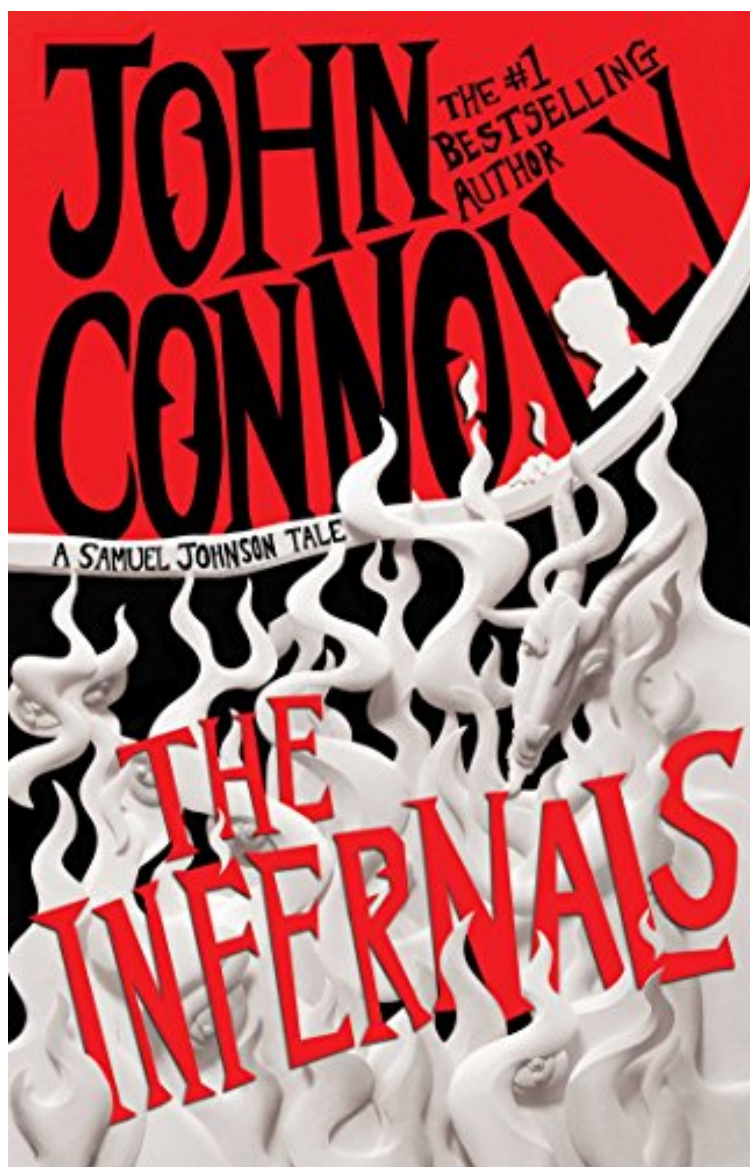


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The Infernals: A Samuel Johnson Tale



Par John Connolly
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom New York Times bestselling author John Connolly, a wonderfully strange and brilliant novel about a boy, his dog, and their struggle to escape the wrath of demons. Young Samuel Johnson is in trouble. Not only is his eyesight so poor that he mistakenly asks out a letter box on a date, but an angry demon is seeking revenge for Samuels part in foiling the invasion of Earth by the forces of evil. It wants to get its claws on Samuel, and when Samuel and his faithful dachshund, Boswell, are pulled through a portal into the dark realm, the home of the Infernals, it gets its chance. But catching Samuel is not going to be easy, for the Infernals have not reckoned on the bravery and cleverness of a boy and his dog, or the loyalty of Samuels friend, the hapless demon Nurd, or the presence of two clueless policemen and the

unlucky, if cheerfully optimistic, driver of an ice-cream van. Most of all, no one has planned on the intervention of an unexpected band of little men, for Samuel and Boswell are not the only inhabitants of Earth who have found themselves in the underworld. If you thought demons were frightening, just wait until you meet Mr. Merryweathers Elves. . . . Extrait The Infernals I In Which We Find Ourselves in Hell, but Only Temporarily, So Its Not All Bad News THE PLACE GENERALLY REFERRED to as Hell but also known variously as Hades, the Kingdom of Fire, Old Nicks Place,¹ and assorted other names designed to indicate that this is not somewhere in which you might want to spend eternity, let alone a short vacation, was in a state of turmoil. Its ruler, its dark king, was unwell, and by unwell I mean mad as a parade of March hares. This source of all Evil, the ancient thing that hid itself in the darkest part of Hell, also had many names, but his followers called him the Great Malevolence. He wished for many things: he wished for every star in every universe to be snuffed out like candle flames between his fingers; he wished for all beauty to cease to be; he wished for cold, and blackness, and a great silence that would last forever. Most of all, he wished for the end of mankind. He had grown weary of trying to corrupt every human being, one by one, because it was time-consuming, and frustrating, and a lot of human beings continued to defy him by being decent and kind. While he hadnt exactly decided to give up on his efforts entirely, it just seemed easier to destroy the Earth and have done with it, and so he had come up with a plan. At the time, it had seemed like a very good plan, and as far as the Great Malevolence and his followers had been concerned, there was absolutely no way that it could go wrong. None whatsoever. Not a chance. This plan positively and without a shadow of a doubt could not fail. Naturally, it failed spectacularly. Now, for those of you who may not be entirely familiar with our story so far, here is a chance for you to catch up.² When last we met, the Great Malevolence, aided by the demon known as Baal, was trying to harness the power of the Large Hadron Collider in order to open the gates of Hell and force his way into our world. The LHC was a massive particle accelerator in Switzerland designed to re-create the moments after the Big Bang that brought our universe into being. In other words, the LHC was dealing with very primal forces indeed, and buried somewhere in those primal forces was the seed of Evil. Thus it was that the Collider created a fissure between worlds, and the Great Malevolence saw his chance. Baal, his most trusted servant, passed through a portal connecting Hell to Earth, and disguised himself as a woman named Mrs. Abernathy in Biddlecombe, England, having first killed the original Mrs. Abernathy and taken on her appearance. At the last minute, just as the Great Malevolence and his armies were about to take over the Earth, Mrs. Abernathys plans were foiled by a small boy named Samuel Johnson, his dachshund Boswell, and an inept, although well-meaning, demon named Nurd, the Scourge of Five Deities. The Great Malevolence blamed Mrs. Abernathy for this, and as a result was now refusing to meet with her, causing her much humiliation and not a little concern for her future. All clear? Good. The Great Malevolence still wasnt quite sure how his plan had failed, and he didnt care. For a moment he had glimpsed a hole between dimensions, a possibility of escape from Hell, and then that portal had been closed just as he was about to leave his dreary kingdom behind. All of his bloodied hopes, his shadowy dreams, had come to nothing, and the closeness of his triumph had driven him insane. This is not to say that he wasnt nuts already: the Great Malevolence had always been madder than a bag of badgers, madder even than a colony of bats trapped in a cookie tin. Now, though, he had passed into another realm of craziness entirely, and significant portions of Hell had been filled with the sounds of his wailing ever since the portal had blinked out of existence. It was a terrible sound, that cry of rage and sorrow, ceaseless and unvarying. Even by the standards of Hell, it was very annoying, echoing from the Great Malevolences lair deep inside the Mountain of Despair, through tunnels and labyrinths, through dungeons and the bowels of the odd dragon, until at last it reached the doorway that led from its hiding place into the dreadful landscape beyond. The doorway was most impressive, intricately carved with terrifying faces whose expressions were ever changing, and horrific forms whose bodies intertwined, so that the very entrance itself seemed to be alive. At this precise moment the doorway was being guarded by two demons. In the classic manner of double acts everywhere, they were exact opposites. One guard was tall and thin, with features that suggested an irritating, and somewhat overweight, child who had spent a lot of time hanging from the guards chin by his hands, thereby stretching the guards face into a very mournful expression. His colleague was shorter and fatter. In fact he looked like he might have eaten the irritating, overweight child as a favor to his fellow guard. Brompton, the thinner of the two, had been guarding the doorway for so long that he had forgotten what he was supposed to be guarding it against, given that the most awful being it was possible to imagine was already in residence inside the mountain. During the centuries that he had spent leaning on his spear, occasionally dozing or scratching himself where polite demons didnt usually scratch themselves in public, he could not, until

recently, recall a great many instances of individuals trying to get in who werent already entitled to pass freely. Oh, a couple of demons had tried to escape from inside the mountain, largely to avoid being torn apart as a punishment for something or other, or occasionally just for a bet, but otherwise things had been very quiet around there, in a Hellish way, for a long time. His colleague, Edgefast, was a new arrival. Brompton regarded him suspiciously from beneath his helmet. Edgefast wasnt leaning sufficiently on his spear for Bromptons liking, and he had not yet proposed skiving off for a cup of tea, or a nap. Instead, Edgefast seemed to be standing up very straight, and he had a disconcerting gleam in his eye, the kind of gleam associated with someone who actually likes his job and, even worse, plans to do it as well as possible. Brompton, by contrast, had not yet found a job that he might be inclined to like or do well, and was of the opinion that such an occupation did not exist, which suited him just fine. A job, as far as Brompton was concerned, was something that somebody made you do when youd rather be doing nothing at all. Edgefast glanced nervously at Brompton. Why do you keep staring at me like that? he asked. Youre not slouching, said Brompton. What? I said, Youre not slouching. Making me look bad, you are. Making me look untidy. Making me look like I dont care. But, er, you dont care, said Edgefast, who understood, from the moment he had set eyes on Brompton, that here was a demon with waste of space written all over him. Thats as may be, said Brompton, but I dont want everyone to know that I dont care. Youll get me fired, looking all enthusiastic like that. I might not like this job, but there are worse ones out there. Dont I know it, said Edgefast, in the manner of a demon who has seen the worst that Hell has to offer, and for whom anything else is pure gravy. Yeah? said Brompton, interested now despite himself. What were you doing before this, then? Edgefast sighed. You remember that time Duke Kobal³ lost his favorite ring? Brompton did. As demonic lords went, Kobal wasnt the worst, which meant that, when he was sticking sharp needles into your flesh, or finding out just how many spiders you could hold in your mouth at once, he would always provide coffee and cake for everyone who was watching, and tell you how sorry he was that it had come to this, even as he tried to fit one last spider between your lips. Kobal had lost his best skull ring down one of Hells sewers, and it had never been found. Following this incident, a law had been passed requiring that all of Hells rotten vegetables, old food, unidentified limbs, and assorted demonic bodily waste products should be searched by hand before being swept into the Sea of Unpleasantness, just in case anything valuable might have been mislaid. Well, continued Edgefast. You know all that searching business? You mean, going down on your claws and knees and raking through poo n stuff? Yep. With your nose right in it, so you could be certain that nothing slipped by? Yep. And with nowhere to wash, so you had to try and eat your sandwich at break by holding it right at the edges with your claws while hoping that you didnt drop it? Yep. But your hands smelled bad so your sandwich smelled bad too? Yep. Orrible. Just orrible. Brompton shuddered. Doesnt bear thinking about. Worst job in Hell. Anyway, go on. Well, that was me. No! Yes. Years and years of it. I still cant look at a toilet without feeling the urge to stick my hand down it. I thought you smelled a bit funny, even for a demon. Its not my fault. Ive tried everything: water, soap, acid. It wont go away. Very unfortunate for you, and anyone who happens to be downwind of you, I must say. Well, this must be quite the promotion for you, then. Oh, it is, it is! said Edgefast fervently. Somebody likes you. Brompton nudged him. Edgefast giggled. Suppose so. Oh yes, youre quite the special one. Satans little pet! Dont know Im born, said Edgefast. Happiest day of my existence, getting away from all that. Edgefast beamed. Brompton beamed back. Just then, a large slot opened above their heads, and the hourly emptying of Hells drains began, dousing the two guards in the foulest waste imaginable before coming to rest in a series of large, stinking pits at the base of the mountain. When the last drop had fallen, and the slot had closed, a small demon dressed in Wellington boots, and wearing a peg on its nose, entered the pits and began searching through the latest delivery. That was me once, that was, said Edgefast, carefully removing a piece of rotting vegetation from his ear. You lucky, lucky sod, said Brompton. They watched the demon quietly for a time. Good of them to give us helmets, though, said Edgefast. One of the perks of the job, said Brompton. Wouldnt be half as nice without the helmets. I meant to ask, said Edgefast. What happened to the bloke who had this job before me? Brompton didnt get the chance to answer. A long, dismal road led through the pits and on to the dreary plain beyond. That road had been empty ever since Edgefast had arrived for this, his first day on the job, but it was empty no longer. A figure was approaching. As it drew nearer, Edgefast saw that it was a woman, or something that was doing a pretty good impression of one. She was wearing a white dress decorated with a pattern of red flowers, and a straw hat with a white ribbon around its crown. The heels of her white shoes made a steady click-click-click sound on the stones of the road, and over her left arm hung a white bag fastened by gold clasps. The woman had a very determined expression on her face,

one that might have given pause to a more intelligent demon than Edgefast. But, as Brompton had correctly surmised, Edgefast was an enthusiast, and there's no talking to enthusiasts. The woman was now close enough for Edgefast to see that the dress was more tattered than it had first appeared. It looked homemade, with uneven seams, and the shoes were crude black boots that had been painted white and then carved so that the heels ended in points. The bag had a frame of bone over which skin had been draped, complete with freckles and hair, and the clasps were, on closer inspection, gold teeth. None of these elements, peculiar in themselves, represented the strangest aspect of the woman's appearance. That honor went to the fact that the only thing more poorly stitched together than her dress was the woman herself. Her skin, visible at her face and arms and legs, seemed to have been ripped apart at some point, the various pieces then sewn back together again in a rough approximation of what a woman might look like. One eye socket was smaller than the other, the left side of the mouth was higher than the right, and the skin on the lower part of the left leg sagged like a pair of old tights. The woman's blond hair sat untidily on her head like a mess of straw dropped there by a passing bird. What he was looking at, Edgefast realized, was not so much a woman as a woman costume, which made him wonder what might lie beneath it. Still, Edgefast had a job to do. He stepped forward before Brompton had a chance to stop him and stuck out his spear in a vaguely threatening manner. You know, I wouldn't do Brompton began to say, but by then it was too late. Halt, said Edgefast. Where do you think you're going? Unfortunately, Edgefast didn't get an answer to that question, but he did receive an answer to his earlier one, which was what had happened to the chap who had held the guard's job before him, for Edgefast was about to become intimately acquainted with his predecessor's fate. The woman stopped and stared at Edgefast. Oh dear. Brompton pulled his helmet low over his eyes, and tried to make himself as small as possible. Oh dear, oh dear, oh Fearsome tentacles, dripping viscous fluid, erupted from the woman's back, ripping through the fabric of her dress. Her mouth opened wide, revealing row upon row of sharp, jagged teeth. Long nails shot from the tips of her pale fingers, curling in upon themselves like hooks. The tentacles gripped Edgefast, lifted him from the ground, and then pulled him very, very hard in a number of different directions at once. There was a squeal of pain, and assorted pieces of what was once Edgefast were thrown in the air; one of them landed on Brompton's helmet. He peered down to see Edgefast's head on the dirt before him, a puzzled look in his eyes. You might have warned me, said the head. Brompton put his foot over Edgefast's mouth to keep him quiet as the woman adjusted her now even more disheveled appearance, patted her hair, and then proceeded to pass through the doorway to the Mountain of Despair, untroubled by any further inquiries as to where she might be going. Brompton tipped his helmet to her as she passed. Morning He paused, trying to find the appropriate word. The woman's dark eyes flicked toward him, and he felt a coldness enter his belly, the kind of coldness that comes just before someone rips you into little pieces and tosses your head at the nearest wall. Miss, he finished, and the woman smiled at him in a yes-I-am-so-pretty-thank-you-for-noticing way before disappearing into the murk of the mountain. Brompton breathed a sigh of relief and lifted his foot from Edgefast's mouth. That really hurt, said Edgefast as Brompton began picking up his limbs and placing them in a large pile in the hope that Edgefast could be put back together in a way that might vaguely resemble what he had once been. It's your own fault, said Brompton. He began to fold his arms, then realized that he was still holding one of Edgefast's arms in each of his hands and it all threatened to get very confusing, so he contented himself with shaking one of Edgefast's severed limbs at Edgefast's head in a disapproving manner. You shouldn't be asking personal questions of a lady. But I'm a guard. And I'm not sure that was a lady. Shhhhh! Brompton looked anxiously over his shoulder, as though expecting the woman to pop up again and tear both of them into pieces so small that only ants could find them. You know, I don't think you're cut out to be a guard, he said. You're too keen on the whole guarding business. But isn't that what we're supposed to be doing? asked Edgefast. Our job is to guard the entrance. I was just trying to be good at it. Where are you now? said Brompton. He looked doubtful. You know what I'm good at guarding? No. What? My health. He popped Edgefast's helmet back on Edgefast's head, and went back to leaning on his spear as he waited for someone to come and take the bits away. Who was um, she, anyway? asked Edgefast. That, said Brompton, was Mrs. Abernathy, and she's in a very bad mood. *Revue de presse* Connolly's graceful prose, laced with acerbically witty footnotes, is a joy to read, and he easily alternates among slapstick comedy, powerful drama, and skin-crawling horror. *Publishers Weekly* Brilliantly funny, often touching, with enough action to keep adventure fans on the edges of their chairs, this novel combines top-notch writing with cutting wit. *Kirkus* sRoald Dahl meets Harry Potter. *My Shelf* Confessions Connolly lets his imagination and his wit run delightfully wild as he describes Hell's denizens

and the human bands pilgrimage through its geography. New Orleans Times-Picayune