

## Universal Harvester

John Darnielle

Far from a midcareer side project, this unsettling second novel from the frontman of indie folk band The Mountain Goats confirms the promise of his National Book Award-nominated debut, *Wolf in White Van*. Jeremy Heldt is working at the Video Hut in small-town Iowa during the late 1990s when a customer returns her VHS rental, complaining that another movie appears to have been spliced in—not much action, just some faint breathing. Soon after, another customer reports something similar, this one involving a figure in a chair with a bag tied around its head. Jeremy's boss Sarah Jane recognizes the barn in this second video and ultimately gives up the video store trying to find answers. From this spooky premise, Darnielle goes further into an oblique, moving meditation on grief: Jeremy's mother was killed in a car accident when he was younger, and the woman whose barn Sarah Jane identifies lost her mother to a religious sect more than 20 years earlier. Their losses haunt the novel, as does the foreboding Iowa landscape. **VERDICT** Darnielle's contemporary ghost story may confound with its elusiveness (who is the mysterious "I" narrator?), but its impact will stick with readers.

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