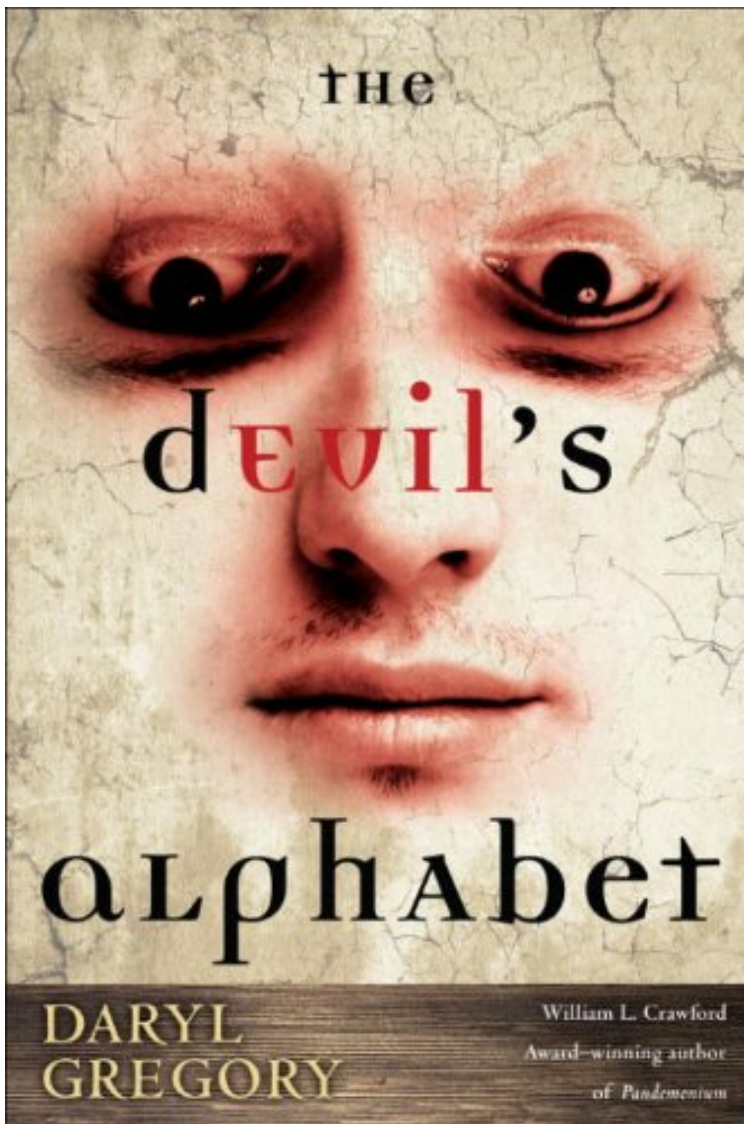


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The Devil's Alphabet



Par Daryl Gregory
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom Daryl Gregory, whose Pandemonium was one of the most exciting debut novels in memory, comes an astonishing work of soaring imaginative power that breaks new ground in contemporary fantasy.Switchcreek was a normal town in eastern Tennessee until a mysterious disease killed a third of its residents and mutated most of the rest into monstrous oddities. Then, as quickly and inexplicably as it had struck, the diseasedubbed Transcription Divergence Syndrome (TDS)vanished, leaving behind a population divided into three new branches of humanity: giant gray-skinned argos, hairless seal-like betas, and grotesquely obese charlies.Paxton Abel Martin was fourteen when TDS struck, killing his mother, transforming his preacher father into a charlie, and changing one of his best friends, Jo Lynn, into a beta. But Pax was one of the few who didnt change. He remained as normal as ever. At least on the

outside. Having fled shortly after the pandemic, Pax now returns to Switchcreek fifteen years later, following the suicide of Jo Lynn. What he finds is a town seething with secrets, among which murder may well be numbered. But there are even darker and far weirder mysteries hiding below the surface that will threaten not only Pax's future but the future of the whole human race. From the Trade Paperback edition. Extrait Chapter One Pax knew he was almost to Switchcreek when he saw his first argo. The gray-skinned man was hunched over the engine of a decrepit, roofless pickup truck stalled hood-up at the side of the road. He straightened as Pax's car approached, unfolding like an extension ladder. Ten or eleven feet tall, angular as a dead tree, skin the mottled gray of weathered concrete. No shirt, just overalls that came down to his bony knees. He squinted at Pax's windshield. Jesus, Pax thought. He'd forgotten how big they were. He didn't recognize the argo, but that didn't mean much, for a lot of reasons. He might even be a cousin. The neighborly thing would be to pull over and ask the man if he needed help. But Pax was running late, so late. He fixed his eyes on the road outside his windshield, pretending not to see the man, and blew past without touching his brakes. The old Ford Tempo shuddered beneath him as he took the next curve. The two-lane highway snaked through dense walls of green, the trees leaning into the road. He'd been gone for eleven years, almost twelve. After so long in the north everything seemed too lush, too overgrown. Subtropical. Turn your back and the plants and insects would overrun everything. His stomach burned from too much coffee, too little food, and the queasy certainty that he was making a mistake. The call had come three days ago, Deke's rumbling voice on his cell phone's voice mail: Jo Lynn was dead. The funeral was on Saturday morning. Just thought you'd want to know. Pax deleted the message but spent the rest of the week listening to it replay in his head. Dreading a follow-up call. Then 2 a.m. Saturday morning, when it was too late to make the service--too late unless he drove nonstop and the Ford's engine refrained from throwing a rod--he tossed some clothes into a suitcase and drove south out of Chicago at 85 mph. His father used to yell at him, Paxton Abel Martin, you'd be late for your own funeral! It was Jo who told him not to worry about it, that everybody was late for their own funeral. Pax didn't get the joke until she explained it to him. Jo was the clever one, the verbal one. At the old town line there was a freshly painted sign: welcome to switchcreek, tn. population 815. The barbed wire fence that used to mark the border was gone. The cement barriers had been pushed to the roadside. But the little guard shack still stood beside the road like an outhouse, abandoned and drowning in kudzu. The way ahead led into what passed for Switchcreek's downtown, but there was a shortcut to where he was going, if he could find it. He crested the hill, scanning the foliage to his right, and still almost missed it. He braked hard and turned in to a narrow gravel drive that vanished into the trees. The wheels jounced over potholes and ruts, forcing him to slow down. The road forked and he turned left automatically, knowing the way even though yesterday he wouldn't have been able to describe this road to anyone. He passed a half-burned barn, then a trailer that had been boarded up since he was kid, then the rusted carcass of a '63 Falcon he and Deke had used for target practice with their .22s. Each object seemed strange, then abruptly familiar, then hopelessly strange again--shifting and shifty. The road came out of the trees at the top of a hill. He braked to a stop, put the car in park. The engine threatened to die, then fell into an unsteady idle. A few hundred yards below lay the cemetery, the redbrick church, and the gravel parking lot half-full of cars. Satellite trucks from two different television stations were there. In the cemetery, the funeral was already in progress. Pax leaned forward and folded his arms atop the steering wheel, letting the struggling air conditioner blow into his damp ribs. About fifty people sat or stood around a pearl-gray casket. Most were betas, bald, dark-red heads gleaming like river stones. The few men wore dark suits, the women long dresses. Some of the women had covered their heads with white scarves. A surprising number of them seemed to be pregnant. An argo couple stood at the rear of the group, towering over the other mourners. The woman's broad shoulders and narrow hips made a V of her pale green dress. The man beside her was a head shorter and skinny as a ladder. He wore a plain blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up his chalky forearms. Deke looked exactly as Pax remembered him. The people who were seated rose to their feet. They began to sing. Pax turned off the car and rolled down the window. Some of the voices were high and flute-like, but the bass rumble, he knew, was provided by the booming chests of the two argos. The melody was difficult to catch at first, but then he recognized the hymn "Just As I Am." He knew the words by heart. It was an altar-call song, a slow weeper that struck especially hard for people who'd come through the Changes. Leading them through the song, her brick-red face tilted to the sky, was a beta woman in a long skirt, a flowing white blouse, and a colorful vest. The pastor, Pax guessed, though it was odd to think of a woman pastor at this church. It was odd to think of anyone but his father in the pulpit. When the song ended the woman said a few words that Pax couldn't catch, and then the group began to walk toward the back door of the church. As the rows cleared, two figures

remained seated in front of the casket: two bald girls in dark dresses. Some of the mourners touched the girls' shoulders and moved on. Those had to be the twins. Jo's daughters. He'd known he'd see them here, had braced for it, but even so he wasn't ready. He was grateful for this chance to see them first from a distance. A bald beta man in a dark blue suit squatted down between the girls, and after a brief exchange took their hands in his. They stood and he led them to the church entrance. The argo couple hung back. They bent their heads together, and then the woman went inside alone, ducking to make it through the entrance. Deke glanced up to where Paxton's car sat on the hill. Pax leaned away from the windshield. What he most wanted was to put the car in reverse, then head back through the trees to the highway. Back to Chicago. But he could feel Deke looking at him. He stepped out of the car, and hot, moist air enveloped him. He reached back inside and pulled out his suit jacket--frayed at the cuffs, ten years out of style--but didn't put it on. If he was lucky he wouldn't have to wear it at all. "Into the valley of death," he said to himself. He folded the jacket over his arm and walked down the hill to the cemetery's rusting fence. The back gate squealed open at his push. He walked through the thick grass between the headstones. When he was a kid he'd used this place like a playground. They all had--Deke, Jo, the other church kids--playing hide and seek, sardines, and of course ghost in the graveyard. There weren't so many headstones then. Deke squatted next to the grave, his knees higher than his head like an enormous grasshopper. He'd unhooked one of the chains that had connected the casket to the frame and was rolling it up around his hand. "Thought that was you," he said without looking up from his work. His voice rumbled like a diesel engine. "How you doing, Deke." The man stood up. Pax felt a spark of fear--the back-brain yip of a small mammal confronted with a much larger predator. Argos were skinny, but their bony bodies suggested scythes, siege engines. And Deke seemed to be at least a foot taller than the last time Pax had seen him. His curved spine made his head sit lower than his shoulders, but if he could stand up straight he'd be twice Paxton's height. "You've grown," Pax said. If they'd been anywhere near the same size they might have hugged--normal men did that all the time, didn't they? Then Deke held out a hand the size of a skillet, and Pax took it as best he good. Deke could have crushed him, but he kept his grip light. His palm felt rough and unyielding, like the face of a cinderblock. "Long time, P.K.," he said. P.K. Preacher's Kid. Nobody had called him that since he was fifteen. Since the day he left Switchcreek. Pax dropped his arm. He could still feel the heat of Deke's skin on his palm. "I didn't get your message until last night," Pax lied. "I drove all night to get here. I must look like hell." Deke tilted his head, not disagreeing with him. "The important thing's you got here. I told the reverend I'd take care of the casket, but if you want to go inside, they're setting out the food." "No, that's--I'm not hungry." Another lie. But he hadn't come here for a hometown reunion. He needed to pay his respects and that was it. He was due back at the restaurant by Monday. He looked at the casket, then at the glossy, polished gravestone. Someone had paid for a nice one. JO LYNN WHITEHALL BORN FEBRUARY 12, 1983 DIED AUGUST 17, 2010 LOVING MOTHER "Loving Mother." That's nice," Pax said. But the epitaph struck him as entirely inadequate. After awhile he said, "It seems weird to boil everything down to two words like that." "Especially for Jo," Deke said. A steel frame supported the casket on thick straps. Deke squatted again to turn a stainless steel handle next to the screw pipe. The casket began to lower into the hole. "It's the highest compliment the betas have, though. Pretty much the only one that counts." The casket touched bottom. Paxton knelt and pulled up the straps on his side of the grave. Then the two of them lifted the metal frame out of the way. Paxton brushed the red clay from his knees. They stood there looking into the hole. The late Jo Lynn Whitehall, Paxton thought. He tried to imagine her body inside the casket, but it was impossible. He couldn't picture either of the Jos he'd know... Presentation de l'diteur From Daryl Gregory, whose Pandemonium was one of the most exciting debut novels in memory, comes an astonishing work of soaring imaginative power that breaks new ground in contemporary fantasy. Switchcreek was a normal town in eastern Tennessee until a mysterious disease killed a third of its residents and mutated most of the rest into monstrous oddities. 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