

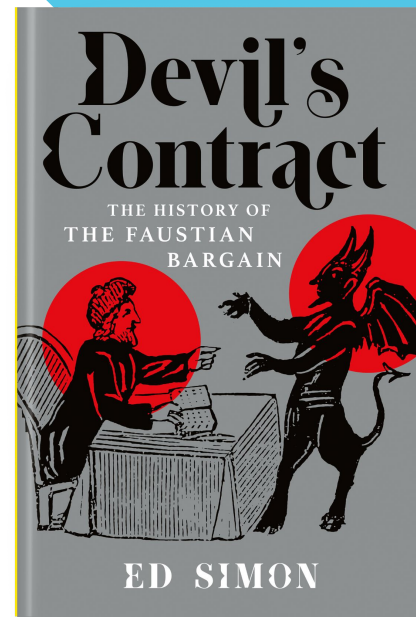
DEVIL'S CONTRACT

The History of the Faustian Bargain

Ed Simon

Hardcover 9781685891046

eBook 9781685891039



“ An undeniably fascinating read, as the author weaves literary and intellectual strands into a colorful tapestry.”
—*Kirkus*, **STARRED Review**

“ Never before has the Faust legend has been studied in this context ... What is conjured by this study is a new perspective on the human condition.”
—**Joseph P. Laycock**, author of *Speak of the Devil*

SUMMARY

A devilishly fascinating tour of the Faustian bargain through the ages, from brimstone to blues and beyond ...

From ancient times to the modern world, the idea of the Faustian bargain—the exchange of one's soul in return for untold riches and power—has exerted a magnetic pull upon our collective imaginations.

Scholar Ed Simon takes us on a historical tour of the Faustian bargain and illustrates how the instinct for sacrificing our principles in exchange for power models all kinds of social ills, from colonialism to nuclear warfare, and even social media, climate change, and AI. In doing so, Simon conveys just how much the Faustian bargain shows us about power and evil ... and about ourselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From Christopher Marlowe's play to Goethe's poem, the story of bluesman Robert Johnson to the Charlie Daniels' Bands "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," our culture has been fascinated by stories of people who have sold their soul to Satan. What's your personal favorite story in this vein?
2. Early on in *Devil's Contract*, Ed Simon argues that stories about somebody selling their soul to Satan for power and knowledge are among the most influential and significant that have ever been told. Do you think that the Faustian legend is our culture's most central legend? What legends could compete with it?
3. Throughout *Devil's Contract* there are certain themes which re-occur, particularly the claim that art, music, and theater, in their reliance upon illusion, have something that's particularly "Faustian" about them. Do you think that this is true? What are some examples of artists or creative acts that are Faustian?
4. Several times throughout the book Simon argues that the legend of Faust, and indeed religious stories in general, have crucial things to teach us even if we're not personally religious. Do you think that this is true?

DEVIL'S CONTRACT

5. Much of *Devil's Contract* concerns the similarities between various Faustian legends, the common details of their being a signed contract, or of the person who sold their soul acquiring magical abilities. What are some important differences that you see between various examples of the Faustian legend?
6. In one chapter, Simon argues that certain things are particularly "Faustian," e.g., that America's national history is Faustian or that totalitarian politics is Faustian. Do you think that this is a useful adjective to apply to those words, and if so, what are some other things in literature, philosophy, history, or culture that could be described as "Faustian?"
7. At points Simon seems to argue that we should have sympathy for the broad archetype of Faust. How sympathetic to him are you?
8. Among the most novel of arguments made in *Devil's Contract* is Simon's claim that ours is a particularly Faustian age, in fact that we could call it the "Faustocene." What aspects of the modern world do you think could be fairly described this way?
9. *Devil's Contract* discusses aspects of the modern world which Simon terms apocalyptic—things like climate change, technological overreach, and nuclear proliferation—which he also thinks are "Faustian." Is there a way in which the warnings of the Faust legend can help us better understand those issues?
10. In the introduction, Simon claims that all of us are in some sense "Faustian," that in a very real way that to read about the legend is to consider your own biography. Do you think it's fair or true to say that to some degree Faust's story is all of our story?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Simon is the executive director of Belt Media Collaborative and editor in chief of literary journal *Belt Magazine*. A staff writer for *LitHub*, his essays and criticism have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, the *Paris Review Daily*, the *New Republic*, and the *Washington Post*. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with his family.

MORE TO DISCOVER

Find more resources for your book club at www.mhpbooks.com.

