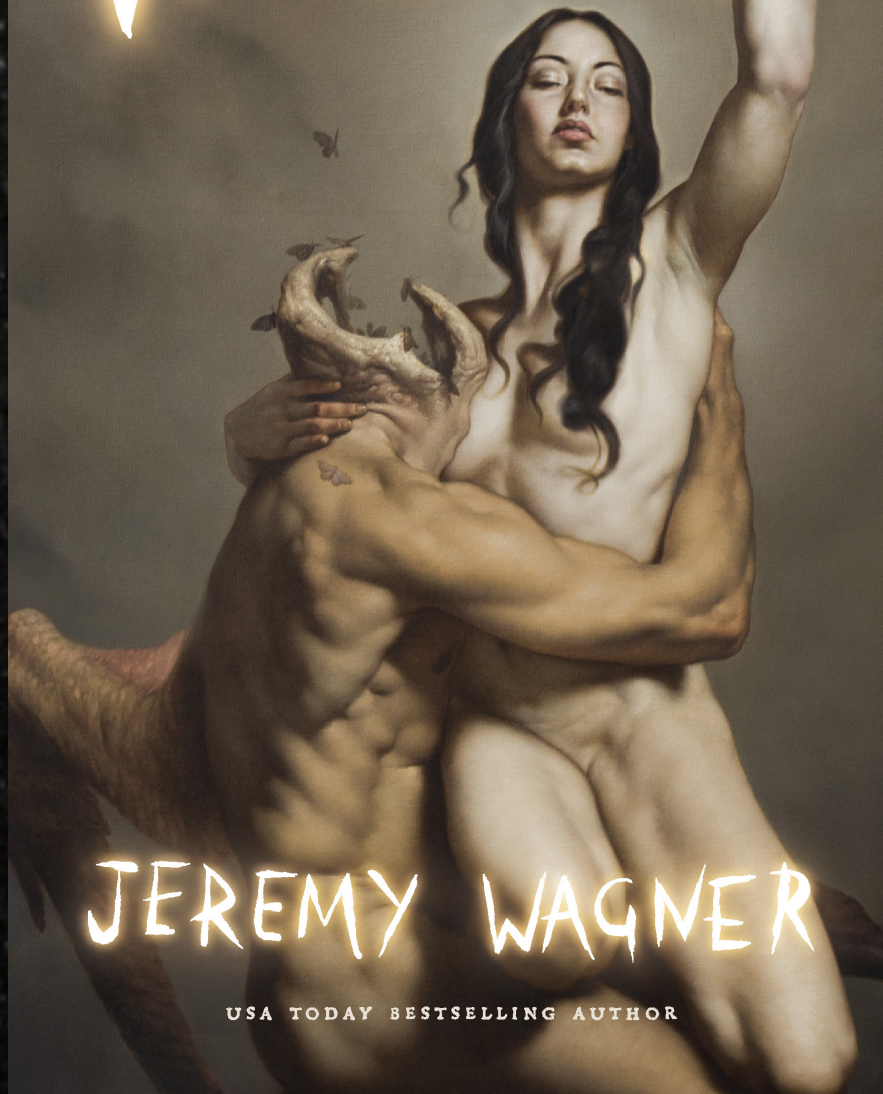


*"If you only read one more horror novel this year, make sure this is it."* — Edward Lee

# WRETCH



**READING GROUP GUIDE**

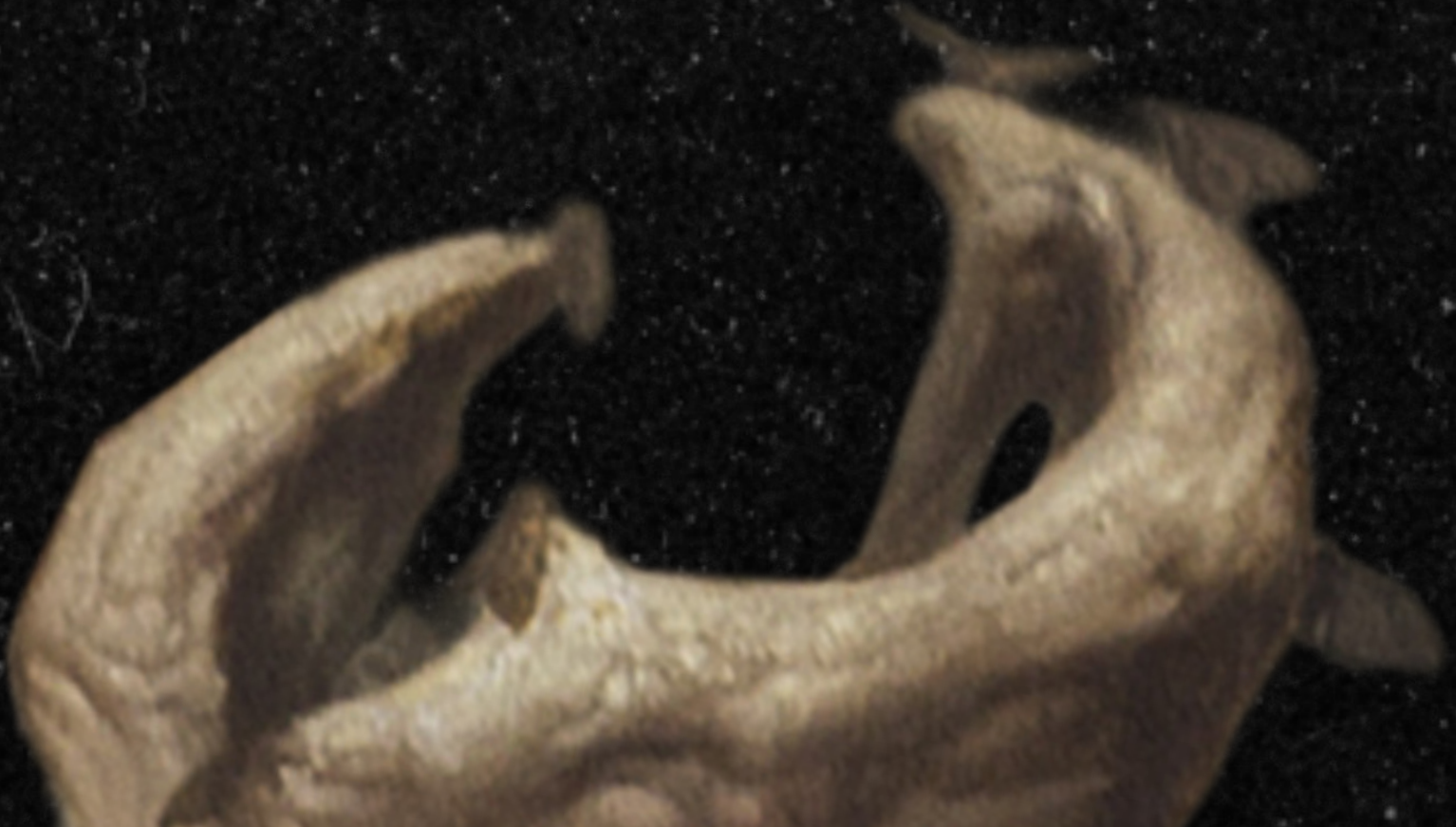
**Reading Group Discussion Guide for**

# WRETCH

**By Jeremy Wagner**

This reading group guide for Jeremy Wagner's *Wretch* includes an introduction, discussion questions, a Q&A with the author, and ideas for enhancing your book club.

The discussion questions may contain spoilers for readers who have not yet read *Wretch*.





# INTRODUCTION

*Wretch* is a relentless descent into crime, horror, and vengeance. A brutal unflinching thriller for fans of organized crime sagas, dark detective fiction, and monsters born in the shadows of science.

Chicago is choking under the hottest summer on record, but the true heat comes from the blood spilled on its streets. Detective Donnie Lynch trails a killer who shouldn't exist. Mob boss Tico "The Meatgrinder" Tortellio has stepped out from the shadows of his empire with a personal vendetta to avenge his daughter—and nothing short of blood will settle the score. Both men are hunting the same man— if "man" is still the right word...

The elusive killer, Derek Hoffman, is a steroid-abusing-sociopath twisted beyond recognition whose body and mind have been grotesquely transformed after his participation in a clinical trial for an experimental ED-arousal-drug called, LIBIDONAL. Hoffman has become something monstrous, a predator driven by lust, rage, and a thirst for blood.

With the city becoming a killing ground for a new apex predator, Lynch and Tortellio race toward the same target. But who will reach Hoffman first? And when they do, can bullets or brutality be enough to stop him? *Wretch* is a brutal descent into crime, horror, and vengeance. A nightmare version of a city where justice wears many faces, and none of them are merciful.

# QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

*The questions below may contain spoilers for readers who have not yet finished Wretch.*

1. The weather is often blamed for people's bad behavior: Heat waves causing rising tension, and the phases of the moon were once thought to be the cause of temporary insanity (hence the word lunacy). Have you noticed this pattern in your own life or in fiction? How does the weather affect human behavior? How is weather used to cover up crime?
2. Power imbalance and corruption fuel the actions of various characters: Derek Hoffman extorts his brother to get money, Sid Hoffman uses his position as a researcher to illegally enter his brother into a pharmaceutical trial, and Tico uses his connections to corrupt police officers to gain information about his daughter's attacker. Would the events of the novel have been possible without these abuses of power?
3. Tico, Donnie, and Hoffman each represent different sides of how masculinity is expressed by men and how it impacts them. Did their relationship with masculinity become a weakness? A strength? How did it influence their relationships with other characters? What makes a "good" man?
4. Derek Hoffman is the killer of the book, but is he fully responsible for the deaths? If Hoffman isn't solely responsible, who else is to blame and why?
5. Throughout the novel, Donnie Lynch deals with several losses: the dissolution of his marriage, his cancer, and finally, his friend and former partner. How did the events of the novel help him reckon with those losses? How did they impact his investigation?
6. Tico "The Meat Grinder" Tortellio is a mob boss who values his family legacy. What other famous or fictional mob bosses are similar? Why do you think we are so drawn to this archetype? Do you think Tico's actions were born of love or ego?
7. Do you think Derek would have still become a murderer even without the effects of Libidonal and the other drugs he took? Why or why not?
8. The drug trial for Libidonal went horribly wrong. In recent years, Big Pharma has been analyzed more in the media and pop culture. Can you think of other examples where Big Pharma has been under the microscope? At what point is innovation not worth the price? What ethical and moral standards should pharmaceutical companies be held to regarding drug trials?
9. Each death was, at first, seemingly unconnected until the end revealed how the threads were woven together. Which death was the most surprising to you?
10. Was the ending satisfying to you? Why or why not? Was justice served?

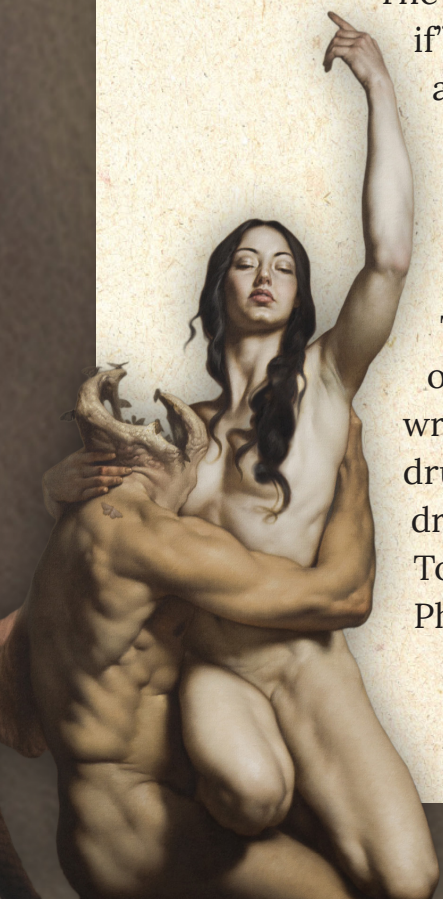
# Q&A WITH JEREMY WAGNER

**Q: The dangers—and negligence—of Big Pharma are a major theme in *Wretch*. How did you research this? What was important to you about incorporating this into *Wretch*?**

**A:** The dangers and negligence of Big Pharma came to me decades ago—sometimes the ideas for stories are planted, noted, and waiting to find the right time to be written. For *Wretch* research, it starts with me being a human guinea pig. It all started when I actually participated in a pharmacological research program for the Big Pharma giant, Abbott Labs in the 1990's! For those who don't know, Abbott Laboratories is a Chicago-based, multinational medical devices and health care, and pharmaceutical company that sells medical devices, diagnostics, branded generic medicines, and nutritional products. Some of Abbott's products include Pedialyte, Similac, BinaxNOW, Ensure, ZonePerfect, FreeStyle Libre...

Back in the day, Abbott sought participants for their pharmaceutical research programs—and some of these trials paid \$3,000. That was huge money to me then.

The experience planted the seed for *Wretch* ... The whole “what if” of someone participating in a program like this, and thinking about what if something went horribly wrong was fascinating to me. After that, I spent time picking the brains of Abbott employees I actually went to school with, getting a picture of experimental drugs gone wrong, side-effects, and also, I did a lot of reading up on real-life Big Pharma horrors for research. Then when Viagra came out and other ED drugs, a lightbulb went off in my head, which was, “What if something went horribly wrong during a pharmacological research for an experimental ED drug?” I'm fascinated by the dynamics of sex and the effects of drugs and how they can transform lives—and the bad side to that. To that end, I absolutely knew I was going to weave this Big Pharma horror into an antagonist in *Wretch*. I was on my way!



**Q: You did a ride-along with the Chicago PD during your research for *Wretch*. What did you learn from that process? What was important to you about capturing an authentic police experience?**

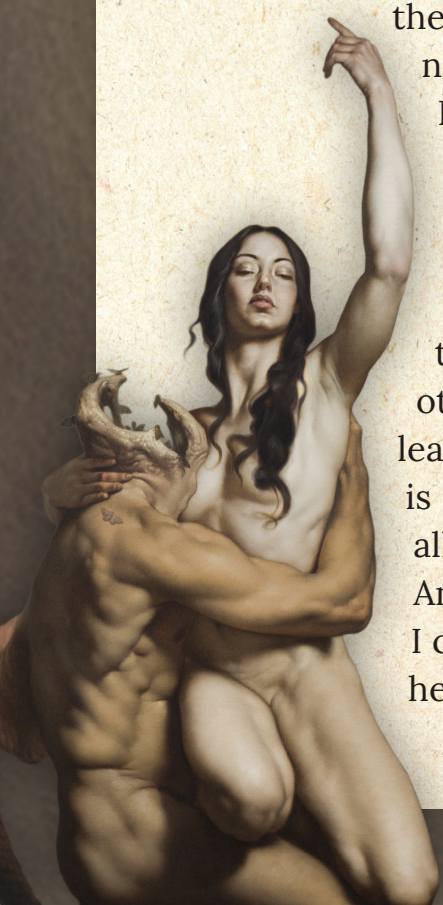
**A:** I'm from Chicago, *Wretch* takes place in Chicago, and because I strive for some kind of legit accuracy in my novels with things I don't know about, I go to the experts and also do my own research.

I actually DID go for a ride along with Chicago Police Detective (CPD) and worked primarily with a retired CPD detective named Peter Koconis—who I met through lawyer crime novelist Laura Caldwell who also consulted me on police procedures. Peter was awesome. I learned so much from that process... Peter Koconis (whom I also call Sgt. Pete or Uncle Pete now) had done it ALL in his career: beat/street cop, detective, homicide, organized crime task force on the Chicago Outfit (mobsters), internal affairs, gang task forces...He even had a detail where he had to dress up as a female prostitute to bust men trying to pay for illicit sex in the 1970s. I learned so much from Sgt. Pete. I did 8 hours of interviews with him and then met up with him in Chicago. After doing all that legwork with Sgt. Pete, I also hit the Chicago streets on my own, some very bad parts of town—which was risky, honestly—places where gangs, drug dealers, street people, prostitutes, and more resided and plied their trades. Why? To see what Sgt. Pete had taught and shown me. Those hard-life folks on the street always want money—I learned that much, but I also learned that

these “criminals” did their thing to survive—even if violence was necessary in their POV. It was eye-opening and harrowing—and I'm grateful nothing happened to me by going that extra mile.

My takeaway from working with police and a real veteran CPD detective, was that I learned what it is to be a cop in today's world and what they have to deal with specific to Chicago, what the CPD camaraderie is like, how hard it to be short-staffed on the police force, rolling with new times—like being respectful to others they question and sensitive to the LGBTQ+ community—I learned about forensics, what a day in the life of a CPD detective is like, the things they see, how they protect themselves...I got all that. And I LOVE the experiences and I learn a lot!

And I think my dedication to my craft shows readers how much I care about my novels and invest in them to give the readers a helluva ride—and as “real” as possible.



Why did I do that and why is that important? It's like I said, I strive for some kind of legit accuracy in my novels with things I don't know about so that the reader gets as close to the "reality" of the POV of characters whose lives/careers hit home. It's paramount to me to go crazy deep into research. Also, even though *Wretch* is fiction, it's important to me to get it as right as possible for those who are cops, doctors, thugs, bodybuilders, etc. read this novel and can say, "Jeremy got it right."

**Q: Detective Donnie Lynch joins the roster of other memorable noir detectives of the genre. Who are some of your favorite fictional detectives? How did they influence Lynch?**

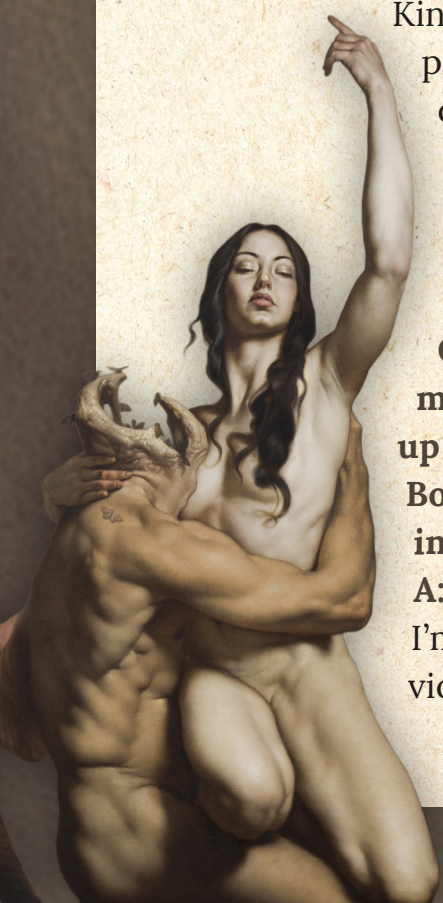
A: When I had the idea for *Wretch*, I needed a protagonist—one who had real heart, who had flaws, was progressive yet balancing his drive as being a good man in a world full of terror and violence, and colleagues who weren't as refined as him. So, I thought a "detective" was the perfect protagonist in *Wretch*. SOMEONE had to get to the bad man any way possible before more damage was done—enter Detective Donnie Lynch.

Moreover, I'm a big fan of crime-fiction. Some of my favorite fictional detectives are: Lourdes Robles, a relentless young Latina detective for the NYPD in author Peter Blauner's, *Sunrise Highway*, Homicide Detective Raymond Cruz in author Elmore Leonard's, *City Primeval*, detective Holly Gibney from Stephen

King's, *The Outsider*, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the legendary private investigator, Philip Marlowe, created by hard-boiled crime author, Raymond Chandler, and last, though he's not a detective but rather, a sheriff's deputy, Bob Hightower from Boston Teran's *God Is a Bullet* was such a great character who was on the hunt for some really bad people.

**Q: Tico "The Meat Grinder" Tortellio was a devoted family man, but also a brutal criminal. Derek Hoffman was a juiced-up bodybuilder, who had survived physical and mental abuse. Both men are products of their circumstances. What was most interesting to you about exploring these antagonists?**

A: I'm fascinated by organized crime, misfits, and sociopaths. I'm also fascinated by abnormal psychology and the biology of violence. In my experience of "write what you know," I've met



some real-life Tico's and Derek's—and these men were absolutely products of their circumstances, whether by either inheriting thrones of mayhem or by design, or by BOTH.

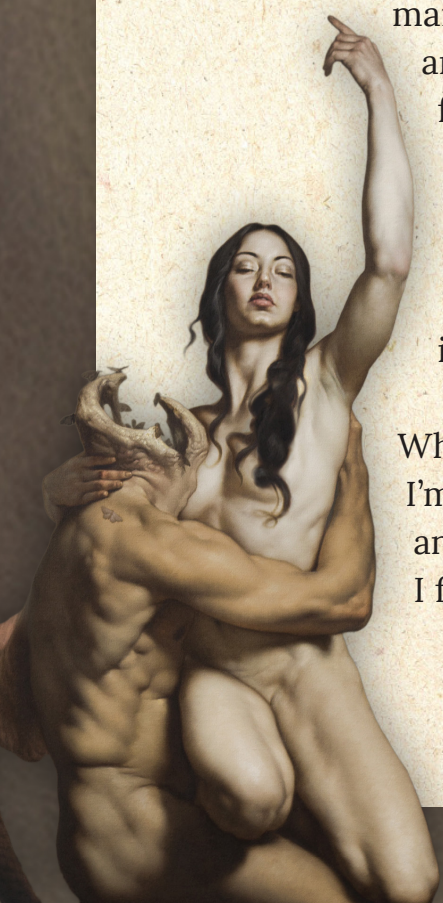
What's most interesting about exploring these psychopaths is that they have legitimate, complicated layers. They're horrible people, but I also want them to be seen as “human” and “three-dimensional.” I give readers the backstory on these guys, and I believe once you've read what their origins are, you might even have sympathy for them. Tico could be seen as being akin to Vito Corleone from Mario Puzo's novel, *The Godfather*—Vito being both a ruthless head of a major crime family, but also a loving family man. And Derek Hoffman could be seen as being akin to Francis Dolarhyde from Thomas Harris' novel *Red Dragon*.

My antagonists and the ones that I mentioned are not guys everyone might not root for, but they evoke some level of sympathy, given the hand they were dealt in life.

**Q: You are a modern Renaissance man: musician, publisher, and author. What do you love about writing compared to the other aspects of your career? As an author with multiple titles under your belt, what was unique about your experience writing *Wretch*?**

**A:** Writing novels and short stories is my favorite aspect of my career of having many irons in the fire. Compared to being in bands, making films, and being a publisher, writing is nice and quiet. Writing is solitary for me, and I don't have to deal with a million people on the creative side—only my editors and publisher are involved with my books. Being a book writer feels much freer, and I get my voice heard—both my “voice” that is the vibe/brand in my stories and my “voice” saying that it's my way or the highway if anyone doesn't embrace my brand of fiction or non-fiction.

What's unique about my experience with writing *Wretch* is that I'm both hitting my stride with my brand of fiction. I like it darker, and I'm going darker—while trying to tell a damn good story—and I find that I'm really “on brand” with my fiction.





# ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

- It's a hot one! *Wretch* takes place during one of the hottest weeks of a Chicago summer. For the snacks of your book club, set up a spread of heat wave treats for your fellow readers to enjoy.
- The noir detective is a beloved archetype of the genre. Come dressed as your favorite literary detective for an added air of mystery to your book club night.
- *Wretch* deals with the effects of body culture, toxic masculinity, and the patriarchy, as well as the dangers of Big Pharma. For some additional reading to give these topics more context, try:
  - » *Dopesick* by Beth Macy
  - » *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* by Patrick Radden Keefe
  - » *Of Boys and Men* by Richard V. Reeve
  - » *The Will to Change* by bell hooks
  - » *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris
  - » *Terminal Man* by Michael Crichton
- Check out **this Spotify playlist** of songs that author Jeremy Wagner put together that he says sums up what happens in *Wretch*—from the characters to Chicago and all that happens in between.

