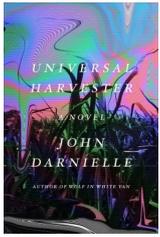


Review: Universal Harvester



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This is the second novel from Bloomington-born author John Darnielle, known also for the past twenty-five years as the songwriter in his band the Mountain Goats. While *Universal Harvester's* trailer video [YouTube] suggests a horror story, the only slight chills come from the unexpected shifts between third and first person narration. And the eeriness is almost comforting, providing a profound depth and hopefulness to lives that may outwardly appear unremarkable.

Set amidst the cornfields of small-town Iowa, *Universal Harvester* begins with twenty-two-year-old Video Hut employee Jeremy Heldt's discovery of unsettling images spliced into the store's VHS tape rentals.

Recognizing the farmhouse he sees in the videos, Jeremy and an acquaintance, Stephanie, reluctantly begin to look for an explanation. This leads them to Lisa Sample, whose mother had abandoned her in the 1970s to join a religious cult, never to be heard from again.

The clearly detailed mystery of the strange events in *Universal Harvester* is an engaging component in itself, but it is the way multiple characters deal with sudden, life-altering loss and grief that is most compelling. We see these beautiful, quiet moments from a wider perspective, where, as the narrator says, "It doesn't matter that the days roll on like hills too low to give names to; they might be of use later, so you keep them. You replay them to keep their memory alive. It feels worthwhile because it is."

Darnielle's writing, as well as the music of the Mountain Goats, is available in the Library's physical and online collections. As with his first novel—the 2014 National Book Award nominee *Wolf in White Van*—the audiobook version of *Universal Harvester* is read by Darnielle and features his original music, making for a worthwhile listen even if you've already read the book.

Jared C.

Posted by Ryan S. on May 15, 2017

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