



"A brilliant first novel."  
—DICK WOLF,  
creator of *Law & Order*

# ONE DAY YOU'LL BURN

A NOVEL

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## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. When Dustin Sparks—a special effects professional—discovers the victim's body, he notices that it resembles some of his work in horror films. Do you think graphic violence in movies can affect how we perceive reality? Why or why not?
2. Jarsdel found his career as a history professor unendurable and left his field to join the police force. What do you think inspired his career change? Do you think he made the correct decision?
3. Describe the relationship between Jarsdel and his parents. Why is there so much tension between them? Do you think it's fair for his parents to be resentful of his career choice?
4. What do you think of Jarsdel and Morales's dynamic? Do you think they work well together? If you were a detective, who would you choose as your partner? Why?

5. In what ways does Jarsdel's academic background influence his police work? Is his background always helpful, or does it get in the way of the investigation?
6. Aleena and Jarsdel debate the existence of true evil—Aleena claims that people do bad things to each other because of their circumstances, and Jarsdel believes that sometimes a person's 'badness' is inherent. Which side do you agree with? Are all people capable of evil?
7. What do you make of someone like Jeff Dinan? Do you think he's a good person?
8. Would working a disturbing case like this make you question your notions of good and evil? Do you think it's possible to investigate violent crimes without becoming jaded?
9. What kinds of things do you associate with modern-day Hollywood? Do you agree with Stevens that the magic of old Hollywood has been lost?
10. Think about someone like the Dog Catcher, who doesn't physically hurt people but still acts maliciously and with the intent to harm. Why does he do the things he does? Is he a bad person? Is he as bad as someone like Stevens?
11. What do all of Stevens's victims have in common? Why does he target them?
12. At the end of the book Jarsdel is conflicted about his place in the Hollywood Homicide, though he ultimately decides to keep his job. Why do you think he decides to stay? Did he make the right decision?

13. We are taught to not repeat the mistakes of the past, but Stevens replicates a killing device from ancient Greece. Discuss the consequences of venerating history, rather than using it as a warning. What are the dangers of trying to bring the past to life? Are there any benefits to it?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

**The setting in this story is crucial to the development of the plot. What is it about Hollywood that made you choose to feature it so prominently in the book?**

Hollywood is where I grew up, and it's strange—I was always conscious of its otherworldliness, even when I was very young. It's wild when you're raised in a place where it's the adults who are always playing make-believe. I don't just mean professional actors, who actually comprise a very small percentage of the population. I'm talking about the poor guy they got playing Doc Brown running around Universal Studios, or the costumed characters in front of the Chinese Theater. Countless others. Writers and directors and producers, set designers and FX crews, they dedicate their lives to telling stories. Stories are what built that town. And it's true—every now and then you do have that giddy experience of watching a film and then running into one of the actors at the grocery store. I can't describe what a thrill that is when you're a little boy obsessed with movies. So I always felt like it was a special, magical place—much like growing up in a circus, I imagine.

But you see the frayed edges too, and you see what happens when people run out of money or realize they've gotten too old, that what they came all the way out there for probably isn't going to work out.

The slowly dawning horror that they're going to have to admit that everyone who told them they were crazy for going to Hollywood was *right*. It's uniquely painful. Insult to injury. If you want to become a doctor and for whatever reason it just doesn't come together, nobody calls you an idiot. But you try and fail in the entertainment industry, and it's "What were you thinking? What made *you* think you were so special?"

Ever had one of those dreams that suddenly slides into a nightmare, without warning? Hollywood's just like that sometimes, and I thought it was the perfect place to set a story about desire, regret, and death.

**The story is chock-full of details about forensics, human anatomy, police procedures, history, and philosophy. What was your research process like?**

Researching for a debut novel is very tough, because you don't have any credibility. Most of the people you call up aren't going to get back to you, and I hit a lot of dead ends. I devoured every book on the subject I could find, including textbooks written for homicide investigators. I really wanted the story to feel authentic, and Det. Rick Jackson was gracious enough to look over the finished manuscript, telling me what I could fudge on and what I couldn't.

Most of the hands-on research I did was in the Contra Costa Sheriff's Citizens Academy, which is a kind of crash course in each branch of the department, from investigations to aerial pursuits to forensics. They conduct it for free as a way of showing interested civilians what police work is like. I actually plan on retaking it so I can stay current. It's terrific fun, but it's sobering too, like the day we learned vehicle stops. One of the deputies was playing the guy I'm supposed to pull over, and he comes stumbling out of the car, acting drunk, waving his hands around. They've given me a gun loaded with Simunitions, which are kind of like paintballs, but you fire them from a standard weapon, and you get the report and everything, the gun cycling like it normally would if you were using live

ammo. I tell the guy to calm down, and he doesn't. We're playacting, and I feel a little silly, ordering him around. It's like a bad improv scene, me spouting all these stock cop lines I learned from TV. But then suddenly he whips out a black cell phone and thrusts it in my direction. And I shoot him, and the projectile hits him in the chest and he goes down. A few seconds pass before the deputy gets up and the next student takes my place, but I'm a little shaken by the whole thing. We were in broad daylight in the middle of a sheriffs' training facility—a controlled, safe situation, and I shot him. I thought, what if this had been real? What if this had happened at night, on the side of a deserted highway? I would've just killed a man for pointing a phone at me, and I'd have to live with that decision forever. I knew right then I wasn't cut out to make those kinds of decisions, that crime writing was as close to the real thing as I wanted to get. And it gave me a whole new respect for the law enforcement pros who face that situation on a regular basis.

**With his background in academia, Jarsdel isn't a conventional detective. When you were creating his character, why did you choose to make him a historian?**

The first reason had to do with practicality. I wanted him to be intelligent but not street-smart. And if he wasn't street-smart, he still had to have something that would make him special or set him apart. A scientific expertise might have worked, but as much as I love science I can't write about it with much authority. History on the other hand is my favorite subject to teach, and I felt at home creating a character who'd been an adjunct classics professor. It informs his worldview, his philosophy. It's also a convenient way to have him call forward an obscure bit of knowledge, hopefully without the audience asking why he would know that. And when I give some background on LA, maybe it seems like it's coming from him instead of me, which can make that kind of stuff feel a little less expository.

The second reason is because I deliberately asked myself, before I put a single word down on paper, what I could contribute to the

genre of detective fiction. I knew I couldn't pull off a tough, alpha-wolf detective. It's been done too well, and by writers who really know that voice and can generate it authentically. Michael Connelly had worked for years as crime reporter before he published *The Black Echo*. When he writes Harry Bosch, you feel the weight of that character, can tell it's been earned from soaking up that world. I needed a way to make my perspective as an outsider work for me, not against me. I felt Jarsdel could offer a mystery lover a fresh perspective on the genre, allowing both me *and* the reader a way into the material that hadn't been tried before.

**The Dog Catcher subplot is a surprisingly disturbing one—what made you include it in the narrative?**

I enjoy stories that have a secondary mystery for the detective to solve. It offers a break from the main thread and allows you to discover things about the character, so I knew it was something I wanted to do in my own book. What was most important to me was that the sub-plot be relevant to Jarsdel's journey. The crime had to be repugnant to him on every level—spiteful, cruel, selfish, absolutely wicked. Because I knew he wasn't going to end up with Aleena at the end of the story, I had to give him a victory, something he could exit with and still have his head up high.

I love dogs, just adore them. I remember the incredible pain I felt when we lost our dog a few years back to bone cancer. One day she was fine, then it was downhill so fast, almost as if the diagnosis itself made her sicker.

Storytelling has to begin with what's compelling to the writer. If it doesn't move the writer, it's definitely not going to move the reader. Add to that my general disposition, which is unfortunately a *what if* personality. I torment myself with *what if* scenarios about things going wrong in my life—ruining my career, disgracing my family, ending up in prison. And since you can't prove a negative, no one can definitively tell me my fears are completely groundless, right? It's awful, but at least with writing, I can turn that mechanism loose.



I take an incident like my dog dying, and I think how much worse it would have been if it'd been caused by a malicious act instead of a disease. Then I compound that, think how much worse *that* would be if it occurred during a special, happy event, like a wedding. What would the fallout be? Would the marriage survive after getting started with a tragedy? I live with those kinds of *what if* questions, and they drive the darker sides of my fiction.

**A plot like this one twists and turns, keeping the readers on their toes. How did you go about writing this story? Was it difficult to keep track of the plot points, or did everything fall into place?**

My original story was much more of a straight line and not as dynamic. Both my agent and editor suggested places to weave in red herrings and kick up the pacing, which resulted in a substantially stronger plot. It was a long process, with several drafts. When you fix something, it often causes a continuity problem elsewhere, and you might spend whole workdays just tweaking timeline issues. It was a learn-as-you-go situation, and there were certainly many ways I could've worked smarter. With the second book in the series, I used a more efficient system where I'd keep track of plot points using scene numbers and a character manifest—similar to how you'd write out a beat sheet for a screenplay.

**What books are you reading these days?**

I'm on the second of Anthony Horowitz's *Daniel Hawthorne* series. It's a bold concept, with Horowitz writing in first-person as himself, and he's been asked by this brilliant but socially awkward detective to shadow him and document his cases. It's a new take on the Watson-Holmes paradigm, with very funny, fourth-wall-breaking details about Horowitz's life as a novelist and screenwriter. And he's a master of the genre, so the mysteries themselves are extremely satisfying.

In nonfiction, I just finished *Caesar's Last Breath*, by Sam Keane. It's all about the gases that make up our air—their discovery, their

uses and misuses by humankind. You get the history of anesthesia, dynamite, the steam engine. Keane's one of the best contemporary science writers, and the book is pure pleasure.

I'd say the standout for me this year—the one that got inside my head and wouldn't let go—was *The Radium Girls*, by Kate Moore. It's the definitive account of the workers—young women and teenaged girls—hired to paint luminous radium dials in the '20s. The companies tell them the material's harmless, and the stuff is all over them every day—in their hair, in their mouths from pointing the brushes. It's heartbreaking, absolutely ghastly what happened to them. But then you learn the things they achieved for labor rights, how they changed the country, and you can't believe you haven't heard about these people before. It's the kind of book that makes you wonder why certain stories are included in the academic canon and others aren't, and who gets to decide what's significant. It's a knockout read on every level, and Moore's prose is just gorgeous.