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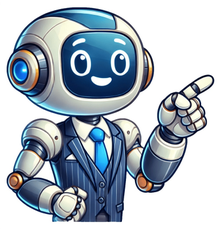

This present darkness book summary

edit descriptions of this character This Present Darkness by Frank E. Peretti edit descriptions of this character Ashton, a seemingly quaint and peaceful small town in the Midwest, appears to be the epitome of idyllic, small-town America with its picturesque streets, charming houses, and close-knit community. However, beneath this veneer of tranquility, dark secrets lurk, hidden from the eyes of most of its inhabitants. The town, with its serene facade, becomes the focal point of a cosmic battle between good and evil forces. Marshall Hogan, the no-nonsense editor of the local newspaper, The Ashton Clarion, arrives in town determined to bring serious journalism and uncover any hidden truths. Alongside him is Hank Busche, the newly appointed pastor of the small Ashton Community Church. Hank comes with a deep faith and a sense of purpose, but quickly realizes that he has stepped into a place where his spiritual insights will be critically tested. Both men, though initially unaware of the full extent of the spiritual warfare unfolding around them, become central figures in the ensuing battle between light and darkness. In their early days in Ashton, both Marshall and Hank notice peculiar events and undercurrents suggesting that something far more sinister is at play beneath the town's surface. Strange occurrences, unexplained phenomena, and encounters with hostile individuals hint at a larger, more malevolent presence. Marshall's journalistic instincts push him to dig deeper, while Hank’s spiritual discernment grows sharper—both begin to sense the intensity of the unseen forces at work. From the very start, the novel portrays a town caught in a web of spiritual intrigue and conflict. Angelic and demonic beings engage in a fierce struggle, their battles invisible to the human eye yet profoundly influencing the physical world and its inhabitants. The seemingly peaceful town of Ashton is, in reality, a battleground where celestial entities clash, vying for control over the souls and destinies of its residents. Through the eyes of Marshall Hogan and Hank Busche, readers are introduced to the duality of Ashton. While on the surface, life continues with typical small-town routines, beneath it exists a seismic spiritual conflict that threatens to engulf the town. The novel sets the stage for an epic confrontation, revealing that Ashton’s tranquility is precarious and held in balance by forces beyond mortal comprehension. The early chapters set the tone for the rest of the novel, melding the ordinary with the extraordinary, the visible with the invisible. As Marshall and Hank begin to uncover the layers of secrecy and spiritual conflict in Ashton, their paths converge, leading them towards an inevitable confrontation with the darkness that seeks to overtake their town. This initial exploration of Ashton’s true nature sets the stage for the unfolding drama of "This Present Darkness," establishing the central theme of spiritual warfare and the essential roles that faith, courage, and determination play in combating the pervasive forces of evil. A sinister schoolteacher steadily grooms kids in their care to accept liberal indoctrination, ultimately leading to the takeover of young minds by shadowy forces. All the while, the teachers are backed by a larger, high-powered conspiracy to control the government, the educational system, and the national media — all in the name of evil leftists battling the ongoing culture war.That rhetoric might sound like sheer fantasy, but it’s increasingly becoming the dominant worldview of many right-wing US conservatives, especially white evangelicals. It’s also the literal plot of two novels by Christian fantasy author Frank Peretti, This Present Darkness (1986) and its sequel Piercing the Darkness (1989). Although not household names to many, these are very likely two of the most culturally influential novels in recent history.Though they flew under the mainstream radar, especially relative to the bestselling Left Behind series that followed them a few years later, Peretti’s novels were formative and fundamental in a way the Left Behind books never were. They went viral in the pre-internet era, selling millions of copies and spreading through word of mouth across churches all over America. It’s easy to see why: The Darkness duology arrived at the peak of Satanic Panic, when, as Peretti later wrote, “demons — and their doctrines — were gaining a weird, glassy-eyed respect from the popular culture.” Peretti envisioned a new kind of Christian fiction that visualized and vivified his idea of modern spiritual warfare: Angels and demons engaged in very real, literal battles for humanity, often just out of sight of their impassioned human charges.Peretti’s angels and demons are humanized and captivating. The angels are all tall, hot, witty, and sophisticated, the demons are brutish and calculating; all are dedicated to their metaphysical Pokémon battle for saints. Meanwhile, prayer and faith, at both an individual and collective level, function as a kind of angel Gatorade, juicing their battery packs and helping them find the strength to defeat the enemy. These books essentially transform Christians into crucial NPCs helping their favorite video game avatars defeat increasingly awful, powerful enemies. The prize? Nothing less than the souls of mankind.If that sounds gripping and immersive, now pair it with the other half of Peretti’s plot: an international conspiracy fueled by evil New Age practitioners using seemingly innocuous tools, like yoga, self-help psychology, and environmentalism, to indoctrinate the masses. Peretti’s feeble but faithful humans get tangled in a page-turning conspiracy that tugs the reader along, all the while taking them on a tour of Evil Indoctrination Stratagems. On the way we get glimpses of literal fundamentalism: for example, the belief that intense depression and anxiety attacks aren’t mental illnesses but are caused by demonic attacks that strong Christians can fight off.Peretti, who went on to write far more allegorical novels, most likely meant much of this fantasy to be read metaphorically, not literally. But his audience missed that memo. He engaged his readers so completely that the Darkness duology stayed on bestseller lists for nearly a decade. In 2013, Publisher’s Weekly dubbed him “the father of Christian fiction.” Peretti wasn’t creating the concept of spiritual warfare. The notion of angels and demons battling among us has been around for centuries; the Christian idea of humans helping them comes to us from Ephesians. In the 1980s, such rhetoric percolated on talk radio, in contemporary Christian music, and in churches, all at odds with modern mainstream culture. But his novels, with their thorough version of an embattled but entirely righteous Christian culture, are an early articulation of what has become the reigning modern evangelical conspiracy theory. A recent survey revealed that a large number of right-wing Republicans — and 27 percent of white evangelicals — believe the central conceit of QAnon, the false conspiracy theory that Donald Trump is fighting high-powered Democrats and other powerful liberals who are engaged in sexually abusing, kidnapping, and sex trafficking children. The “liberal child-napping sex cult” theme of QAnon, and its recent “groomer” variant, seems to be the only thing literally different from the Peretti novels; everything else positing a high-powered government scheme to control the world and eradicate Christian culture is more or less identical.As far-right conspiracy theories swerve into the mainstream, more cultural critics have been revisiting Peretti, perhaps hunting for insight into the modern paranoiac evangelical far-right mind. Here at Vox’s culture team, we’ve discussed Peretti’s influence many times over the years. Three of us, like millions of other ’90s evangelical kids, have our own formative experiences of reading Peretti as preteens. Even rereading as adults, Alissa, Emily, and Aja agree that these books are still fun, engaging standouts among the pantheon of pulpy conspiracy theory thrillers. We sit down to discuss our own personal histories with Peretti and how it feels to revisit the series that helped shape the modern ideological divide.Emily: I read a fair amount of potboiler Christian fiction growing up in the evangelical church, and even as I left fundamentalist Christianity behind, I maintained a vague memory of Peretti’s books being “the good ones.” When I was a tween, I inhaled This Present Darkness and Piercing the Darkness in similar fashion to my friends who were just discovering Stephen King.And rereading these books in 2022, I am struck by how much tween me’s opinion holds up. Where, say, the Left Behind series is a dull slog, Peretti trained as a screenwriter, and you can really tell. His books move in a way that suggests a big-screen blockbuster. The second Darkness book is quite a bit better than the first, which has some clunky “this is my first novel aimed at adults” stuff in it. There’s a lot of unnecessary detail, as when Peretti spends several paragraphs on how a reporter makes sure she has the right apartment by ... finding the door with the right number. But both books are enjoyably trashy in a way Christian fiction rarely allows itself to get.They are, strictly speaking, not very good as literature, but I would say the same of Michael Crichton (the mainstream writer whose prose Peretti’s most resembles), and I still love Jurassic Park. Both books work as serviceable horror fiction pastiche, with Peretti having a ball writing the slinky, slimy demons, who are constantly backbiting each other. They work even better as paranoid conspiracy thrillers, but it’s in that arena where everything in reality is a plot to take down evangelical Christians and, as such, Peretti’s books end up looking an awful lot like the conspiracy theorizing that dominates religious conservative spaces right now.Aja: I tend to think of such conspiracies as akin to Christian live-action roleplaying, because that’s what these books turned me into for about a year when I was a kid. It was the peak of Satanic Panic; my church youth director was teaching us how to spot demonic activity and making all us kids watch documentaries like Hell’s Bells, which taught that heavy metal music was satanic. Kids in my school were reading memoirs about satanic ritual abuse and lectures on the seven circles of Hell. This stuff was just in the water; and in the middle of it all, my church was among the thousands passing around a copy of This Present Darkness. And boy, was I too young to read those books! Because of Frank Peretti, I went around for months envisioning angels and demons fighting in the air all around me. Even after that initial wave of vivid fantasy wore off, the impression the books left me with for years was of an entire adjacent cosmic realm directed by the whims of God and the devil, if I would only believe enough to fall into it. Rereading them, one thing that stands out most to me is how flimsy the initial logic is that kicks off the whole conspiracy investigation. One villainous pastor is supposed to be suspicious because he’s into things like “saving the whales,” and has the audacity to tell one of our heroes, Marshall, that “every human has the natural capacity for good, for love, for expecting and striving for the best interest of himself and his neighbor.” This gentle humanism is the deceptive liberalism behind which Satan lurks?The devil’s primary weapon is New Age spirituality — which is also overtly racist, since Peretti frames most of the world’s demonic New Age practices as stemming from Asian mysticism — but the New Age spirituality in the books is utterly banal. This Present Darkness is vividly cinematic, but if it were an actual movie, the sight of villains dramatically doing yoga or sitting around smoking weed while they surf the astral plane hardly seems like it would invoke earth-shaking metaphysical terror.Clearly, though, decades of evangelical moral panic has shown us that people are leery of all these alternative practices. Peretti gives us a detailed road map for what that moral panic looks like on a granular level: It’s not the cloven-footed devil or the child-abducting clown in a storm drain, but the beautiful (demonic) liberal arts major who speaks to you of ecology, or the mild-mannered preschool teacher who lets your child draw their imaginary (demon) friends. In other words, it’s pretty much everything and anything. No wonder I saw angels and demons everywhere; no wonder that fascination never quite wore off.Alissa: I was such a voracious reader as a kid (we didn’t really watch TV or movies) that I basically read my way through the church library. And yes, they were exciting! While they had some kind of spiritual application and a highly, strangely moralistic worldview, I could also just tell that they were meant to be fun. They read like movies or comic books.Plus, they tapped into everything that I already thought was basically true, because it was what people were talking about on Christian radio, from preachers to drive-time hosts kicking it with various evangelical celebrities to future Trump lawyer Jay Sekulow and his mega-popular call-in show. At the time, among a wide swath of evangelicals, it was very much in vogue to have teenagers go through “worldview” study groups; the curriculum we used was primarily driven by video lectures that had been recorded in the 1980s and early 1990s, which meant a lot of them were about the various ways that the “new age” — or “cosmic humanism,” as they liked to call it — was infiltrating our minds in movies, books, college courses, public school curricula, and various toys.So the plots you both mention in the Darkness books seemed natural and correct to me, and the images they painted were so vivid. I believed every bit of it. I thought for sure that if I listened to rock music, I would discover one day that my mind had been colonized by a demon (in Peretti parlance, probably named “Rock Music” or maybe just “Rebellion”) and would have to be exorcised.I think what was so appealing is the same thing that’s appealing about any conspiracy thinking: It ascribes meaning and purpose and logic to things that aren’t honestly all that meaningful or purposeful or logical, like random accidents or senseless struggles that ordinary people encounter every day. It made me feel meaningful, like a warrior who could join with other warriors to protect what was good. To be honest, the same sort of thing made the Left Behind books appealing — the main characters even formed a force to fight the Antichrist that they called the “Tribulation Force.” Which is so cool! Especially when you feel kind of helpless and ordinary in your real life.When I started reading about QAnon’s rise as a belief system, I instantly saw the same sort of thinking at play — that its believers could save the world from a shadowy and hidden cabal of evil. Even if you didn’t ascribe to something quite as fantastical as that, though, there’s a strain of this thinking in all “us versus them” belief systems: that the real truth of what’s going on in the world has only been revealed to the faithful, and their purpose is to fight the other side.Aja: I completely agree with you, Alissa — there’s something really powerful and individualistic about the feeling you’re part of a spiritual ecosystem. Something that struck me too as I was rereading is how Peretti creates an inherent tension around every new meeting with another human: Are they one of the “initiated” Christians? Do they get it? Can they be trusted? As a way to generate suspense, that’s a classic conspiracy plot trope, but as a way of viewing humans IRL, it feels exhausting.I feel like the ’90s especially gave rise to this new era of performative self-identification among evangelicals, to the point where anticipating your societal persecution because of your faith was almost faddish; “what will people think when they hear that I’m a Jesus freak?” etc. And now that mentality has resurged and joined with the broadly fundamentalist idea that the world is inherently opposed to Christianity. If you’re taught to believe the world is a spiritual land mine and everyone who’s not in the church is inherently standing against you, even if they don’t know it, then it surely makes you more likely to expect bad faith, stratagems, and manipulation coming from people you’ve identified as uninitiated. That makes it even harder to break down an “us versus them” divide. On a human-to-human level, how are evangelicals supposed to talk to people they think might be unwitting tools for Satan? For that matter, how is anyone else supposed to talk to them about things like basic human rights, much less anything else?Emily: There’s a bit of a double bind here, because compared to its height in the 1980s, the white evangelical church has seen a precipitous drop in membership. And if you are already trapped in a cycle of conspiratorial thinking, then learning that more and more people — maybe even people you think of as friends! — are “in on it” can be extremely discombobulating.The idea that the world is uniquely out to get evangelicals is incorrect; the idea that they are a small and shrinking remnant of believers, whose numbers grow smaller by the day, is more or less right. And since the two ideas feed each other, the latter props up the former too easily.If you poke at the logic of the book for even a second, it completely falls apart. When the angels are sufficiently prayer-powered, why do they still need to let the forces of darkness come so close to winning the day? If both the angels and demons engage in a little light rule-bending to, say, influence a vote to oust a particularly prayerful minister from his church, why is it fine when the angels do it but unscrupulous when the demons do so? The storytelling answer, of course, is that “the angels won, let’s go home” would be a very short novel. But the books also neatly capture the in-group projection inherent to a lot of evangelical art.Evangelical theology would argue that it’s okay for angels to cheat and not demons because a thing becomes good if it’s done by the right team, more or less. The answer within evangelicalism to the age-old theological question of “Is a thing good if God does it?” is always, always “yes,” and that answer gets applied to whatever in-groups evangelicals deem worthy. In this worldview, whatever the Republican Party does is always right, for instance, because the Republican Party is on the right side.The core assumption of Peretti’s work, and most evangelical art, is that this sort of “my side did it, so it’s okay” thinking is the way everybody approaches how they think about the world. In a polarized society, that’s occasionally true, but human beings are a lot more complicated and messy than all of us simply having the same thought patterns about society being a zero-sum game where only one group can win. (Of course, most potboiler fiction exists in a world where people are paper-thin caricatures who exist to advance the plot, and Peretti is working within that tradition.)Aja: This, again, is another thing that absolutely falls apart if you think about it for even a moment, because Peretti’s worldbuilding only works if all non-Christians and progressive Christians are, by default, incapable of building authentic loving communities and performing real authentic goodness. But of course, humans are quite capable of inherent goodness and love without invoking religion, and the longer the books progress through tours of characters who get divided up by religion without acknowledging their inherent capacity for humanity and goodness, the more these dividing lines stretch thin.Even less plausible is Peretti’s interpretation of gender relative to faith. In Peretti’s universe, unmarried men and women interact solely through a weird Puritan binary in which they are either always in danger of having sex (bad!), or else yoked together in a student/mentor or BDSM-y servant/master dynamic, with one always leading the other one (usually to Satan!). The only way Christian couples seem to function is by enthusiastically being in the God fandom together. The only way everyone else seems to function is by seeing the opposite sex as either a temptation or a tool. It’s such a strange way of framing relationships. He also presents masculinity as a sign of godliness. The effeteness of the villain’s church is one of its tells. Marshall thinks God should be bigger and tougher than the God he gets at the bad church. Peretti’s angels are big, brawny warriors. Peretti’s concern is with spiritual warfare, but even in the spiritual realm, war is a distinctly masculine subject. Emily: In that elevation of masculinity above all else, Peretti’s books accidentally capture the real scandal that was going on inside American evangelicalism at the time and that is now being steadily revealed: a terrible willingness to forgive child abuse and sexual assault if the accused was a powerful man and the accuser was a woman or child.In both books, male protagonists are accused of either child abuse or rape, and in both books, those accusations are lies concocted by demons to bring down powerful Christian men who are needed in the war against Satan. Within the fiction of the book, the accusations are obviously lies, because we see, for instance, every interaction pastor Hank Busche has with Carmen, the woman accusing him of raping her, and we also see that she’s possessed by many demons.In reality, however, the patriarchal hierarchy of evangelical churches creates a situation that is rife with opportunities for abuse. When God has ultimate authority and when he has given the people who lead his churches a simulacrum of that ultimate authority, then what they do is, by definition, acceptable. Thus, when these men are accused of heinous crimes, they are either being assailed by Satan’s lies or their victims deserved what happened to them on some level. Peretti plays into that idea in both books, paying lip service to the idea that some pastors might be horrible people (or, in the book’s cosmology, demon-infested people) but never actually depicting that reality.In talking about the books’ portrayal of power dynamics, we also need to talk about their racism, which is sometimes quite direct. Peretti frames all of his villains as being vaguely Hindu, a choice so forthrightly awful that it becomes kind of darkly comedic. But I’m more interested in the books’ other depictions of race, which are within evangelical Christian spaces. For the most part, Peretti uses the “colorblind casting” approach of lots of popcorn fiction where a character’s race is incidental to their plot function — for instance, in Piercing the Darkness, one of the main characters, Ben Cole, is a Black cop — and at least when it comes to the angels, he’s occasionally egalitarian. Yet all the human characters are assumed to be white unless otherwise noted, and it’s here where the books’ depiction of evangelical racism is most pernicious.Modern evangelical Christianity often likes to pay lip service to diversity. An evangelical megachurch, especially in an urban area, will crow about the diversity of its membership, but that diversity only exists insofar as it props up the existing hierarchy, which elevates white, straight, cis men. The Darkness novels use a similar approach to race. Once you’re on the right side, you’re one of the good guys, regardless of your race, but Peretti’s diverse band of angels is still preserving the status quo of white, patriarchal American Christianity. And once you’re on the wrong side, well, then the book will just be forthrightly racist when talking about you.Alissa: When I reread the books a couple of years ago, the racism was the thing that stuck out most clearly to me, and I’m kind of curious how Peretti would handle it today. (I suspect a little differently, if only because of his publishers?)In the end, here is the thing — and the reason we even started talking about this in the first place, I think. Other than serving as a manual for spiritual warfare for some Christians — something Peretti actively discouraged, to his credit — his books are more of an encapsulation or embodiment of the culture wars of the time than a driver of them. When you read them, you were hearing echoes of what people were saying on Christian radio, from pulpits, and in Christian bookstores.And so it’s important to note that there was a lot of evangelical pop culture pushing and reflecting the same ideas at the time and soon afterward. Take, for instance, Audio Adrenaline’s mega-bestselling 1993 album Don’t Censor Me (the one with that huge hit song “Big House” on it). The whole album is about how you can’t make Christians shut up or stop praying in schools — basically, an anti “cancel culture” album, and it came out when I was 10. Or, as you mentioned, Aja, there’s DC Talk’s song “Jesus Freak,” with the chorus “People say I’m strange, does it make me a stranger / That my best friend was born in a manger?”Or, as a friend recently pointed out on Twitter, there’s a whole Christian nationalist mini-sermon tacked onto the end of the band Sonicflood’s track “I Want to Know You,” a song that has nothing at all to do with America but was played at every single evangelical youth conference and event around the turn of the century. Sonicflood basically invented the “worship” genre (which has more or less taken over Christian music, but that’s another story), and American Christian nationalism now pervades the genre, which translates into what gets played in churches.Or, as I’ve written previously, an entire cottage industry instantly sprang up in the late 1990s around what turned out to be somewhat apocryphal tales of Christian teens being killed for their faith at Columbine. That spawned a martyrdom fantasy that continues to this day.You can draw a straight line from these to the uberpopular and, frankly, downright un-Christian God’s Not Dead movies, which are the most political of all evangelical films and posit increasingly hysterical battles between evil ACLU atheists and devout Christians. Peretti’s books are kind of quaint and friendly by contrast.I could go on and on and on. But the point is this: very little has changed. That fact is why we started talking about this at all. I remember, maybe a dozen years ago, during Obama’s first term, hearing evangelical “thought leaders” of various stripes proposing that the culture wars were over, that we were past all of that now. I was skeptical, and it turns out, rightly. Everything old is new again. I think some of us, having been exposed to the hysterics in the past, instantly recognize it when it resurfaces and know there’s nothing new here. But if we don’t learn from history, we’re doomed to repeat it.