



Photo Credit, Emily Raboteau

Victor LaValle, Writer

, “Once you’re put in a system that doesn’t care, you will discover that you are actually, quite like the people who are trapped inside already.”

Excerpt from Greene Interview with Victor LaValle

I had read Victor LaValle’s *Slapboxing with Jesus* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1999), a book focused on stories of Black and Latino young men; however, when I read *The Devil in Silver* (One World, 2013), I was amazed. LaValle had chosen to write in an entirely different genre. His story of a well-man who ends up in a mental institution was fascinating. Pepper, the protagonist of the story, is placed in Hyde Park Hospital’s psychiatric ward in Queens after he is picked up by policemen. During his first night, he is attacked by a strange creature and is told by his fellow residents that this creature is the devil incarnate who roams the halls of the institution each night, and in short, there is nothing that he can do about it.

The Devil in Silver was named as one of the best books of the year by *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post*, and *Publishers Weekly*. The book, along with LaValle’s reputation as an engaging and skilled writer. Teacher, and workshop leader, inspired

me to invite him to lead a writing workshop at the Center for Black Literature's North Country Institute and Retreat for Writers of Color and to participate on a panel at the National Black Writers Conference.

My interview with LaValle focuses on his motivation for writing *The Devil in Silver*, his concerns regarding the treatment of those who end up in mental health institutions, and the state of psychiatric institutions in New York City and beyond.

Greene

Tell us about your motivation for writing *The Devil in Silver*.

LaValle

When I was thinking about writing this book, I knew it was going to be a setting inside a mental hospital. I wanted to say something about the American Healthcare system, their care for the mentally ill, and in particular, their care for people who are working class or poor, and about what that care looks like.

LaValle details his concern about the attitude of the health care workers who manage patients and how patients internalize the ways they are treated.

The ugly truth was that these patients weren't here to be cured. There was no cure for them. They had illnesses that had to be managed by them and by those who treated them. They were like ships that would never find a shore. The most you could do was bring them supplies; the most they could do was get used to the rocking, the unpredictability, of the vast, impenetrable ocean below them. (131)

In LaValle's view, there is no hope for those who are labeled insane. They are doomed to float and will never find an anchor. They will drown before they can be saved.

Many debut novels are autobiographical. I asked LaValle how he knew so much about the mental health system and what really motivated him to write about it.

LaValle

To put it bluntly, I have a number of people whom I'm related to and who I love deeply who are mentally ill and who have spent their lives in and out of mental health hospitals in the country and also outside of this country. . . and I've visited them over the years since I was a teenager. . . . And so maybe you understand and you are maybe angry about the injustices you know most closely. And I wanted to write about this system.

LaValle expresses his anger and criticism of the injustices in the system in his description of what happens when Pepper realizes that there is a leak from the ceiling and that it is directly hitting his bed. Pepper has refused to take his medication and the backlash he receives for this resistance is immediate.

When Pepper returned to his room, he found that his mattress had been stripped of its sheets and his pillow was missing. A bare mattress lay on the bed frame and the towel he had set down on the floor to catch the leak from the ceiling had been taken away. In its place, someone had stacked his slacks and socks. They were soaked orange.

Pepper had to admit these guys were good. He'd asserted his rights and they'd attacked his quality of living. How many small cuts like this before he'd just give up? (151)

The Devil in Silver was written in 2012. In 2024, New York City released a report on the state of mental health across age groups. Its major findings were that a) deep inequities in

treatment persist despite overall improving post-pandemic mental health and b) nearly half of teens surveyed in New York City report depressive symptoms of some kind and severity.

[https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/about/press/pr2024/nyc-releases-first-ever-state-of-mental-health-](https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/about/press/pr2024/nyc-releases-first-ever-state-of-mental-health-report.page)

[report.page](https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/about/press/pr2024/nyc-releases-first-ever-state-of-mental-health-report.page) Health Commissioner Dr. Ashwin Vasani stated that “This report represents a landmark moment, the start of a process where the city’s mental health is routinely reported on as a civic responsibility.”

Literary texts reflect the human experience and are sometimes more impactful than reality. The literary writer works at stirring emotions and providing realistic and graphic detailed representations of life that affirm what readers know intuitively. LaValle does this in *The Devil in Silver*. His interview with me is pointed: “Once you’re put in a system that doesn’t care, you will discover that you are actually, quite like the people who are trapped inside already.” His illustration of this belief in *The Devil in Silver* is powerful.

La Valle

One of the great things that a novel can do is it can show you, an individual’s experience, but even more, an individual’s experiences through a system.

The characters in *The Devil in Silver* also consider the nature of death. Pepper thinks about the life of Vincent Van Gogh.

The thing I’ve been thinking about as I’m reading this letter is that there’s actually two Vincent Van Goghs. There’s a whole building dedicated to what he painted in his life. . . . But the second Van Gogh is just a guy named Vincent. Vincent lived for 37 years. Van Gogh only came to life after Vincent died. Same man, two people.

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Is this the fate of the patients in the psychiatric unit of New Hyde Park? Will they only be remembered after they die. Do they have to die to be remembered? Is this the fate of men?

Victor LaValle is the author of eight works of fiction: five novels, two novellas, and a collection of short stories. He has won many awards and is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. For more information about Victor LaValle, visit <http://www.victorlavalle.com/>

These literary meditations on the reflections of Victor LaValle's *The Devil in Silver* represent a window into the world of my book project. I would love to hear from you. Please visit my website at www.drbrendamgreene.com.