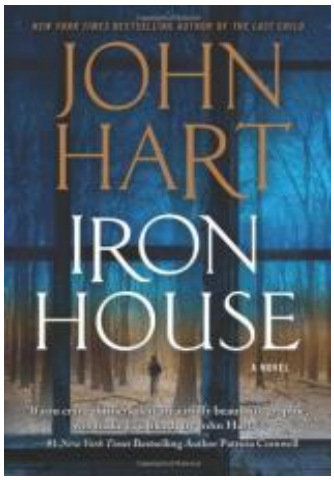
Iron House

by John Hart



About the Book

Two families. Two brothers. One explosive secret.

John Hart has written four New York Times bestsellers and won an unprecedented two back-to-back Edgar Awards. *The New York Times* labeled his work ?Grisham-style intrigue and Turow-style brooding.? Now he delivers a gut-wrenching, heart-stopping thriller no reader will soon forget.

There was nothing but time at the Iron Mountain Home for Boys, time for two orphans to learn that life is neither painless nor won without a fight. Julian survives only because his older brother, Michael, is both feared and fiercely protective. When an older boy is brutally killed, Michael makes the ultimate sacrifice to protect his brother: He flees the orphanage and takes the blame with him.

For two decades, Michael thrives on the streets of New York, eventually clawing his way to a world of wealth, fear and respect. But the life he?s fought to build unravels when he meets a woman who knows nothing of his past or sins. He wants a fresh start with Elena, the chance to build a family of his own. But a life in organized crime is not so easily abandoned. With a price on his head and everyone he loves at risk, Michael spirits Elena back to North Carolina, to the brother he?d lost and a thicket of intrigue more dense than he could possibly imagine. In a tour de force narrative of violence, hope and redemption, the brothers must return to the Iron House of their childhood, to the place that almost broke them, the place it all began.

A Letter from John Hart

Dear Reader,

I was so pleased with my last novel that I thought I would never top it. THE LAST CHILD won a second Edgar Award and spent six months on the New York Times bestseller list. It felt like a lot to live up to, but I?d decided early to write a book that was different from everything I?d done before. All of my previous books (THE KING OF LIES, DOWN RIVER, THE LAST CHILD) were about normal people looking for strength, about small people finding the power to overcome whatever horrible thing I?d inflicted on their lives. I?d never written a protagonist with a skill set, never created a man who knew from the start exactly what he was willing to do and, more importantly, how to do it. And I really wanted to write that guy! A character that was strong, confident, dangerous.

IRON HOUSE is what came from that, and while it differs from THE LAST CHILD, it has all the things that made the other books work ? loyalty and fear, courage and faith and betrayal. The tension is more physical, the violence more overt; but it?s a combination that works, a full-on thriller with the same deep emotional core.

It?s funny, really. I thought I?d focus on the plot and write faster because of it. I thought I?d blaze through the story, but that?s not how it happened. It took more work, instead, more time. Because at the end of the day, my characters need to be real, they need to live and hurt - to be *relatable* - and that?s all about motivation. It?s about depth and life and the things that drive us to be extraordinary. It?s what makes me most proud of IRON HOUSE: that I was able to build this very hard-charging thriller without losing all of the things that made my other books work so well: the people, the intricacies of relationship, emotionality and need. The book is a thriller, no doubt, but you will also find much to discuss. I hope you enjoy.

Discussion Guide

1. The story begins with a vivid depiction of Michael and Julian's childhood at the Iron Mountain Home for Boys, and yet we don't find out the truth about Abigail's childhood until the climax of the book. How did your assumptions about Abigail change as the truth unfolded?

2. The crux of this story is Michael's outlook on fatherhood as a new beginning, a chance for happiness and a moral life previously unavailable to him. Do you think this kind of event can fundamentally change a person ? both within the context of the book and in your own experience?

3. In his determination to protect Abigail, Jessup is willing to do almost anything, up to and including breaking the law. Is he right to do so? Why does Jessup care so deeply for Abigail?

4. Throughout the book several characters are haunted by things they've done in the past, though they often acted at the coercion of others and not of their own volition. How does this change your judgment of that character's actions? Examples: Julian is pushed to the brink by the torments of unmonitored and violent bullies at Iron House. Michael finds the only father figure he'll ever know, but is forced to take the lives of others in order to win his approval.

5. There are few characters in *Iron House* who had the privilege of a traditional childhood. How are the main characters shaped in different ways by their pasts?

6. Explore the different parent-child relationships in the story. How does each relationship evolve throughout the course of the novel? Are there any "good" parents in this story?

7. Given the things he's done, is Michael capable of a moral existence? Does he have a religious faith? Was he ever a moral man? Is he, indeed, more than the things he's done?

8. Psychological disorder figures prominently in *Iron House*. Some characters are aided by others who recognize their issues and attempt to help them. But there are also cases of unchecked malady, as in Jimmy's uncontrollable violence. How does psychological disorder function in the larger story?

9. Jimmy's feelings for Michael are powerful yet ambiguous. What does he really feel and why?

10. There are significant differences between the way Abigail, Jessup, Julian, and Victorine treat psychological disease. Is this a reflection of the respective age of the characters, and the perception of psychological disorder in which each generation was raised?

11. Was Michael right to let Arabella Jax live? What were his reasons for doing so and were they morally correct?

12. Given all that's transpired, can Michael and Elena be truly happy together?

13. If you've read some or all of John Hart's earlier books, how do you see *Iron House* in relation to them?

14. How do you feel about the resolution of *Iron House*?

Author Bio

John Hart is the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE KING OF LIES, DOWN RIVER, THE LAST CHILD, IRON HOUSE, REDEMPTION ROAD, THE HUSH and THE UNWILLING. The only author in history to win the Edgar Award for Best Novel consecutively, John has also won the Barry Award, the Southern Independent Bookseller?s Award for Fiction, the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award, and the North Carolina Award for Literature. His novels have been translated into 30 languages and can be found in more than 70 countries.

Photo Credit: Ashley Cox Photography

Critical Praise

"If you crave thrillers that are vividly beautiful, graphic, will make you bleed, try John Hart." --- Patricia Cornwell

"Lean, hard and absolutely riveting, IRON HOUSE is a tour de force. With his best book yet, John Hart has clearly joined the top rank of thriller writers." --- Vince Flynn

"It isn?t as if Hart?s career needed jump-starting. His first three stand-alone thrillers have been greeted by an ever-growing crescendo of praise, including two Edgar Awards. Definitely not the kind of writer who needs a breakthrough book. And, yet, Iron House lifts Hart to an altogether new level of excellence?. The present-time plot---disaffected Mob hit man on the run, trying to carve a new life without endangering those he loves?makes a superb thriller on its own (steadily building tension, magnificently choreographed fight scenes, including a High Noon-like finale), but it?s what Hart does with the backstory that gives the novel its beyond-genre depth. Like the great Peter Hoeg in Borderliners (1994), Hart uses the familiar story of mistreatment in an orphanage as a way into the inner lives of his characters, and the blind fear, abject confusion, and yearning for love he finds there are both heartbreaking and curiously hopeful, in an almost postapocalyptic way. An unforgettable novel from a master of popular fiction.? ---*Booklist*, starred review

"This rich, impressive contemporary thriller from two-time Edgar-winner Hart (The Last Child) focuses on two brothers, Michael and Julian, both raised and abused at the Iron House of the title, an orphanage in the mountains of North Carolina.... Hart deftly interweaves a complex family history story with Stevan's intense, bloody quest for vengeance.... [The book's] powerful themes and its beautiful prose will delight Hart's fans---and should earn him many new ones." ---*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

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Publication Date: July 12, 2011
Genres: Fiction, Thriller
Hardcover: 432 pages
Publisher: Thomas Dunne Books
ISBN-10: 0312380348
ISBN-13: 9780312380342