



**BOOK CLUB KIT**

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Scholz wrote in his will, “I had a devil of a good time.” “Devil” is a recurring expression and term used throughout the book and takes on different meanings. Describe and compare all the ways it is used and how it relates to the themes within the story.
- 2) Discuss the role of cultural identity in this story compared to the way it plays in our current society (1950s vs. 2020s). How does it compare to what we see about identity today? How is it different?
- 3) At the end of the novel, Morris Baker decides to become a private investigator because he can “do more good that way.” How did Baker’s character change through the course of the story? Discuss key moments when you saw a shift in his mindset.
- 4) What other novels, TV shows or movies do you feel share a kinship with *Beat the Devils*? Where in the canon of alternate history and mystery/thriller does Weiss’s novel fall, in your estimation?
- 5) *Beat the Devils* takes place in the days leading up to the Fourth of July. Why do you think Weiss chose to set this story then? What effect does the countdown to July 4th lend to the overall mood and tone of the read?
- 6) How does this book help you to better understand your role in society? How does it make you think differently about people with differing views and opinions?
- 7) What part of *Beat the Devils* did you find the most surprising? The most affecting? Explain why.
- 8) “Bearing witness to evil after the fact is just as important as fighting it head-on. In that way, you help make sure it never happens again.” Sophia tells this to Baker after he reveals his background. Discuss how this notion of disrupting historical cycles relates to what we’ve seen in our society. How have we stopped cycles of injustice? What are moments that still need to be stopped and never happen again?
- 9) What was your favorite part in *Beat the Devils*? Explain why.
- 10) How did your intuition about who murdered John Huston, Walter Cronkite, and Arthur Scholz change as you progressed through the book? What clues, evidence, or suspicions helped you support your intuition? And, if it went against your initial thoughts, how did it alter your experience reading the rest of the book?



# *A conversation with* **JOSH WEISS**



*Q. What inspired you to write *Beat the Devils*?*

It all began with my grandfather and his stories of survival during the Holocaust. I never got the chance to know him all that well, but his legacy lived on through his son, my father, who never wasted an opportunity to lecture my siblings and I on the horrors of the Nazis' concentration camps. I always had a strong desire to write about my grandfather, but was always a little hesitant because I didn't have all the facts to write a true biography or work of nonfiction.

In college, I watched John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* for the first time and was utterly blown away by it.

Wanting to tell a Cold War thriller of my own, I began playing around with the idea of a Jewish Holocaust survivor solving some kind of mystery during the McCarthy-driven Red Scare of the 1950s (all while cynically coming to grips with what they went through during WWII). Then the lightbulb went off: why not base the main character on my grandfather? That was the foundation, though I ended up drawing on a number of my favorite pieces of media — from *Watchmen* to *The ODESSA File* to Jay Roach's 2015 biopic about Dalton Trumbo starring Bryan Cranston.

*Q. Which authors have influenced your work the most?*

In no particular order, the authors that have influenced me the most are Ira Levin, William Goldman, Frederick Forsythe, Michael Crichton, Dan Brown, Eric Garcia, Brendan DuBois, Ryan Graudin, Ian R. McLeod, Philip K. Dick, Chaim Potok, Alan Moore, Damon Knight, Mark Greaney, Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, Michael Chabon, Annie Jacobsen, Jerome Bixby, Robert Harris, and Philip Roth.

It's also worth mentioning that a number of people of this list were major supporters of *Beat the Devils* and for that, I am profoundly grateful!

# *A conversation with* JOSH WEISS

*Q. Hollywood movies and television play a huge role in Beat the Devils. What are some of your all-time favorite movies? How did they inspire your writing?*

The classic Warner Bros. productions featuring Humphrey Bogart — such as *Casablanca*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Big Sleep* — are certainly high up on my personal list of favorite films. The whip-smart dialogue, black and white film stock, dynamic lighting choices, swelling scores, and Transatlantic accents are always in the back of my mind while writing a period piece like this. I really do hope refracting the story through that prism of cinema comes across on the page.

John Huston, who wrote and directed *The Maltese Falcon*, went on to make several more iconic pictures with Bogart, including *Across the Pacific*, *Key Largo*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The African Queen* (which finally nabbed Humphrey a well-deserved Oscar victory), and a little project called...*Beat the Devil!*

Needless to say, I absolutely adore movies. I really could go on and on about all my top choices, but that would probably cause your eyelids to droop. I'll just say that a number of noirs, neo-noirs, and noir pastiches (*Chinatown*, *Blade Runner*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, and *Minority Report* — to name a few) were the biggest sources of inspiration for my first novel.

And heck, while we're at it, let's throw the Cohen brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* into the mix as well. That movie's penchant for hilariously playing up the farcical aspects of Old Hollywood — like its irrational fear of communists — kept recurring to me as I tried to infuse little bits of irony here and there.

[CLICK HERE to read the rest of the conversation!](#)

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# DAZZLE THEM WITH DOO-WOP!

## A “Beat the Devils” Playlist

**While my debut novel is firmly set within the genre of alternate history, you may notice certain historical elements — like the smattering of musical cues sprinkled throughout, for instance — remain intact.**

The purpose was to write the book in the style of a Scorsese film with various tunes (mostly of the doo-wop variety) bringing an almost cinematic quality to the overall proceedings. George Lucas’s *American Graffiti* was another major inspiration, particularly the way in which it uses music to portray the last gasp of wide-eyed 1950s innocence that would be snuffed out by Kennedy’s assassination and the intensification of the Vietnam War.

Now, you might be asking yourself: “Well, if this is a vastly different universe from our own, then why is the music the same? Wouldn’t the culture have turned out differently?”

The simple answer is “Yes,” but my choice of using real-world songs was meant to be a reflection of the the ‘50s as a supposedly wholesome decade. Think of TV shows like *Father Knows* and *Leave it to Beaver*, which promoted “Gee whiz” values of honesty, respectability, and the comfort of nuclear (no MAD intended) family. This was also echoed in the music of the time, which told innocent stories of first loves, broken hearts, and sock hops.

If the McCarthy administration of my parallel universe is committed to crushing free speech and rounding up communists, there isn’t much it can do in the way of music because there’s nothing inherently wrong with the messaging of these songs.

Music has always been a major part of my creative process. The ear-pleasing harmonies of doo-wop groups (with uniquely unassuming names like The Penguins and The Flamingos) were constantly playing in the background while I typed out this book.

On that note, I am proud to present a curated playlist of ‘50s-era tracks to help enhance your *Beat the Devils* reading experience.

- *Josh Weiss*  
Author, *Beat the Devils*

# OFFICIAL *BEAT THE DEVILS* PLAYLIST



CLICK THE IMAGE TO  
LISTEN TO THE  
PLAYLIST!

**Josh Weiss & Jazz Age Cocktails Present**

# Beat the Devils: The Cocktail

**Keep your liver safe from  
the communist scourge —  
drink American vodka!**



By official order of President Joseph McCarthy, Russian vodka is hereby banned in the United States of America. Any establishment or individual found in possession of the Soviet-produced spirit will face severe penalties: arrest, a fine of up to \$10,000, or worse. No exceptions will be made. Your government thanks you in advance for your compliance.

**Author's Note:** When Grand Central Publishing asked me to develop a cocktail inspired by my first novel, I immediately thought of my good friend and mixologist extraordinaire, Avi Pusateri, founder of Jazz Age Cocktails. If you've got a bartending question — no matter how big or small — he's the man to ask. My only requests were that the drink include peach schnapps (Morris Baker's alcohol of choice), and a bit of spice to reflect the "Devils" element in the title.

Without missing a beat, Avi responded with a wealth of ideas a mixology layman like myself would never have come up with on my own. It was he who suggested using American vodka because after all, the Russian stuff would never fly under President McCarthy's watch.

The desiccated lime is a nice touch and while Avi didn't provide a specific reason for its inclusion beyond aesthetic purposes, I like to think it represents the dried-up husk of a man our hero has become since 1945. The chocolate nubs coating the rim of the glass, meanwhile, are meant to represent Baker's love for candy bars, which he discovered from the American GIs who liberated the concentration camp in which he had been incarcerated.

Thematic resonance aside, this is a damn tasty cocktail. It's sweet, spicy, and pairs well with far-reaching conspiracies involving Nazi war criminals. Please drink responsibly...

## **Spicy Peach Schnapps Martini:**

**1 oz peach schnapps**  
**1 oz vodka (Tito's or similar)**  
**.5 oz triple sec**  
**1 oz orange juice**  
**.5 oz lime juice (fresh or bottled)**  
**1 lime**  
**2-3 jalapeño coins**  
**2-3 slices fresh peach**  
**Red food coloring**  
**1 tbsp. dark chocolate**  
**1 tbsp. chili powder**  
**Hot sauce of your choosing**

**1)** Set oven to 170-200 degrees Fahrenheit (if you've got a dehydrator handy, just go with that)  
**2)** Slice lime into thin circles and place on baking sheet topped with lightly-oiled parchment paper to keep the fruit from sticking  
**3)** Leave limes in oven for 2-3 hours (turning every so often) until dry and slightly browned  
**4)** Pour or squeeze lime juice onto a plate  
**5)** On a separate plate, combine chili powder and dark chocolate (shave or chop the latter as finely as possible)

**6)** Using lime juice as a binder, coat the rim of your martini glass with chili powder and chocolate  
**7)** Muddle 2-3 jalapeño coins in a cocktail shaker along with several slices of fresh peach  
**8)** Add liquids (and several squirts of red food coloring) with ice, shake well until cold, and strain into a martini glass.  
**9)** Garnish with dehydrated lime (topped with a few dashes of your favorite hot sauce) and jalapeño coin



Recipe developed in partnership with Avì Pusateri (@jazzagecocktails)

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