



**THE  
DARKEST  
GAME**

**A NOVEL**

**JOSEPH  
SCHNEIDER**

**"Irresistible... Joseph Schneider should be on everyone's radar."**

**—JONATHAN MOORE, Edgar Award and Hammett Prize finalist**

## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Describe the emotional turmoil Jarsdel faces throughout the narrative. Is he able to overcome any of it by the end?
2. Discuss the dynamic between Jarsdel and Morales. Do they work well together?
3. Explain how Keating and Burken each used their roles at the museum for personal gain. Do you think one of them is worse than the other? Why?
4. Pruitt ends up being a perfect rival for Jarsdel. Outline their similarities and differences.
5. There are many kinds of crime in this book: the bloody massacre in 1854, Baba's cowardice, the senseless murders. Discuss the legacies they leave behind.
6. What was your first impression of the Natty Lads? Did your opinion change throughout the book?
7. Do you think Rostami deserves to know the true

circumstances around her son's death? Baba chooses not to tell her—would you make the same choice?

8. Jarsdel and Baba have a contentious relationship. Why do you think that is? Do you have a similar relationship with a parental figure?
9. Explain the terrible truth behind “King Henry’s Pride.” How is it tied to the journal and Pruitt Equities?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

**Pulling Jarsdel out of LA, his home turf, was an interesting choice. Why did you choose Catalina Island as the new setting?**

Catalina's very special to me. I do my best writing there, and when I was making the final push on *What Waits for You*, Anna watched the kids and just let me slug away at the manuscript by myself in Avalon. All I did was write and walk and stare out at the ocean, and I started to think how perfect a place it was to set a mystery novel. You've got the proximity to LA, so it's a plausible destination for Tully, and its geography as an island let me indulge a classic trope of the genre. You know—how did the killer do it if he was separated from the victim by water? And how's the isolation from the mainland going to affect the story and the characters? Mostly, though, I was captivated by Avalon's vibe and wanted to see if I could translate it to the page.

**When the story opens, Jarsdel is grappling with what one might call an existential crisis. What made you decide to put him through that?**

In listening to detectives talk about their job, you get an idea of how painful it can be when you've put so much into a case—all

those countless investigative hours, sacrificing time with your loved ones, dealing with the aftermath of the violence—just to have it fall apart. It can make you feel angry and demoralized. I wanted to show that part of Tully's life and in so doing, start him off with a serious loss, which gives him a powerful motive to solve the new case.

**The ever-growing stack of dusty cold case files Jarsdel finds himself tackling is disheartening. Was this something you came across in your research with law enforcement?**

Yeah, and I don't think Tully's cut out for it. Too impatient, too easily frustrated. The folks I've spoken to who work cold cases are very clear-headed and surprisingly upbeat. They're also able to follow the trajectory of a case over years and years as they work on it, even when new ones come across their desks.

**What books are on your bedside table right now?**

*The Secret History of Magic* by Peter Lamont and Jim Steinmeyer, *How Magicians Think* by Joshua Jay, *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London, and *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* by Merlin Sheldrake.

**This story digs into the history of Iran and Jarsdel's family, and how that shapes his relationships with his Baba. What inspired you to write that subplot?**

I wanted something that would echo the theme of the main story—that the past may sleep, but it never dies. No matter how long it's been dormant, it can snap awake at any moment and rock us to our foundations. Both Baba and the villain try to avoid the consequences of the past, and neither are successful.

**Being a crime writer involves juggling many narrative threads at once. In your writing process, at what point do you know who the killer is?**

I thrive under structure—without it, I’m a mess—so I plan all that stuff out in what screenwriters call a beat sheet before I start the first chapter. Outlines can fudge on the side of vagueness, but beat sheets demand the writer catalogue every discrete unit of action from start to finish. I also indicate, in bold, where clues are threaded in so that the mystery plays fair with the audience.

**It seems that this story explores the aftermath of terrible things. What, for you, is the takeaway?**

I believe the only way for us to make any real progress, both as individuals and as a people, is for there to be a true and honest reckoning with the horrors of history. This is a painful—even agonizing—process but one that’s nevertheless essential in the advancement of human compassion and understanding. It’s the avoidance of honest confrontation with the past, and the concomitant ignorance that results, that lies at the root of so much suffering. And the confrontation will come anyway, one way or another, so it’s best to meet it with courage and open eyes.