

"we could have done it:" fanaticism in the long walk



In Stephen King's novel *The Long Walk*, 100 teenage boys walk the border of Canada and the United States in the ultimate game. If these boys slow down too many times, or stop walking, they are shot until only one is left, upon which he is the winner of the ultimate prize. This prize is only described as "Anything you want, for the rest of your life," (305) something that draws many boys to apply. The event is public, and draws a large crowd. It is due to this crowd's fanaticism that the Long Walk continues, and they are thereby culpable for the ritualistic murders of 99 boys on the Walk. Stephen King uses the crowd to highlight the horrors that a mindset of winners and losers can enable in real life events.

The crowd's fanaticism can be seen in several situations, one of the first being a crowd seen shortly after Curley's death. Due to Curley being the first walker to "buy his ticket," when the news reaches the crowd "for some reason they began to cheer more loudly." (35) The horribly violent way that Curley met his end was met with cheers and whistles from a crowd desperate for blood. This is not the only crowd that is eager to see someone fall, Garraty compares a farmer and his family watching the walkers to "... Western movies he had seen on all the Saturday afternoons of his youth, where the hero was left to die in the desert and buzzards came and circled overhead." (91) Just like the vultures, the family was watching for someone to die, in order to appease their need for entertainment. Later on, another crowd even more bloodthirsty than the first begins to cheer and wave placards. One person "threw a burning road flare," another man "advertised his own candidacy". (275) Despite this, the crowd is described as

"dull and bland as the turnpike itself," (276) due to the lack of individuality or humanity in it.

In fact, the crowd is willing in several situations to risk their lives and the lives of others in order to procure some kind of memory or token from the event. Stebbins describes when he saw the end of the Long Walk "four years ago," when his father took him in order to showcase to his son how much he despised it. According to Stebbins, "'They had the National Guard out and Sixteen Federal Squads to augment the State Police... Over twenty people were trampled to death before it was all over.'" (95) There were so many people watching the event that others died to watch two boys walk to their deaths. Several people dart into the road to grab souvenirs, discarded clothing and even excrement, even though they know it's against the rules.

Beyond their demand for blood, the crowd is responsible for not putting a stop to the Long Walk. According to Stebbins' description as well as other scenes in which we see large crowds, the crowd is packed "sixty people deep for five miles" more than enough to overpower the five to six guards that accompany the boys. Hank Olson tries to escape from the Walk, climbing the turnpike and yanking a gun out of a guard's hand, where it "clattered into the crowd." (254) No one came to his aid, and the guards shoot him in the gut, leading to his painful and slow death. It would have been possible for a crowd member to take up arms and fight back, but "they shrank from it." (254) Collie Parker later overpowers a handful of guards, wrestling a gun from one of them and killing one of them. McVries explains to Ray that "he wanted us all up there with him, Garraty. And I think we could have done it." (359) There were twenty-one boys when Parker stole

the gun, more than enough to overpower the guards, and countless members of the crowd, but due to their inaction, the Walk goes on.

King's moral in *The Long Walk* is that fanaticism is dangerous, and while the events in the novel are fictionalized, it is a warning. By beginning new chapters with quotes from game shows and competitions, King reminds the reader that the mindset of the crowd is not too far away from being acceptable, unless something changes. In the beginning of Chapter 14, the quote is from *The Ten Thousand Dollar Pyramid*, a gameshow with very strict rules that led to a prize. The host reminds players that "...if you use your hands or gesture with any part of your body, or use any part of the word, you will forfeit your chance..." (315) This reflects the mindset of *The Long Walk*, where the Walkers remind themselves constantly of hints like "Conserve wind," (117) and "Conserve energy whenever possible." (11) While events like *The Ten Thousand Dollar Pyramid* or *The College Bowl* don't result in the mass loss of human life at the demands of a crowd, the mindset of someone losing is there. Sporting events have often ended in riots and violence, just as the end of the Walk that Stebbins witnessed resulted in the deaths of twenty onlookers.

Stephen King's novel is a moral warning to a society that believes in winners and losers, and demands to see each. He informs the reader that in the situation of the Walk, the crowd is every bit responsible for the deaths of the Walkers due to their fanaticism, and that if society becomes fanatics as well, they hold responsibility for the outcome.