

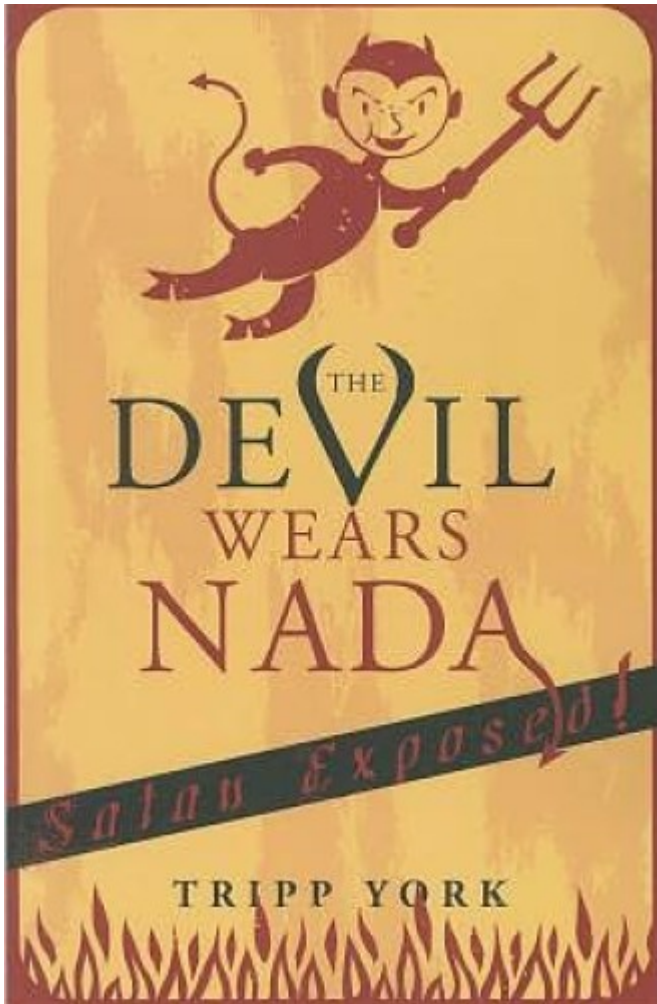
Devil's Ink, by Jeffrey C. Pugh, and *The Devil Wears Nada*, by Tripp York
reviewed by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Devil's Ink

By Jeffrey C. Pugh
Fortress



The Devil Wears Nada

By Tripp York
Cascade

Jeffrey C. Pugh and Tripp York are Facebook friends. Both teach religion at southern institutions of higher learning. Last year, each wrote a good-natured book about Satan. Pugh blurbed York's book ("As he piles up example after hilarious example of people searching for the wrong thing, he almost persuades me that Hell really is other people"), and York interviewed Pugh on his blog, *The Amish Jihadist* ("When it comes to writing authoritative books on Satan he is the daddy of us all"). If you like your theology mixed with a spoonful of sugar—or blackstrap molasses—either book will serve.

Devil's Ink, the more earnest of the two, would be more appropriately titled *Digital Devil*, since ink is no longer involved. If in some parallel universe C. S. Lewis's Uncle

Screwtape is still penning letters to Wormwood, Satan himself now keeps a blog for his diabolical colleagues. Unlike Screwtape, who got intensely involved in one man's personal life, Satan now focuses on greater things. "There is still the small joy one gets when we see individual lives ruined through betrayal or abuse," he tells his minions, but "this is low-hanging fruit." Better to focus, for example, not on political sex scandals but on the underlying utilitarian attitudes which, "when connected with their economic lives, gives rise to big things like child prostitution and sex slavery."

In some 80 loosely connected blog posts, Satan's underlings can read about all sorts of "big things" that warm hell's braziers. The dark lord is happy when humans are narcissistically concerned with their own salvation; when their desire for purity creates "the conditions for countless slaughters"; when they define "the good life" in economic terms; when they either disrespect the material world or believe "that all meaning, all value, all worth" is found there; when they make politics their religion; when they conflate state and church; and when they torture one another in the name of preserving freedom. Satan really loves nation-states, which he calls "large-scale crime syndicates," and he adores war—just war, holy war, war for self-defense, war for empire, war by any name.

By contrast, he's alarmed by people who "realize that our enemy pervades all existence and [that] harm done to anything on the planet is harm done to the very thing that sustains their lives." He is frustrated by "a heart that refuses evil's call to hate, or to fear." He doesn't want people to know that true freedom means leaving their individual desires behind and responding to the enemy's call to love and reconciliation, and he is stymied when people willingly endure suffering "so that redemption might be manifest."

Unfortunately, Pugh never explains how he was able to access the blog, which Satan warned his demonic readers not to leak. Is Satan bedeviled by security breaches? Does Pugh moonlight for the dark side? The preface gives no clue, and its dry tone may discourage people who, if they kept on reading, would enjoy Satan's wry observations, witty blog post titles and impish tags. The book's design doesn't help to attract readers either. It isn't easy to make a printed page look like a blog page, and Fortress has barely tried. Still, people in Pugh's theological and political camps (I count myself among them) are likely to find Satan's blog posts enlightening and amusing.

At first glance, the only resemblance of *Devil's Ink* to *The Devil Wears Nada*, apart from the central character, is the fact that both books are sprinkled with little cartoon demons. York, two decades younger than Pugh and a lot sassier, cheerfully insults all theological and political camps as he pursues an inverted quest for God.

The search begins in a religious studies class in which two of York's students debate whether one can know that God exists. Gina, the believer, argues from personal experience and conviction. Tommy, the skeptic, raises an interesting question: "Since we are incapable of proving, at least to my satisfaction, that God exists, do you think it's possible to prove that Satan exists, therein requiring me, via association, . . . to believe in God?" York decides to find out. He will go on a quest for Satan.

A Nazarene by upbringing and a Mennonite by choice, York starts his pursuit with Christians. "The Protestant South," he writes, "has an undoubted love affair with the diabolical one. That pointy-eared chief of demons seems to be responsible for every single tragedy, calamity, and mishap in the world." Lest we doubt that claim, he lists a few dozen things he has heard people attribute to demonic intervention, from "tempts women to work outside the home" to "caused spelling errors in church bulletins." (Should we blame devil-possessed proofreaders for the abundant spelling, vocabulary, grammatical and typographical errors in York's book?)

Strangely, however, no one can tell him how to contact the devil—not the Nazarene preacher who claims Satan interfered with the church's sound system, nor the Pentecostal preacher who prays that York "will be delivered from the power of the natural sciences," nor the barbershop preacher who is convinced that homosexuality is destroying America, nor even the Christian bodybuilder who has personally exorcised demons at his gym.

So after pausing to look at how the devil is portrayed in the book of Job and the Gospels, York continues his search with people who, he thinks, should be able to introduce him to the prince of darkness: "a Unitarian minister, a druid cleric, a pagan shamanist-healer, and a few Satanists." Oddly, as it turns out, most of these people don't believe in a literal Satan, and those who do are unwilling to bring York and Old Scratch together. So York decides to offer the devil his soul in exchange for canceling his student loans (you'll have to read the book to find out what happens).

Anyone offended by York's portrayal of southern evangelicals in chapters one and two will adore his conversations with Unitarians in chapter four, and vice versa. Indeed, readers who aren't offended by anything in this book haven't been paying attention. But *The Devil Wears Nada* is not all wisecracks. Although the search for Satan is lighthearted, York gets serious when he finds Christians practicing "racism, sexism, homophobia, fear, hatred, pride, bigotry of all sorts, and a strong desire to make the world in one's own image." "Using Satan as an explanation for everything you personally do not like," he writes, "is not only theologically problematic, it is also terribly dangerous. It opens the door to the rampant demonization of other people despite Christianity's claim that all humans, regardless of creed, race, nationality, gender, or faith tradition (or lack thereof), are created in the image of God."

It also bothers him when Christians portray "God and Satan locked in battle over minutiae": "If God really is concerned, let's say, about Steve Smith of the Carolina Panthers scoring a touchdown, then I am led to question why God does not seem to be as concerned about the, oh, I don't know, approximately one billion people having to live without adequate access to water." Here York sounds a lot like Pugh, who wrote on his Facebook wall last fall: "If God is using Tim Tebow to win football games, but not feeding starving children, then atheism is the only option of integrity left."

Pugh and York share more than an interest in the devil and skepticism about heaven's link to football players: both can picture a world in which Christians take Jesus' ethical teachings seriously. Thus both must worry a tempter who nudges Christians to choose power over idealism. As Satan wrote in his now-public blog, "Once you take away their imagination to think about how the world should go and lock them into what is real, it becomes pretty easy to just sit back and watch the carnage." Alas for the powers of darkness, both of these authors' imaginations are in fine condition.