



The Dark Game

Jonathan Janz

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Jonathan Janz's *The Dark Game* is an unsettling, fascinating horror drama about morality and fame.

Legendary writer Roderick Wells hosts a retreat at his secluded estate for ten up-and-coming authors that offers huge monetary rewards and the possibility of a prestigious literary career. The participants range from a debut powerhouse who's afraid of burning out to a more experienced but struggling writer. All have one surprising bond.

As Wells's dark nature reveals itself, so too do the sinister secrets hidden in each writer's past. Before long, it becomes apparent that madness and evil permeate both Wells and his estate. Subconscious fears and nightmares made real prowl the grounds as Wells seeks to break the authors down for his own purposes.

All of the characters are flawed, with unusual traumas in their pasts: one left a man to die in an abandoned house when they were a child; another routinely abused a mentally challenged Amish girl. Each seems to deserve their fate.

Janz writes with a deft and unnerving hand. Every scene features unsettling elements, from subtle foreshadowing to overt gore and mutilation. Chapters are short and entrancing as they quickly rotate through the authors' points of view. Snippets from their works in progress layer in additional suspense. Reveals are frequent and shocking. The story becomes less about who will win than about seeing which author can stave off the horror long enough to escape.

Early foreshadowing feels forced, but as the novel progresses, the unsettling elements unspool with drama and flair. Character reveals and the true nature of the estate come to feel organic, and the climax wraps everything up in a gory bow without compromising the reigning dark tone.

Dark, violent, and twisted, *The Dark Game* blends horror with a character study to disturbing effect.

JOHN M. MURRAY (March/April 2019)

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