

## Read Tape

IN *UNIVERSAL HARVESTER*, FOUND-FOOTAGE FICTION SLOWLY SHATTERS INTO SOMETHING EVEN STRANGER

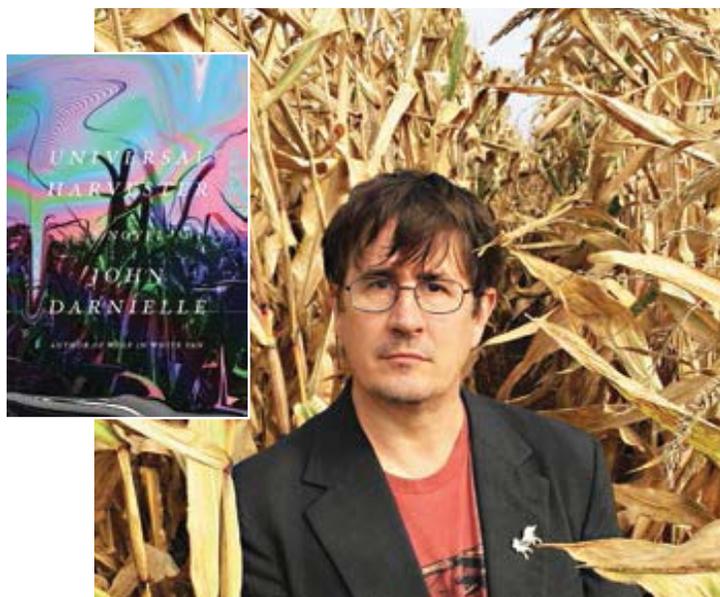
BY BRIAN HOWE

You can get through John Darnielle's second novel in the time it takes a house wren to set up shop inside a gourd, which is about half a day. (This factoid is brought to you by one of the many agrarian or industrial asides that seal up Darnielle's sparsely thatched narrative.) But if you do, you'll understand about as much as a wren would, too.

*Universal Harvester* is one kind of book wearing several disguises. It's a mystery whose momentum doesn't obey the laws of narrative physics, ricocheting sideways into deepening shadow. Still, it has a strange propulsion, and while it evades the crisp, satisfying clicks of traditional suspense fiction, Darnielle resolves his fugue with a groaning song all his own—one that is in some ways frustrating but also quite memorable.

Long before he was long-listed for a National Book Award for his 2014 debut novel, *Wolf in White Van*, Darnielle was renowned as the singer-songwriter of The Mountain Goats, and it's tempting to look for parallels between his music and his fiction. You can find them, say, in visions of rural isolation and religious cults. But Darnielle the novelist certainly doesn't fall into the musician's trap of connecting everything too neatly; if anything, he tends toward opacity and disintegration.

*Universal Harvester* is set at the end of the 1990s, when corporate chains were finishing off small-town video rental stores like the one where Jeremy works, in an Iowa town where the farmhouses all have "clean dish-towels embroidered with roosters or the sun smartly draped over the handle of the stove" and "days roll on like hills too low to give names to[.]" His mother's death in a car accident several years prior has bound him into a quiet, companionable kinship of grief with his father; they watch movies while Jeremy contemplates a future in industrial agriculture. But his inert life is disrupted when customers start seeing weird bits of film spliced into rental tapes like *She's All That*—cryptic snippets, shot in a dark shed, in which a



John Darnielle PHOTO BY BRANDON EGGLESTON

hooded figure is apparently being subjected to captivity, maybe even torture.

As Jeremy and his boss begin to find more of these disturbing scenes, we think we know what kind of story we're in, and it's an odd one. Found-footage horror has thoroughly infested cinema, so why wouldn't it metastasize into a work of fiction set in the ground-zero-era of *The Blair Witch Project*? For a while, *Universal Harvester* seems like it's basically the movie *V/H/S* as a Stephen King novella, peppered with a lot of deceptively extraneous exposition about family histories.

But, as you already know if you read Darnielle's Tumblr, this feint toward literary torture porn isn't what it seems: "I had this idea to tell a horror story that would also function as a cartography of grief set within that world I'd lived in for a long spell," he wrote.

(Though Darnielle now lives in Durham, he has also lived in the Midwest, working on a grain elevator.) Though Jeremy and his boss do get sucked into unraveling the mystery of the tapes, it doesn't lead them anywhere you'd even remotely guess.

As a mystery, *Universal Harvester* exploits four gaps in the reader's knowledge: who the narrator is, why he or she keeps alluding to the existence of other versions of this story, where these spooky tapes are coming from, and what's going on in them. If you expect them all to snap together with the climactic revelation of something hiding in plain sight, don't. The first, third, and fourth mysteries resolve in a way that is surprising but can't be called a twist: the solution is ambiguous, and somewhat arduous to construct psychologically. The metafictional tease of the

second hardly follows through at all, leaving the reader to decide what to make of it. After the reveal, some of the video clips wind up making sense and some don't, and life is just like that sometimes. Cloaked in light horror, it's really a book about families navigating absences—about two mothers taken by God, one in death and one in life, and about how land and commerce shape people in big, empty places that can turn into cages of air.

Darnielle writes in an unvarying register, somewhere between postmodern blankness and Midwestern simplicity. His minimal quotient of affect and style sharply sculpts certain observations and rhetorical flourishes. Jeremy's father is one of those men "whose need to retain their composure often surpassed their desire to be healed," while the Video Hut where Jeremy works exists in a "once-inviolable stillness, its perennial motionless static present, a thing already passing into legend."

On that note, it seems significant that two of the main timelines—the end of the nineties and the end of aughts—were marked by waves of filmic obsolescence: the former of family video stores, the latter of analog film equipment. Both are alluded to in *Universal Harvester*. The abstract feeling of film, a degrading yet infinitely editable bulwark against total loss, is threaded through Darnielle's human insights, which relate to how we want to keep things most as they disappear, how we long to edit our own stories.

But since the characters lack idiosyncrasies, it's the mystery that tugs us on toward the book's uncertain, elusive conclusion. The novel demands not so much rereading as archaeology, combing back through it to find the details that fix the narrow crosshatching of narratives into a meaning. Certainly the initial, implicit promise of a sharp payoff is a red herring. Perhaps it's a story that doesn't quite coalesce because it's about stories that never had the chance to—or maybe I'm just missing something. See what you think.

bhowe@indyweek.com

JOHN DARNIELLE: *UNIVERSAL HARVESTER*

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