

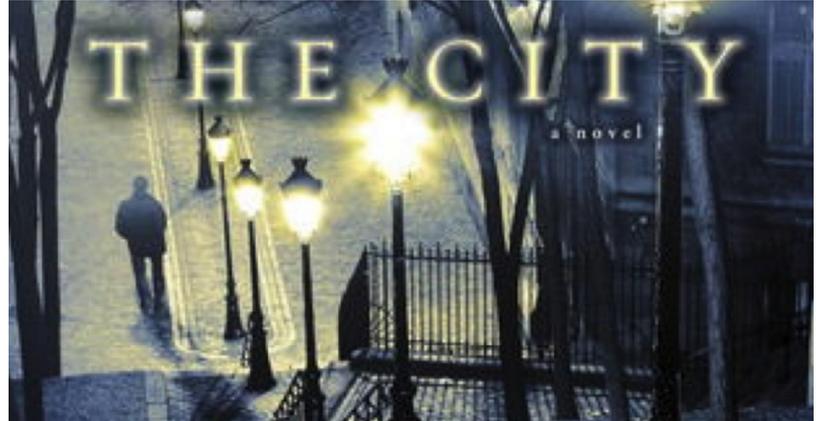


Written by [James Heiser](#) on October 14, 2014

A Review of Dean Koontz's "The City"

"My name is Jonah Ellington Basie Hines Eldridge Wilson Hampton Armstrong Kirk. From as young as I can remember, I loved the city. Mine is a story of love reciprocated. It is the story of loss and hope, and of the strangeness that lies just beneath the surface tension of daily life, a strangeness infinite fathoms in depth."

The beginning of Dean Koontz's most recent novel, *The City*, encapsulates the entirety of the book and does so in a way which hints at the wonder which a literary master artfully discloses through the course of the book.



Dean Koontz's characters are often a strange lot, and Jonah Kirk is no exception. In the hands of a lesser author, the story of a young black man with a gift for music growing up during the 1960s in Koontz's unnamed city would probably become a painful dull preachment on the social ills of that era. When the reader discovers that another major character had been among the Japanese-Americans who spent the years of the Second World War in the Manzanar internment camp in California, the possibility for such preachment would often be redoubled. Not so with *The City*. Koontz does not offer characters who define themselves as "victims," or who wallow in morbid self-pity. Far from making such characters objects of pity, Koontz leads the reader to see the strength which comes from adversity. As one character declares in the course of the novel, "Too many experts make art political, 'cause they believe great artists always held the same convictions as they themselves do. But the last thing art should be is political. Yuck. Double yuck. Keep your mind free. Trust your eye and heart."

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For the inhabitants of *The City*, as for us all, life has times of disappointment and loss — as well as joy — and the ennobling examples offered up in fictional form give the reader an opportunity to reflect on the way in which we have carried our own burdens. Jesus teaches the Church in the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matt. 6:34 NKJV) The human propensity is to borrow trouble from the future, and to despair in the present. Literature written by those who take seriously the power of the Word reaffirms the admonition to leave the future to its Author. As Koontz [explained in a recent interview](#):

People tend to think I had an unhappy childhood ... [but] when I look back on it, I could always find something to make me happy. I think you make a choice in life at a certain point. You [realize that] bad things happen to good people. You can either become embittered by it — or you can find the beauty in life, which is at all times all around you. In *The City*, that's Jonah's strength.

Naming a character Jonah Kirk is, from the perspective of the Christian verity, a bold proclamation concerning the nature of the story which will be told. But the Jonah of Koontz's novel has a relationship with the unnamed city which is vastly different from that which the prophet had with Nineveh of old. For an author to bestow upon a character a name which evokes both a prophet and the Church herself



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portends wonder and revelation and defiance to evil. And in the life and work of Jonah Kirk, the reader is invited to witness the fulfillment of such expectations.

Jonah Kirk's unnamed city tells him that "cities are people" — and there is a beauty in this city which speaks to the beauty which still resides within this fallen world by the grace of Him who fashioned it. But Koontz's novel is far from a paean to the perfectibility of man; rather, beauty stands out in vivid contrast to the banal evil which is so often the work of men. As Jonah declares at the beginning of the novel: "Death dwelt in the metropolis, as it dwelt everywhere, and there were more murders there than in a quiet hamlet, much tragedy, and moments of terror. But the city was as well a place of wonder, of magic dark and light, magic of which in my eventful life I had much experience, including one night when I died and woke and lived again."

As he has explained [elsewhere](#), Koontz is a foe of nihilism — especially when it is expressed in literature — because "[storytelling is] what civilization is based on." The antagonists in *The City* are all nihilists who express that deadly doctrine a multitude of ways. There is no dualism in *The City*: Jonah and those who are allied with him are not simply in opposition to evil; rather, wicked men and women may be terrifying, but their personalities are ultimately flat — even vacuous, in some cases. Their hatred and the destruction which they work is doomed from the beginning — and, in the fullness of time, is subject to judgment —because it is counter to the Law which has been given to men.

In the course of *The City*, Jonah observes:

One of the many wonders of this world is that, if we allow it to happen, anyone newly met can all but overnight become a central figure in our lives, hardly less essential to us than air and water. Although we've made it a world of hatred and envy and violence, the preponderance of evidence proves to me that it is a world created to inspire friendship and love and kindness.

The City is a novel filled with beauty and wonder expressed through characters who may remind you of that which is best in those people who inhabit your own world. In Jonah Kirk, Dean Koontz is a man well-met, and an artist who drives away a measure of the bleakness of our sin-sick world.

Dean Koontz, *The City—A Novel*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2014). Hardcover. 398 pages. \$28.00.



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