

Reviews

Hard Feelings

By Jason Starr. Vintage, \$12.

Any one of us can become a walking time bomb if life stinks badly enough. Such is the moral that stalks much contemporary noir fiction, especially that of Jason Starr. In his previous novels, the Brooklyn writer has led seemingly benign admen and execs down the primrose path to murderous depravity. Though Starr's latest wicked concoction offers few surprises, *Hard Feelings* does a convincing and entertaining job of revealing the killer within its acerbic narrator, Richie Segal.

On the surface, Richie has little to complain about. He enjoys a high-paying job at a midtown software firm, a loving wife and a cozy co-op on the Upper East Side. On the flip side, however, Richie hasn't closed a deal since he started his gig, and time is running out. As his wife climbs her corporate ladder, Richie acts more and more like a sore loser, stumbling home drunk and dredging up old jealousies. Not surprisingly, his fortunes head further south, and Richie begins to pin the blame on a childhood friend named Michael Rudnick, whom he encounters

one day on the street. Michael is a full-fledged success: rich, handsome, the paterfamilias of a perfect suburban clan. Yet as a teenager, Michael was an outcast, a fat freak who indulged his penchant for kinky wedgies on Richie. Now, Richie wants payback.

From the beginning, it's clear that Richie will murder his childhood nemesis; the only question is whether he will get away with it. Starr skillfully plays off the reader's desire for Richie to succeed. After the crime, his fortunes soar:

He closes three sales in a day and gets a promotion; his wife gravitates back to him. But then, it all comes crashing down. Someone knows.

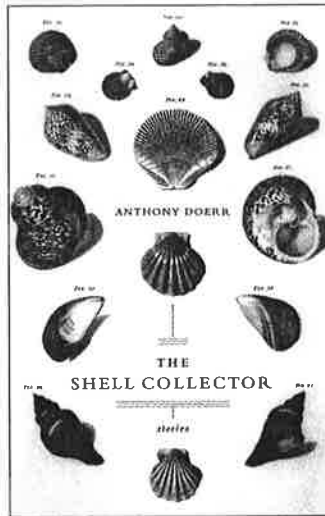
Hard Feelings dances a mesmerizing tango between reality and its menacing shadow. In the opening pages, Richie's voice is whiny but sympathetic; his plea, the call of a man who's been victimized by bad fortune. But

as the novel rolls swiftly on and Richie's self-righteousness grows shriller yet, we begin to wonder how much of the true story Richie has been giving us. While Starr's melodramatic climax leaves something to be desired, his portrait of an average man undone by his own suppressed memories might send us all back to the couch. —John Freeman

HARD FEELINGS

A NOVEL

JASON STARR



The Shell Collector

By Anthony Doerr. Scribner, \$23.

The stories in Anthony Doerr's first collection often feel as if they were culled from *Field & Stream* magazine's literary supplement. If that sounds like a putdown, it's nothing of the sort. The author's ability to seamlessly integrate fly-fishing into nearly every tale is a testament to his skill as well as to his obsession. However, neither this quirk nor Doerr's apparent intimacy with so much of the natural world explains why his stories are so compelling.

In "The Hunter's Wife," a hunting guide courts a teenage girl with the dedication required to land the most skittish prey, and they marry. While schooling his new bride in the ways of the backwoods, he inadvertently facilitates her calling as a spiritual medium for the dead—a gift that eventually leads the girl to abandon him. In the title story, a reclusive oceanographer living in coastal Kenya discovers the healing powers of a rare poisonous snail. His fame brings his estranged son to his doorstep. When the son is killed, the collector's love for shells and his hermetic existence are called into question. But elsewhere, nature redeems: Arriving in Maine, the Puerto Rican teenager of the feel-good story "So Many Chances" finds solace, liberation and even sex through—what else?—fly-fishing. In other tales, Doerr reveals his capacity for salty family drama and farce.

In the strongest story, "The Caretaker," a Liberian civil servant named Joseph flees his war-torn country for a beach town in Oregon, where he takes a job as a summer-home caretaker. After he is fired, he continues to live in the woods behind his former employer's home, taking solace in planting a garden and simply surviving. When several beached whales die on the nearby shore, he removes their enormous hearts and buries them beside his garden in a futile grieving ritual. "What good does burying something really do?" Joseph thinks. "In nightmares it always manages to dig itself out."

Much like the work of Jack London, *The Shell Collector* captivates with reverent depictions of nature and its ability to renew us spiritually and physically. But these stories' real power comes from Doerr's complex take on what happens after we answer the call of the wild. —John Dicker

Be My Knife

By David Grossman.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$25.

Novelist and journalist David Grossman has claimed a place in the front ranks of contemporary Israeli writers with his lyrical yet penetrating explorations of his fellow countrymen's psyches. In books such as *See Under: Love* and *The Book of Intimate Grammar*, characters react to pain—the legacy of either the Holocaust or the suffocation of family life—by renouncing worldly attachments and hiding behind their obsessions. In his fifth novel, however, the protagonists fling themselves headlong into the world—and into each other.

Be My Knife charts the peculiar affair of two middle-aged lonely hearts, as told through their letters and diaries. The novel begins after Yair, a rare-book dealer, spots Miriam, a schoolteacher, at their high-school reunion. Although they barely know each other and both are married, Yair immediately launches into a series of soul-baring letters, which make up the book's first part. "Be a knife for me and I will be a knife for you," he dares Miriam.

Despite the differences in temperament between this pair and Grossman's previous protagonists, *Be My Knife* has much in common with Grossman's other novels. The author's interests still lie in the nature of obsession and the limits of the self. And once again, he eschews conventional plot, instead furthering Yair and Miriam's exchanges with colorful, if occasionally strained, turns of phrase and humorous allusions.

Fans of Jeanette Winterson or Virginia Woolf may enjoy the novel's verbal artistry and its acute attention to the shifting psychological states of love. Yet none of this makes for a particularly compelling story. Yair's letters begin promisingly enough but quickly spiral into a tedium of memories, longings and unconnected daily events. Miriam's diaries—when they finally arrive in the book's last third—are similarly self-absorbed and tiresome. Perhaps alternating these two points of view throughout might have made for a more engrossing read. As it is, there's simply not enough going on to keep the reader interested in how their story will end.

—Paul Zakrzewski

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