke-bottle glasses, Stephen King sits smirking and patiently enjoying their argument. The topic? Verbosity in fiction. More words or less?

Let's see how they feel about that:

Hemingway: *"You use too many damn words, Stephen."*

He takes a slow sip of whiskey, eyes narrowed like he's aiming down a rifle barrel.

King: *"That's rich coming from a guy who once described war with a comma and a frown."*

He grins. *"I like words. Words are tools. You can build a house with a hammer, or you can build a castle with a toolkit. Guess which one sells more tickets."*

Hemingway: *"If it takes you five pages to say a man is afraid, you've already lost him. Fear isn't a paragraph—it's a heartbeat."*

King: *"Right, right—'the man was afraid.' Riveting. But maybe, just maybe, the reader deserves to know what the man hears, what he smells, the childhood trauma that fear is tapping into. That's called texture, Papa."*

Hemingway: *"Texture's fine. Padding is not. Writing is like boxing—you don't win by dancing around the ring with metaphors. You land a clean punch and move on."*

King: *"And yet here you are in a bar, arguing with a man who sold 350 million books."*

He leans forward, grinning like Cujo just got out.

Hemingway: *"Popularity isn't the same as precision. McDonald's sells billions of burgers, doesn't mean they're gourmet."*

King: *"But they keep people coming back. And sometimes, people don't want a five-star filet—they just want a damn good cheeseburger."*

Hemingway: *"Art isn't a drive-thru, Stephen."*

King: *"And readers aren't deer you've got to shoot with minimalist prose. Sometimes they want to be haunted, not just informed."*

Hemingway: *"You haunt them like a man throwing furniture down the stairs. I haunt them with a whisper."*

King (laughs): *"And yet I'm the one writing ghosts."*

Bartender (without looking up): *"Two more drinks and a copy of 'On Writing' for the guy with the beard."*

The bar's dim, filled with the clink of old typewriters and the buzz of cigarette ghosts. A storm howls outside, but inside it's all wood panels and literary arrogance. King sits with a glass of beer labeled

"The Shining Ale." Hemingway's whiskey is called "Old Man and the Sea Cask Strength." Both are exactly the kind of drinks you'd expect.

Hemingway (nodding at a book on the shelf):

"You ever consider trimming it down to the size of a normal human attention span?"

King (not missing a beat):

"You ever consider writing a book longer than my grocery list?"

Hemingway:

"I wrote "The Old Man and the Sea" in two months."

King:

"I've sneezed books in two months, Ernie. One of them had a clown that murders kids and a turtle that might be God. Let's not compare output."

Hemingway (smirking):

"Quantity isn't quality. I sculpted. You splatter."

King:

"Sculpted? You chiseled out six-word sentences like you were being charged by the vowel. There's white space in your books that could be zoned for parking lots."

Hemingway (leaning in):

"Every word I left out made the ones I kept stronger. What you call minimal, I call deliberate. Lean. Clean. Brutal."

King (grinning):

"You write like someone who's been in too many bar fights and too few libraries."

Hemingway:

"And you write like someone who never left the library because the dark hallway outside scared him."

King:

"Better to face imaginary monsters than just drink real ones."

Hemingway:

"Drinking was part of the work."

King:

"So was therapy."

They pause. King takes a swig. Hemingway stares at his glass like he's about to interrogate it.

Hemingway:

"Look, Steve. A writer owes his reader respect. That means telling the story, not meandering through his character's inner trauma for half a novel."

King:

"Trauma is the story, Ernest. You can write a man rowing a boat for eighty pages, but if I don't know what broke his heart, he's just a guy with sore arms."

Hemingway:

"A man on the sea is every man. Universal. That's the point. The reader brings the heart. I give them the silence to hear it beat."

King:

"Yeah, and I give them a haunted clown sewer monster just to keep things spicy. Let's not pretend subtlety is the only flavor worth cooking with."

Hemingway (grunting):

"Subtlety is harder. You drown readers in detail. You paint with buckets. I draw blood with a pinprick."

King:

"And yet here we are, both on the same barstool of history."

He raises his glass. *"Your fans dissect your silence. Mine sleep with the lights on."*

Hemingway:

"At least no one turned my work into a haunted hotel and made Jack Nicholson scream about axes."

King (mock wounded):

"Stanley Kubrick did that, not me. You want to throw shade at directors, go bother Fitzgerald. He's probably still whining about Gatsby."

Hemingway:

"Fitzgerald had elegance. You've got jump scares and middle-school vocabulary."

King (leaning back, all grin):

"And I've got readers in every airport and kid with a flashlight under the covers. Nobody hides with Hemingway. They write essays about you. They live with me."

Hemingway (nods slowly):

"A fair point. But they die with me."

King (raising his beer):

"They die with me too. Just louder."

A moment of silence passes as both men drink. The tension settles. The jukebox kicks on, playing "Riders on the Storm."

Hemingway:

"You know, you're not wrong about everything. The world does need stories that speak to its darkness."

King:

"And I'll admit—sometimes a clean line says more than a monologue. But only sometimes."

They raise their glasses together now. The storm outside rattles the windows, like the applause of forgotten readers.

Bartender (muttering):

"Every Thursday with these two."

J.R.R. Tolkien (from a nearby booth):

"You children squabble about words. Try inventing an entire language before breakfast, then come talk to me."

Hemingway and King (in unison):

"Shut up, John."

Wearing a long green cloak for no reason at all and looking like he walked straight off the cover of a 70s prog rock album, **J.R.R. Tolkien** approaches, pipe in hand, beard mildly glowing from the ethereal light of self-satisfaction. Behind him lingers **H.P. Lovecraft**, pale, twitchy, eyes darting like a rat in a cathedral.

Tolkien (clearing his throat like a church bell):

"Gentlemen. If I may interrupt this brawl disguised as a craft talk... Hemingway, King—your argument is... quaint. But entirely missing the point."

Hemingway (eyes narrowing):

"If you're here to explain why it takes three pages to describe a tree, I'm going to start drinking harder."

King:

"Oh boy. Here we go. Did the forest send you, Johnny?"

Tolkien (sitting with practiced gravitas):

"Words are sacred. They carry the weight of worlds. You two argue about brevity versus verbosity like it's a tavern brawl. But what of sub-creation? What of myth? Of language itself? I forged a world, syllable by syllable."

Hemingway:

"You forged a sleep aid. I opened The Silmarillion and woke up six hours later with a beard and two kids."

King:

"That book has more names than a war memorial and none of them are Steve. What's Angandilion the Pale-Browed supposed to teach me about plot?"

Tolkien (calmly):

"Depth. Legacy. The weight of time. A single elf's sigh echoes across a thousand years of tragedy. Every word matters."

King (grinning):

"Every other word, maybe."



"

Lovecraft (slinking into view, voice like static on a vinyl record):

"You mock intricacy, but the horror of existence is in the details—in what you can't quite understand. I too used many words. Strange words. Words with vowels that shouldn't be friends."

Hemingway (eyebrows raised):

"You described a puddle and called it an ancient god. And you used seventeen adjectives to do it."

Lovecraft (twitching):

"The puddle hungered, sir."

King:

"I appreciate the weird, Howard. I do. But your characters faint more than they act. They read dusty tomes, hear a whisper, scream, and bam—chapter ends. You invented horror without resolution. It's all dread, no payoff."

Lovecraft (offended):

"The payoff is madness. Madness is the truth. And there is beauty in cosmic insignificance."

Tolkien (nodding solemnly):

"He's not wrong. But where you see madness, I see purpose. The stars are cruel, yes—but they are named. I named them. In Elvish."

Hemingway (to the bartender):

"Another round, and maybe a napkin so I can cry into it for all the trees felled by these two."

King (laughs):

"Honestly, I think Howard's just mad that his tentacle monsters didn't get movie rights. Try being upstaged by a sewer clown every Halloween."

Lovecraft:

"Commercialization is a betrayal of the ineffable. The unknowable should not be available on Blu-ray."

Tolkien (glaring slightly):

"Excuse me. The Lord of the Rings was adapted with dignity."

King (shrugs):

"Peter Jackson made Return of the King last longer than the Silmarillion. Dignity's debatable."

Hemingway:

"All of you need an editor and a fistfight."

Bartender (sighing):

"If you're going to fight, take it outside. Last time Lovecraft started vibrating about ancient horrors, we lost the jukebox to existential dread."

At that moment, Virginia Woolf leans in from the next table, sipping gin like it's a lifeline.

Woolf:

"Gods and madness and myth are fine, boys. But has anyone asked how the lighthouse feels?"

All four men simultaneously:

"Not now, Virginia."

The bickering quartet—King, Hemingway, Tolkien, and Lovecraft—have drawn quite the crowd, but in a shadowy booth near the back, untouched by the flickering gaslight chandeliers, sits a man in black.



Edgar Allan Poe, draped in a waistcoat and the aura of unpaid debt, swirls an inky drink called *The Raven's Ruin*, joining Lovecraft and the others like a weary detective at the end of a very bad story.

Poe (muttering to himself, but loud enough to be heard):
"Quoth the idiot... 'Needs more dragons.'"

Hemingway (scowling):

"Oh cheese & crackers, here we go."

Tolkien (adjusting his collar):

"Edgar, you always sit in the darkest corner like you're trying to summon a thunderstorm through sheer will."

Poe (rising slowly, glass in hand):

"I sit in darkness because I understand it, John. Not because I'm afraid of the light. That's Howard's department."

Lovecraft (stiffening):

"Darkness is not fear. It is reverence. Respect for the unknowable. For what slithers beneath reality's skin."

Poe:

"And yet you slather it with so many adjectives it trips over its own tentacles. Do you ever try just... whispering the horror?"

King (smirking):

"Thank you! I've been saying that. You don't need a thesaurus to say 'the basement gave me the creeps.'"

Poe:

"Exactly. A single heartbeat. A raven's cry. A gentle knock upon the chamber door—and the reader is undone."

Hemingway:

"Finally, someone who gets to the point."

Poe:

"No, Ernest, I didn't say we should kill the language and bury it under a cigar stub. I said we should haunt it. There's a difference."

Tolkien (raising a brow):

"And yet you never built a world. Just a parlor. A parlor with mildew."

Poe:

"My dear professor, I didn't need a world. I had a mind. That was plenty labyrinthine, thank you."

King:

"Can we all agree that maybe the world needs all of us? The precise, the poetic, the purple-prosed, and even the guys who think 'eldritch' is a personality trait?"

Lovecraft:

"It is a personality trait."

Poe:

"And a deodorant, I believe."

The table erupts into chuckles. Even Hemingway lets out a grunt that might, in the wild, be mistaken for a laugh.

Tolkien (softening):

"Perhaps, then, it is the mosaic that matters. That a story might need fewer words... or more... or the right ones."

King (lifting his glass):

"To the right words. However many it takes."

Hemingway:

"As long as they bleed."

Lovecraft:

"As long as they tremble."

Poe:

"As long as they echo... in the soul."

They toast. Somewhere in the tavern, a spectral raven lands on the windowsill. It says nothing. It doesn't need to.

Oh, it's happening. The door to the **Afterwords Tavern** creaks open with the sound of a thousand unfinished subplots. A cold breeze drifts in, carrying with it the scent of ink, blood, and reader expectations. The fireplace flares for no apparent reason. And there he is.

George R. R. Martin.

Half wizard, half New Jersey uncle, wearing suspenders, a fisherman's cap, and an expression like he's lost another Stark. A battered notebook peeks from his pocket—possibly containing the end of "A Song of Ice and Fire", but no one's sure. He waddles toward the cluster of literary legends with the weariness of a man who's killed more beloved characters than cholera.

George R. R. Martin:

"Well, well. I see the Council of Dead Men and Misery has convened again. Did I miss the vote on who cries best into their whiskey?"

Poe (deadpan):

"We were just discussing how many adjectives are too many. Current record held by Lovecraft's soup description."

Lovecraft (defensive):

"It was a primordial broth of sinister viscosity—"

Martin:

"It was clam chowder, Howard. Let it go."

King (grinning):

"Welcome, George. Pull up a chair, preferably one you haven't burned down for shock value."

Hemingway (grumbling):

"Another one with word bloat."

Martin (sits, unbothered):

"Says the guy who wrote an entire story about a man fishing for three days and somehow made it about masculinity and tuna."

Hemingway:

"Tuna was a metaphor, dammit."

Tolkien (stroking his beard):

"At least George builds his worlds thoroughly. His houses have histories. His trees have feuds."

Martin (raising a glass):

"Cheers, John. I owe you everything—and also maybe my cholesterol."

King:

"You owe us a final book, my dude. Don't think we didn't notice you out there gardening subplots while your fans aged into mist."

Martin:

"It's coming. Great things take time. Rome wasn't burned in a day."

Poe:

"You know what else takes time? Grief, George. You made millions mourn fictional people like they were real."

Martin:

"Oh please. Like you didn't traumatize generations with a talking bird and your whole 'buried-alive' kink."

Lovecraft:

"I rather enjoy George's work. Particularly the way he kills hope so effectively."

Martin (nodding solemnly):

"Hope is a slow death. But it sells."

Tolkien (murmuring):

"So does resurrection. Hope must rise from the ashes, or all your fire is wasted."

Martin (chuckling):

"Says the man whose eagles solve every third act like divine Uber drivers."

King (snorting):

"He's got a point there, Gandalf."

Hemingway:

"Are we talking eagles or endings? Because I'd love to talk about finishing things, George."

Martin:

"And I'd love to talk about fish metaphors again, but no one's perfect."

A moment of silence follows. Glasses are sipped. A slow, begrudging respect lingers beneath the jabs, like steel beneath silk.

Martin:

"Look, all I'm saying is, we all write differently. Some of us strip it down. Some of us layer it like a 12-tier cake made of death and despair. But in the end, we're all trying to say the same thing."

Poe:

"That life is fleeting."

Lovecraft:

"That existence is madness."

King:

"That fear makes us human."

Tolkien:

"That hope is sacred."

Hemingway:

"That a well-placed period is worth a thousand adverbs."

Martin (smiling):

"Exactly. Also, dragons are cool."

All together:

"Yeah, dragons are cool."

Up walks **Jane Austen**, gloves pristine, expression icy, holding a teacup and a napkin folded sharper than any of their plot twists.

Austen:

"Gentlemen, I trust the testosterone storm has passed. Or shall I fetch a mop and a mirror so you can admire the mess you've made?"

The literary gods stir. The tavern's raucous laughter, clinking glasses, and witty barbs quiet to a hush, like a campfire suddenly threatened by wind. The air thickens. The chandeliers flicker with a blue, ancient light. And then—

The floorboards groan, creak, and *split*... not with violence, but reverence. A soft, golden mist pours through the cracks like spilled starlight. A slow, melodic hum rolls through the room—part song, part thunder. And from the mist, **a figure rises**, cloaked in robes stitched with constellations and storm-tossed ships. His eyes are deep, endless seas. His beard flows like a tide. His voice, when he speaks, is not spoken—it is *chanted*.

Homer has entered the tavern.

Homer (his voice echoing as if from a distant mountaintop):

"You squabble over syntax... and yet forget the song."

The others freeze, mid-sip, mid-snark. Even Lovecraft's twitching stills.



Tolkien (standing instinctively, placing hand over heart):
"Master of verse... Is it truly you?"

Homer (glancing at him kindly):
"The elf-dreamer. Yes. You remember the rhythm. You walk in meter. But you, all of you..."

He turns slowly, his gaze resting on each of them like an ancient wave breaking over modern cliffs.

Homer:
"You quarrel about words like they are stones. But words... are winds. They must move. They must carry men and gods across time."

Martin (blinking):
"Alright, that's a bit dramatic, even for me."

Homer (smiling faintly):
"Says the butcher of weddings."

King (leaning forward):
"You're the guy who started this whole mess, huh? You ever think maybe you should've just summarized the war and skipped the catalog of ships?"

Homer (his eyes gleam):
"And rob men of the knowledge that Odysseus came from Ithaca with twelve black ships? That Ajax stood beneath a sail as red as wrath? Never."

Hemingway (grunting):

"I don't care if he rowed here on a sea made of metaphors, if he says 'rosy-fingered dawn' one more time I'm going to punch the floor."

Homer (gesturing with a finger):

"Ah, the short-line man. The hunter of simplicity. You see the truth... but only the half of it. You kill to reveal the bones. I sing to show the flesh."

Lovecraft (awed, stepping forward slowly):

"What... what is it like, to be the beginning?"

Homer (his voice turning soft, almost mournful):

"It is to be unfinished. For every time the tale is told, it begins again. I am not a man—I am the echo of firelight and memory. I am the story itself."

Poe (nodding slowly):

"You're the ghost we all answer to."

Homer (smiling at him):

"And you, dark one, are the shadow that makes the fire brighter."

Tolkien (tearing up just slightly):

"You spoke the world into myth. We just followed your footsteps through the dust."

Homer (to all):

"Then do not bicker over length or structure, ink or ivory. Let the tale be told—as long or as short as the moment requires. Whether in verse or prose, horror or love, fury or silence... only this matters:"

He raises both hands, and in the silence that follows, the very walls of the tavern seem to *listen*.

Homer:

"Does your story move the soul? Does it travel? Does it linger when the fire dies down? If yes—then you are kin."

A beat passes. And then, slowly, reverently...

Jane Austen (lifting her teacup):

"At last, a man who knows how to monologue with purpose."

Everyone:

Laughter. Genuine. Humbled.

Martin (quietly):

"He didn't even need to kill anyone to make a point."

Homer (descending slowly back into the golden mist):

"Your ink is your sword. Wield it with courage... and with song."

And with that, the golden mist withdraws into the cracks of the floorboards. The light fades. The tavern breathes again.

A long silence. Then:

King (blinking):

"...okay, that was metal as hell."

Lovecraft:

"I'm terrified and inspired. I... I need a thesaurus."

Stephen King slaps his hand on the table.

King:

"Okay. Hear me out. There's only one way to settle this: Dungeons & Dragons."

Hemingway:

"What the hell is that?"

King (already pulling out a battered screen and a dice set that looks like it's seen a demon or two):

"It's a game where you roleplay characters in a fantasy world. You describe what you do, and I tell you what happens. It's storytelling with dice and decisions."

Tolkien (instantly intrigued):

"You mean... like an oral history that evolves with each voice?"

King:

"Yes. Exactly that, but with traps, dragons, and ill-advised flirting with barmaids."

Lovecraft (gripping his chair):

"Will there be... monsters from beyond comprehension?"

King:

"Oh buddy, you're gonna love the Mind Flayer."

Poe (darkly):

"Can my character be haunted by the ghost of someone he accidentally walled into a wine cellar?"

King:

"It'd be weird if he wasn't."

Martin (rubbing his hands together):

"I call rogue. With two knives. And abandonment issues."

Hemingway (grumbling):

"Fine. But I'm a barbarian. I attack. No talking."

Tolkien (nodding with delight):

"I shall be an elf loremaster from the Valley of Silindarion... whose twin sister was stolen by shadow-hawks on Midwinter's Eve."

King (sighing):

"It's a level one game, John. Just pick a wizard."

*A half hour later, books are open, dice are rolling, and **King** is narrating from behind his Dungeon Master screen like a caffeinated god.*

King (in full narrator mode):

"You stand before the gates of Castle Verbosa, whose walls are covered in glowing runes and rejected manuscripts. A crowd of literary purists blocks the way."

Lovecraft:

"I cast Eldritch Blah Blah—whatever the spell is called. I mumble unspeakable syllables and summon a three-headed librarian."

King:

"Roll for arcane mumbling."

Dice clatter. It's a 2.

King:

"You summon a stern substitute teacher who tells you to go sit quietly in the reading corner."

Lovecraft:

"She's... worse than the horrors!"

Hemingway:

"I smash the gate with my war axe."

King:

"You roll a 20. The gate explodes. You feel nothing."

Hemingway:

"Just like writing."

Poe:

"I seduce the Duchess of Plot Convenience."

Martin:

"Too late. Already stabbed her. Probably my cousin."

Tolkien:

"I stand atop the rubble and recite the Lay of the Verbose Betrayer in its original tongue—"

King:

"You lose your turn."

Two hours pass. They battle a Critic Basilisk. Hemingway takes down a Simile Golem with a single punch. Lovecraft gets stuck in a metaphor loop. Poe fakes his own death to escape taxes. Tolkien writes a side quest that lasts longer than the main plot. Martin kills three NPCs just to feel something.

Finally, they reach the **final boss**: a towering, shifting creature made of red pens, word clouds, and footnotes. Its name?

The Editor.

King (dramatically):

"The Editor snarls: 'Too much exposition! Too little clarity! Show, don't tell!' It raises its mighty blue pencil—"

He looks at them, grinning. *"So... what do you do?"*

Hemingway:

"I say nothing. I cut all my flavor text and swing hard."

Tolkien:

"I compose a three-page speech about the ancient language the Editor once spoke, forgotten in the Second Revision Era."

Lovecraft:

"I gibber at it until it questions its place in the universe."

Poe:

"I offer it a raven."

Martin:

"I delay attacking while I explore a subplot involving the Editor's tragic childhood."

King:

"...You all fail your rolls."

The Editor looms. Death seems certain. Then—

A glow from beneath the tavern floor.

Homer's voice, like thunder:

"Let all voices speak. Let the tale be long if the wind requires it. Let it be short if the fire is fading. There is no one path."

The Editor wavers. Cracks appear in its perfect margins. The red ink turns to gold.

King (narrating softly):

"The Editor falls. Not defeated, but... transformed. Into a storyteller. Its red pen now writes, not strikes. You each gain +1 to wisdom and a small sense of literary satisfaction."

Tolkien:

"So... who won?"

Poe:

"We all did. Or we all lost. Which is, frankly, more poetic."

Hemingway:

"I'm drunk."

Martin:

"I'm still not finishing that series."

Lovecraft:

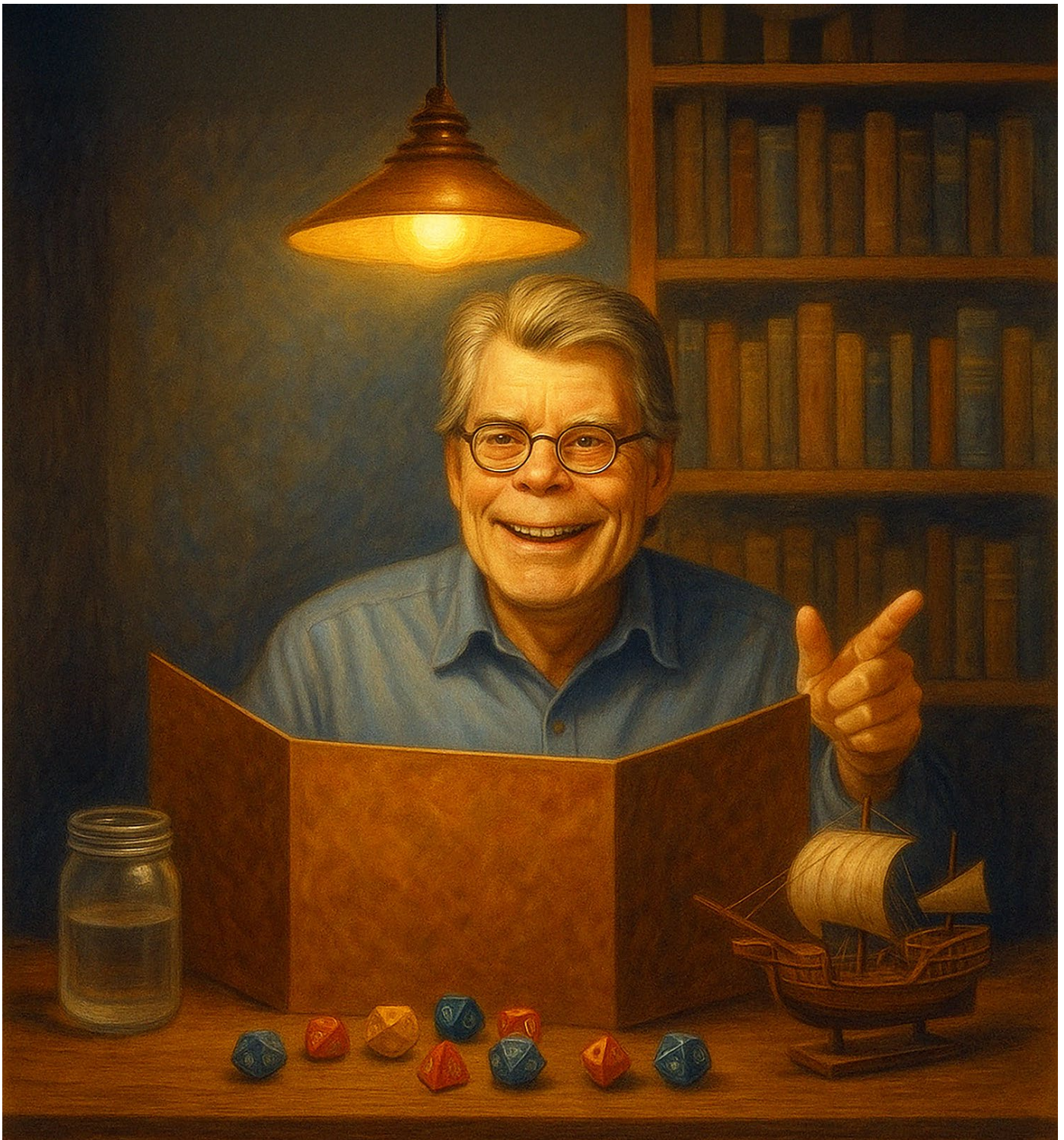
"I fear the game has revealed... my soul."

King (grinning):

"And that, boys, is what a good story does."

Fade out. Dice still spinning. The fire crackles. A raven perches on a beam above, silently judging them all.

The End.



Afterwords Tavern is quiet now. The fire's dim. Dice rest where they fell, ink-stained papers scattered like leaves from a long-forgotten manuscript. Everyone's gone—except one.

From the far corner, beyond the flickering light, a figure steps into view. Cloak dark as fresh ink. Collar ruffled. Pen tucked behind one ear like a dagger. It's **William Shakespeare**, half-shadow, half-smirk, eyes full of trouble.

He plucks a quill from the air.

Shakespeare (murmuring to himself):

*"To bloat, or not to bloat—that was their cry,
A band of ghosts with quills and whiskey dry.
They bared their souls, their trauma, wit, and vice,
And solved it all with dragons, death, and dice."*

He bends over the table, scribbles furiously in a massive leather journal labeled: "**First Folio of Nerds.**"

Shakespeare (grinning):

*"Now here's a tale the Globe would surely cheer:
A dwarf, an elf, a gunslinger austere.
They quest not just for gold or ancient tome—
But seek a tale they both can call their own."*

A pause. He gazes at the ceiling where the stars peek in through wooden beams.

Shakespeare:

*"So let them write, and let them jest and spar,
For even dead men reach to touch a star.
And if their ink runs long, or cuts too deep—
At least, unlike some kings... they do not sleep."*

He winks, flips the journal shut with a thump, and disappears into the shadows, whistling the theme to Critical Role.

THE END FOR REAL