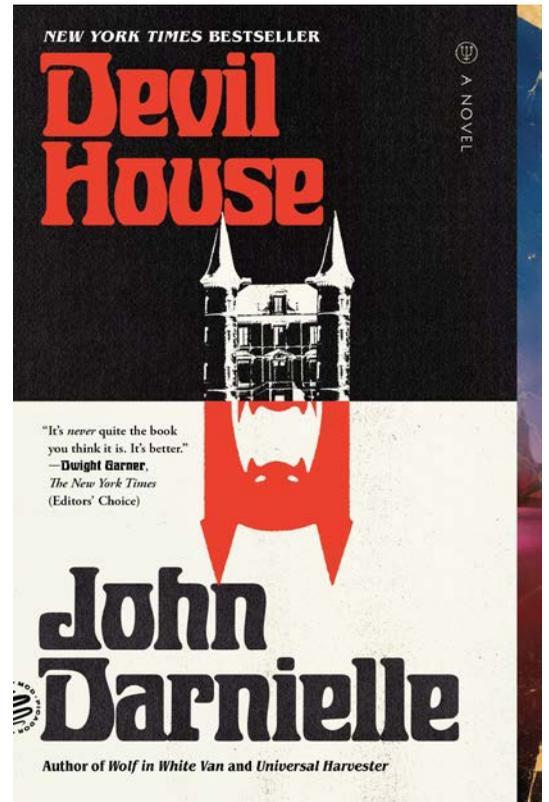


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

# Reading Group Gold

## *Devil House*

by John Darnielle



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Gage Chandler is descended from kings. That's what his mother always told him when he was a child. Years later, he is a true crime writer, with one grisly success—and a movie adaptation—to his name, along with a series of subsequent less notable efforts. But now he is being offered the chance for the big break: to move into the house where a pair of briefly notorious murders occurred, apparently the work of disaffected teens during the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. Chandler finds himself in Milpitas, California, a small town whose name rings a bell—his closest childhood friend lived there, once upon a time. He begins his research into the murders with diligence and enthusiasm, but soon the story leads him into a puzzle he never expected—back into his own work and what it means, back to the very core of what he does and who he is.

*Devil House* is John Darnielle's most ambitious work yet, a book that blurs the line between fact and fiction, that combines daring formal experimentation with a spellbinding tale of crime, writing, memory, and artistic obsession.

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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. “People get murdered everywhere,” Gage Chandler tells us, “but not every murder blooms into myth” (page 15). Apply Gage’s observation to the cases we encounter in *Devil House*: the 1972 Morro Bay case of Diana Crane and the 1986 Milpitas Devil House murders. In what ways are these cases primed to inspire their own dark myths? What types of lessons, warnings, or blame do their tellings convey
2. “I try to honor the dead in my books,” Gage says. “It’s one of the things, I hope, that sets me apart a little from my partners in true crime” (page 61). What might Gage mean by this? In what way might he be said to be honoring the dead in *The White Witch of Morro Bay*? In *Devil House*?
3. We catch our first glimpse of Diana Crane on page 6, and then get an in-depth look at her life as a schoolteacher and her fateful final days in Morro Bay in chapter 2. Our perspective deepens in chapter 6, via Jana Perez’s letter about her son, Jesse Jenkins. Discuss your view of Diana Crane and the Morro Bay case as it unfolds throughout the novel. Does it change after reading chapter 2? Does it change yet again after reading Jana’s letter in chapter 6?
4. Friendship takes many forms in *Devil House*, from Derrick and Seth’s close connection to Jesse Jenkins’s complicated—and, ultimately, ruinous—relationship with Gene Cupp. How do the different friendships in *Devil House* provide a safe haven for their participants? In what ways do these friendships undermine the sense of safety that they create?
5. Soon after Anthony Hawley closes the doors to Monster Adult X, Derrick breaks in and begins using the relinquished space as a kind of art studio. Each moment inside feels “like stolen treasure . . . free of obligation, free of future plans” (page 153). Talk about Derrick’s pivotal decision. What motivates him to sneak back into the shuttered porn store? Why does he decide to open its doors to Seth?
6. The moment Seth steps inside *Devil House*, he’s ecstatic. “I was living and dying for Devil House,” he later admits to Gage Chandler; “I needed . . . a place that felt like I belonged” (page 280). Discuss what Devil House means to each of its young inhabitants. Why does Seth need it so badly? Why do Derrick, Alex, and Angela need Devil House?
7. Artistic expression can be found throughout the novel. Seth and Alex darken the walls of Monster Adult X with their handmade creations; Gage applies a finely tuned creative process to produce his true crime narratives. And yet, when Jessica Halprin, the troubled sister in *Savage Coast*, dismembers her brother’s body, she’s likened to an “artist completing her work” (page 64). In what way is art a generative act in *Devil House*? In what way is it an act of destruction?
8. While thinking back on a true crime convention, Gage recalls a comment made by a fellow true crime author: “There aren’t any villains in a true crime book. There’s the hero, and there’s his victims” (page 61). It’s clear that Gage’s view of true crime is more nuanced, with his subjects often occupying multiple roles at once. Reflect on the cases we encounter in *Devil House*. In what way does Diana Crane embody the “White Witch” villain of Morro Bay? In what way is she a

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victim or a hero? In what ways are her attackers, Gene Cupp and Jesse Jenkins, villains and victims? The same holds true for the Milpitas Devil House murders. In what ways are Evelyn Gates and Marc Buckler villains and victims? Derrick, Seth, Angela, and Alex?

9. Discuss chapter 4, “Song of Gorbonian.” How do its mythical events and the fable-like language of its pages reverberate throughout *Devil House* and into Gage Chandler’s life?
10. Jana Perez’s powerful letter to Gage compels him to reconsider the integrity of true crime and ask pointed questions about his line of work: “What happens when somebody tells a story that has real people in it? What happens to the story; what happens to the teller; what happens to the people?” (page 300). Talk about Jana’s letter and its impact on Gage’s point of view. In what ways do Jana’s words shine a new and necessary light onto the ethics and limits of true crime writing?
11. In her letter, Jana likens the deep sorrow she feels over her son’s murder to “a cave I will never, ever get out of” (page 344). Discuss this metaphor. How does it capture Jana’s experience as a grieving mother and a survivor? Where else do you see caves in *Devil House*? How do these caves serve to shelter, or swallow up, those within?
12. “Nobody cares about the actual details of anything,” Gage says, “they just want the feeling they get when the story punches their buttons” (page 398). *Devil House* is both a novel about an unsolved murder and a nesting-doll narrative about the act of storytelling. Did Gage’s account of the 1986 Devil House murders punch your buttons as a reader? How about his revelatory report of what actually happened in Milpitas?
13. The final chapter of *Devil House* introduces us to a new, unnamed narrator who offers a fresh take on Gage and his provocative approach to chronicling the Devil House murders. “I thought Gage had spent too long trying to save people he couldn’t save,” the narrator observes, “and that the effort had clouded his vision in one way but maybe clarified it in another” (page 402). Discuss this passage. In what ways have Gage’s efforts clouded his vision? In what ways do you think his vision is clearer now than it ever was?
14. Underlying the crimes in *Devil House* are complex issues of ownership and self-defense: Who has the right to claim a certain space as their own? How far should one go to protect their castle? Discuss the Devil House murder case as seen through the lens of the castle doctrine. Who do you view as the rightful owners of this contested space? Who are its intruders? Who are its defenders?
15. The novel summons a bygone era when information often traveled slowly by word of mouth and was more susceptible to embellishments and distortion. And yet, the novel’s acute understanding of truth’s fragility is more relevant than ever. Discuss the dangerous dance of facts and hearsay in *Devil House* and how this resonates with our present moment of misinformation and emotion-driven contortions of the truth.

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## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Urban legends, and the word-of-mouth spread of such legends, play a central role in Darnielle's novel. After finishing *Devil House*, consider gathering your book club—ideally, on a dark and stormy evening illuminated by the glow of candlelight—to share the urban legends and ghost stories you remember from your youth. How do these stories compare with one another? How do they contrast? Pay particular attention to any patterns that emerge: who plays the victim, who plays the aggressor, etc. How does the very act of sharing your story with others affect the way you tell it?
2. In addition to being a novelist, John Darnielle is the lead singer-songwriter of the band the Mountain Goats. As an aural complement to your book club gathering, consider hosting a listening party of one of Darnielle's albums. A great place to start may be *Transcendental Youth*, which contains the song "In Memory of Satan." What do you hear in Darnielle's music and lyrics? How do his musical compositions resonate with the key motifs of *Devil House*?
3. At the heart of *Devil House* is an investigation into the ethics and responsibilities of true crime writing. Consider reading an influential true crime book after your group finishes *Devil House*. Options include *The Stranger Beside Me* by Ann Rule, *Zodiac* by Robert Graysmith, *Devil's Knot* by Mara Leveritt, or a true crime book by Joseph Wambaugh, an author name-checked in Darnielle's novel. What strikes you while reading this text? How does it compare and contrast to the true crime reportage in *Devil House*? What issues might Gage Chandler raise about your chosen true crime narrative if he were reading it alongside you?