

# On the Devil's Court Short Guide

## On the Devil's Court by Carl Deuker

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## Overview

On the Devil's Court presents an intriguing and novel approach to the ancient theme about a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for a short time of happiness and success. Prominent authors such as Christopher Marlowe and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe have written about this age-old quest for happiness at a price. Deuker has taken the myth and turned it into a very contemporary novel about a teen-ager who is willing to do just about anything for one great basketball season.

Basketball is the main element in the novel, and contributes much to the excitement and suspense of the story.

But the author has done much more than just write another sports novel with vivid and fast moving action. This is also the story of Joe who learns that "magic" is possible through team spirit, friendship, cooperation, and faith in oneself. Yet the haunting question remains: Are there such things as miracles, and how much control does a person really have over his fate?

## About the Author

Carl Deuker was born in San Francisco on August 26, 1950, and brought up in nearby Redwood City. While never a star athlete himself—"I am strictly JV material," he insists—he knows his way around a basketball court. He played the game in high school and later, as an English and science teacher in various Seattle area schools, served as coach. He is equally at home with a typewriter. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1970s, he spent a year working for a Los Angeles newspaper. After earning his teaching certificate from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a master's degree from the University of Washington and beginning his teaching career, he wrote film and book reviews for a Seattle weekly. At present, he teaches English and physical science at the junior high level and makes his home in Seattle, Washington, which is also the setting for his novel.

*On the Devil's Court* was an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults (1989), and winner of the South Carolina Young Adult Book Award (1989).



## Setting

The story takes place in Seattle, Washington, where Joe's dad, a prominent scientist, has just accepted a position with the University of Washington. Both he and his wife, a wellknown artist, are pleased with the move. Not so, however, their seventeen-year-old son Joe, who is forced to change school in his senior year. Missing his friends, and at a loss about what to do with the few remaining days of summer vacation, he wanders into a neighborhood basketball game, and strikes up an acquaintance with a boy who attends a nearby public high school. Sharing a love for the game becomes the basis for friendship, and Joe decides that he would like to attend the same school. Unfortunately, his father, who has ambitions for Joe to become a scientist, has other ideas and forces his son to enroll in a small private school with a good academic program but a lousy basketball team. Angrily, Joe sulks, despising the school.

Even his basketball game suddenly deteriorates and he is cut from the team. Then, one late, dusky winter afternoon Joe discovers an abandoned building that once was a boys' club. As Joe uses this desolate place to practice shooting baskets, he makes nine perfect shots. Moved by the dim, spooky place, and by the memory of a play about Dr.

Faustus his class is reading, Joe offers his soul to the devil for a perfect basketball season.



## Social Sensitivity

The theme of black magic and the devil may appear to some readers to be controversial. Satanism is a sensitive topic today. However, a close reading of the story shows that instead of dealing with the devil and magic, the author stresses personal achievement and confidence as the source for any "miracle."

The conflict between parents and children is another social issue which is common in families with teen-agers.

The author handles it with sensitivity and tact. Both Joe and his father are likable people who simply fail to communicate. It is interesting that, although Joe has to make an effort, it is his father who has to do most of the "learning" to understand the son. Even after they have reconciled, he tries to tell Joe which college he should enter, but he eventually accepts his son's right to choose for himself.



## Literary Qualities

On the Devil's Court is an exciting sports story. The author is familiar with all aspects of high school basketball and speaks the language of the game. The dialogue between coach and players is natural and convincing.

These are real boys in a real situation.

There is suspense and buildup in the detailed accounts of the games Joe's team plays during the round robin, which alone would make it a good novel. But this tension is skillfully increased through Joe's doubts and worries about his supposed pact with the devil. Each win or loss becomes an additional piece of the puzzle.

The conclusion of the novel is particularly effective. All through the story, Joe wonders whether he has really sold his soul to the devil or whether it was just his imagination. Just before the crucial final game, he sits at his desk making a list of all the reasons that his pact was, and was not, real. When he compares the two, they balance. After his team's championship game, he finally solves the riddle. Watching the moon outside, he thinks: "Out there in space was a burning sun. Its light had traveled millions of miles, bounced off the moon, and come into my room.

Wonderful things are happening all the time."



# Themes and Characters

The dominant theme of the novel is the legend of Doctor Faustus, and the author uses it in several ways. Doctor Faustus was a medieval scientist who longed for power and forbidden knowledge. Joe's father is also a scientist whose research in the field of genetics is considered pioneering. He becomes the subject of a story by the *Star Enquirer*, a sleazy publication which calls him "the devil's doctor," and accuses him of Nazi-type experiments. That the family's name is Faustus underscores the parallel.

The theme is taken up again when Joe's English class is assigned the play *Dr. Faustus* by the sixteenth-century English writer Christopher Marlowe. In Joe's mind, the malicious attacks of the newspaper and the public on his father and the story of the play merge until he half-seriously makes what he considers a pact with the devil in the abandoned gym. Of course, he does not really believe in black magic and the devil, until a series of unexpected coincidences restore his place on the school team, where his suddenly fantastic skills on the court make him the center of the game. His team wins one game after another, and for the first time in the school's history they have a shot at the state championship. But to Joe these wins raise a frightening question.

What is the price for his success? Is the devil really going to collect?

A secondary theme deals with Joe's love/hate relationship with his father.

On the Devil's Court Dr. Faustus has high expectations for his son, and Joe is continually aware that he does not measure up. He really adores his dad but feels rejected because his father is not even interested in attending his son's games. The conflict between generations, between father and son, is a strong element in this story. Secretly Joe fears that his "promise" to the devil has jeopardized his father's life, especially when his dad has a heart attack after a particularly crucial and successful game.

Joe Faustus is an average student and good athlete, but he feels that he is never able to please his brilliant father.

The only thing he thinks he is good at is playing basketball, and after his move to the new school, even this skill seems to leave him. He regains his confidence when his game suddenly improves miraculously. Without entirely realizing it, his sudden belief in himself inspires the entire team and helps them win.

Joe's father, Dr. Faustus, lives for his research and never really understands his son. He is very important in the story because he is the reason for Joe's feeling of failure. Only after Joe's harrowing pact with the devil and subsequent fear for his father's life do father and son begin to understand each other, and accept their differences.





Joe's teammates are minor characters, but each is carefully developed and plays a crucial part in the story. In the end, Joe realizes that they are the reasons for winning the championship.

"I'd been so wrapped up in myself that I had been blind to the team. I'd believed that without me they wouldn't win, that they were nothing. But it was the other way around." With this discovery, the spell is broken. Just as the story of Dr. Faustus is about faith, or lack of it, Joe's story revolves around faith in oneself. In a final dramatic confrontation with his arch rival and former friend Ross, Joe finds the strength to win. "But from somewhere I found the extra spring. I went higher and higher, and the miracle happened.

I slam-dunked it down and through."



## Topics for Discussion

1. Even before he moved to Seattle, Joe has had many disagreements with his father. What do you think is their main problem?

2. Joe is fascinated with Ross. What is the real basis for their friendship?

What are the qualities Joe admires most in Ross? Why?

3. The disastrous interview with the reporter from the scandal magazine marks a turning point in Joe's life. How does it prepare him for his future actions?

4. Do you think Joe really saw the devil at the abandoned gym or was it just his imagination?

5. Is there an explanation for Joe's sudden lack of skill at the basketball court other than magic or bad luck?

6. Is there a rational explanation for his sudden success, or is it really the work of the devil? How do you explain his sudden improvement in his grades?

7. Everything is working out well, so why is Joe not happy?

8. With Joe injured during the game, his team still wins. Why? And what does that tell us about their earlier winning streak?

9. Why is the championship win of the final game important? What effects does this victory have on Joe's life in general?

10. Joe is a modern teen-ager. Why does he believe in the devil? Does modern society still believe that people can make pacts with the supernatural?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The legend of Dr. Faustus has intrigued writers for centuries. Some of the more prominent ones are Christopher Marlowe and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Read their plays and compare the treatment of the legend in *On the Devil's Court*. How does it differ?

2. Marlow's Dr. Faustus loses his soul to the devil. Why doesn't Joe?

What saves him, and was he ever in danger?

3. An old saying states that "the gods give perfect luck to those whom they are trying to destroy." What does this mean? Is this true in the case of Joe?

4. Joe is a modern teenager. Why does he believe in the devil? Does modern society still believe in such things? Why or why not?

## For Further Reference

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. Faust, Part I. In *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. Vol 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 1985: 476-566. This play by a famous German writer is one of the best-known treatments of the Faustus legend in literature.

Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 1. New York: W. W. Norton, 1962. This contemporary of Shakespeare wrote one of the earliest plays about the Doctor Faustus theme. In *On the Devil's Court*, the main character is assigned this play in school.

The following publications give brief, evaluative reviews of *On the Devil's Court*: *Booklist* 85 (December 15, 1988): 703.

*Children's Book Review Service* 17 (February 1989): 79.

*Horn Book Magazine* 65 (March 1989): 216.

*Journal of Reading* 33 (1989): 70.

*Kirkus Review* 57 (January 1, 1989): 47.

*Publishers Weekly* 234 (November 11, 1988): 60.

*School Library Journal* 35 (January 1989): 92.

*Voice of Youth Advocates* 12 (April 1989): 27.

*Wilson Library Bulletin* 64 (Summer 1989): 11.

## Related Titles

The importance of competition and winning in a sport play a major part in *On the Devil's Court*. Joe Faust is willing to sell his soul to the devil for one good basketball season. A novel about another young man who risks his life to be a winner is Stephen Hoffius's *Winners and Losers* (1993). Daryl, a high school athlete and talented runner has a heart attack during a race. His career seems to end there, but Daryl is determined to go on, pushing himself harder and harder in each race, until his heart fails and he collapses and dies. Another writer who is much concerned with the ethics involved in winning and losing in sports is David Klass whose novel, *Breakaway Run* (1987), deals with Tony, a soccer player and exchange student at a Japanese school. Different cultural concepts about what is important in sports collide when Tony, the American, and his Japanese classmates struggle with team honor and the will to win.



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