

# BOOK CLUB KIT



**“FULL OF MYSTERY, MAGIC, DARK COMEDY, AND HEART.”**

**—DEESHA PHILYAW**

**AUTHOR OF PEN/FAULKNER AWARD-WINNING  
THE SECRET LIVES OF CHURCH LADIES**

# AN INTERVIEW

## WITH JOHN VERCHER



### How did you come up with the idea for the book?

There were two main sources. First, there is a band founded by a biracial Black musician called Zeal & Ardor whose debut album is called *Devil Is Fine*. The concept of the album was based on the notion that enslaved Africans had embraced the devil instead of Christianity. This was a fascinating concept to me and planted the seed of a story.

I also frequently vacation in a mid-Atlantic beach community and while on a run, I wondered if there had been any plantations in the community's history. My search revealed a dig at a plantation named Avery's Rest, where eleven bodies were discovered, eight of those determined to be of the family that owned the land, and three enslaved West Africans.

I became obsessed with the history of the land, what it might mean for a mixed-race person to have to reconcile having that be a part of their family history, and the tendency of many museums to appropriate bodies and artifacts.

These two sources gave shape to the novel.

### While there are certainly some overlapping elements, this book is different from your previous works. What made you decide to introduce magical realism into your writing?

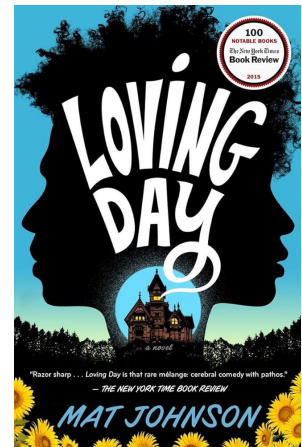
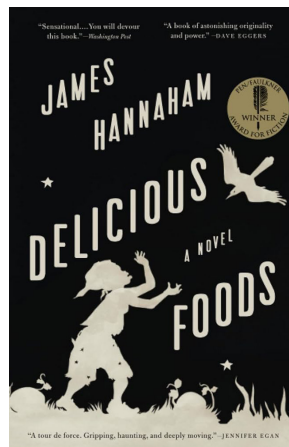
I'm fortunate enough to teach creative writing alongside some of the most creative authors I've ever met/read. Those who are writing surrealism and magical realism seem to be having so much fun on the page. I tell students they should write the stories/books they want to read, and I felt in the early stages of writing *Devil Is Fine* that I wasn't following my own advice. I thought about the books and authors whose work I've read several times, and they were all absurdist and surrealists—so I decided I'd try my hand at it. Despite the heavier topics, it's the most fun I've ever had writing.

### With its complex themes of fatherhood and race, as well as elements of metafiction, *Devil Is Fine* makes an excellent book for discussion groups. What do you hope book clubs will come away with after reading and discussing your book?

I hope they'll come away feeling less like they have all the answers about these topics but more like they're moving toward a place of interrogation, questioning the things they thought they knew for sure or the things other people told them.

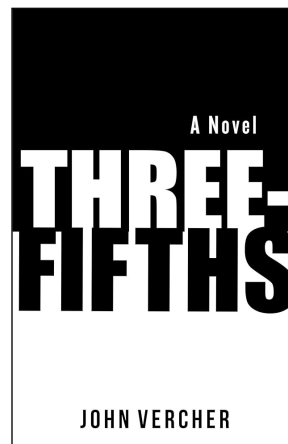
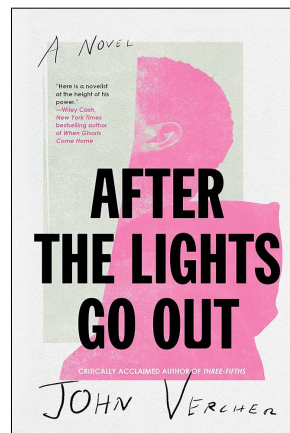
## AUTHOR PICKS

John Vercher recommends...



**JOHN VERCHER** lives in the Philadelphia region with his wife and two sons. He has a Bachelor's in English from the University of Pittsburgh and an MFA in Creative Writing from the Mountainview Master of Fine Arts program. John serves as an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Department of English & Philosophy at Drexel University and was the inaugural Wilma Dykeman writer-in-residence at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. His debut novel, *Three-Fifths*, was named one of the best books of the year by the *Chicago Tribune* and *Booklist*. It was nominated for the Edgar and *Strand Magazine* Critics' Awards for Best First Novel. His second novel, *After the Lights Go Out*, called "shrewd and explosive" by *The New York Times*, was named a Best Book of Summer 2022 by *BookRiot* and *Publishers Weekly*, and named a *Booklist* Editor's Choice Best Book of 2022.

## ALSO BY JOHN VERCHER:



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Vercher writes this story with a unique narrative perspective — the narrator speaks directly to his deceased son, Malcolm. How did this influence your experience reading the novel? And your perception of the narrator?
- 2 Magical realism has become a literary tool for many recent book releases, including *Lone Women* by Victor LaValle and *Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. Why do you think the author used magical realism to tell this story?

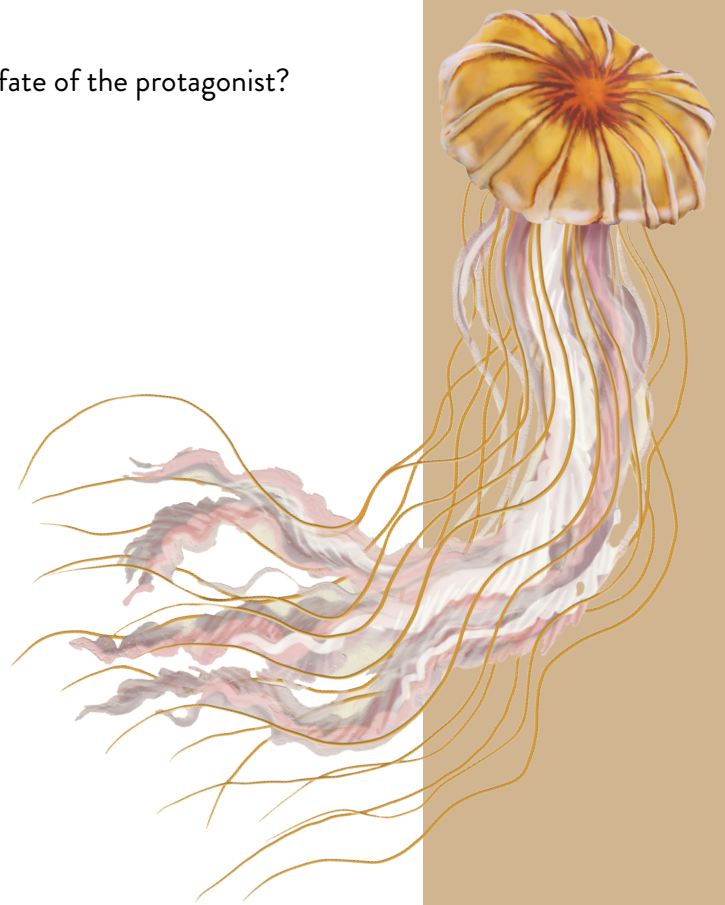
**Suggested by Diverse Voices book club (Easton, PA)**

- 3 The protagonist experiences strange events and visions. Do you think he is an unreliable narrator? If so, what makes him unreliable? Which events in the book do you believe were formed from his unreliable perception, and which do you think are elements of magical realism? What clues helped you make those distinctions?
- 4 Discuss the complicated relationship between the narrator and his family. Why do you think the narrator's grandfather chose to pass the land down to Malcolm?
- 5 What lessons did the narrator learn from being a father? How is he different from his own father?
- 6 How does this book address the question of who history belongs to?
- 7 Discuss the dark sense of humor that the narrator interjects into his story. How did this affect your reading of the book, especially surrounding some of the heavier themes?
- 8 Why do you think Vercher made the decision not to reveal the narrator's name? How does a story from an unnamed narrator influence the book's overall theme of identity?
- 9 The narrator has a fraught relationship with both the university where he teaches and his literary agent. How do you think identity plays into which stories certain individuals are allowed, compelled, or forced to tell? What do you make of Vercher's "meta" decision to discuss the process of writing a book within this book?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 10 Near the end of the novel, the spinelessness of jellyfish is reframed as resilience. What is the relationship between these two seemingly opposite traits, and how do they manifest in this book?
- 11 How do you interpret the ending of the book and the fate of the protagonist?



If you decide to adopt ***Devil Is Fine*** for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at [reader@celadonbooks.com](mailto:reader@celadonbooks.com) or post on social media using the hashtags #CeladonBookClub and #DevilsFine.

