

Dear Reader,

I never thought that I would be fortunate enough to make a living as a writer. I dreamed of it, fantasized about it, but even as I walked away from a law practice to write my first novel, the decision was based on an undeniable need to at least try. To aspire. That kind of need is very different from the conviction that it would actually work. I often think of it as a kind of desperation - one that is probably known by a lot of working writers - an urge to do something different, to make something from nothing: a compelling story, unforgettable characters, a message, maybe. I knew the odds of getting published were small and that the odds of becoming a bestseller were even smaller, but I never much cared for being an attorney. I guess it had something to do with all of those guilty clients.

My wife never doubted. When I told her that I wanted to quit my job to pursue the only dream I've ever had, she said, "Of course you should quit." We had a newborn at the time and serious plans for another. She was not working. "It'll work out," she said, and I love her for that. That total trust.

I walked away from the law and never looked back. We lived lean while I wrote: no dinners out, no travel. We did not have to sell our house, but it was an interesting time. Three books have now been published (THE KING OF LIES, DOWN RIVER and THE LAST CHILD) and all three have been bestsellers. I'm blessed to be published in more than two dozen languages and in over thirty countries, a fact that still seems unreal. When DOWN RIVER won the Edgar Award for Best Novel, I actually started to believe that I would not have to beg for my old job back. Then THE LAST CHILD won England's Steel Dagger for best thriller of the year, and I finally relaxed (for about three days...).

I've met so many wonderful, committed people along the way. Publishers, editors, booksellers. They shared an excitement about what I was doing, invested their energies and faith ... None of this could have worked without them.

With my new novel, THE LAST CHILD, I took even more chances. My earlier works were told from the first person perspective of an adult white male, which is a skin that I am well-suited to wear. And while both books worked, I feared that a third done in the same manner might feel similar. Not only is THE LAST CHILD told from multiple perspectives, but the voices truly challenged me: a thirteen-year-old boy traumatized after the disappearance of his twin sister yet still innocent enough to believe in magic, the boy's grief-stricken, drug-addicted mother, a three-hundred-pound escaped convict with the mind of an innocent and the voice of God in his head ... I had to stretch for these. But I wanted to tell the story of a child whose world is shattered so badly that no one can make it right: not his parents, or the cops, not the church or the community. How does the boy cope? Where does he find strength and down what dangerous path will that strength take him?

Making a thriller work with a child as the main character is not an easy task. The risks have to be credible, the action not only compelling but very, very real. And the kid ... man, the kid has to be real, too: his perspective, beliefs and actions, everything that he sees and thinks. That challenge so daunted me that when I first began the book I told my editor that in a year's time he would either love me or hate me. Thankfully, the book works. It's my favorite yet, and I couldn't be happier.

Enjoy,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Hart', written in a cursive style.

John Hart

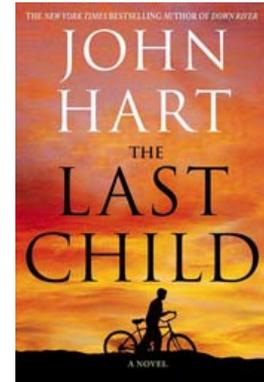


Last Child

By John Hart

St. Martin's Press

On Sale: 3/10/10



The New York Times bestselling novel now in paperback--a thirteen year-old boy and a tormented cop search for the boy's missing sister in rural North Carolina.

Thirteen year-old Johnny Merrimon had the perfect life: a warm home and loving parents; a twin sister, Alyssa, with whom he shared an irreplaceable bond. He knew nothing of loss, until the day Alyssa vanished from the side of a lonely street. Now, a year later, Johnny finds himself isolated and alone, failed by the people he'd been taught since birth to trust. No one else believes that Alyssa is still alive, but Johnny is certain that she is---confident in a way that he can never fully explain.

Determined to find his sister, Johnny risks everything to explore the dark side of his hometown. It is a desperate, terrifying search, but Johnny is not as alone as he might think. Detective Clyde Hunt has never stopped looking for Alyssa either, and he has a soft spot for Johnny. He watches over the boy and tries to keep him safe, but when Johnny uncovers a dangerous lead and vows to follow it, Hunt has no choice but to intervene.

Then a second child goes missing . . .

Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. What is the meaning of the title? Who is "The Last Child"?
2. The novel is not just about Johnny's search for Alyssa. It's also about his quest for power. Where does Johnny look for power and does he ever truly find it? If so, where?
3. In the beginning of the novel we find Katherine in a state of utter collapse. Is her condition understandable, given the circumstances? If not, does she redeem herself?
4. Why does Detective Hunt care so much for Katherine and Johnny? Why does he love her so deeply and what does he see in the boy that he finds so remarkable? How do those feelings contrast with the way he sees his own son? His own life?
5. Revisit the opening of Chapter Fourteen: Johnny's ritual with the fire. We find out that Johnny has had a severe crisis of faith since Alyssa disappeared, and for what he was about to do, he "needed older gods." What draws Johnny to "older gods"? What kind of power do they have that the God of his childhood does not?
6. By the end of the novel, Johnny comes to believe that Freemantle was, indeed, set in motion as an instrument of God. If this the case, by what means did God put Freemantle in motion? And given the debt that Freemantle owes to Johnny's family, was the price too high, or was it fair? Is life, indeed, a circle?

Reading Group Discussion Questions (cont'd)

7. We see two preachers in Johnny's life, one described as, "fingernails buffed and fat face shining," and one described as "a blade of a priest in white, flashing robes." How do these figures reflect the changing nature of Johnny's faith? At the end of the novel, does he believe in the same God he believed in before Alyssa disappeared or does he still believe in other sources of power?
8. Freemantle believes that crows have the power to collect the souls of the dead. This is why he fears them. If the crows are not after the soul of Freemantle's daughter, as Freemantle originally believes, why then are they following him? Do the crows have another goal in mind? Is the goal accomplished?
9. Explore the different father-son relationships in the story. How does each relationship evolve throughout the course of the novel? What are the similarities and differences between each father-son relationship? How do the fathers' actions effect those of their sons?
10. Many people blame themselves for things that have happened in the past—Johnny, Hunt, Katherine, Jack, Levi Freemantle, and others. How does guilt motivate each of them to act? Where does the real guilt lie in the story?
11. The novel opens on a view of the North Carolina back country. What role does the setting have in the story? Do you think Johnny's story have the same impact if it took place in a different state, or in a different country?

About the Author



photo credit: Abigail Seymour Photography

JOHN HART was born and raised in North Carolina. For a time he practiced criminal defense law, but left to write *The King of Lies*. John used to do foolish things, like fly helicopters and sail small boats across large oceans. Now, with a loving young family, he writes books, which is harder but safer. John still makes his home in North Carolina.