

No Second Chance

by Harlan Coben; New York, Dutton, 2003, 338 pages, \$24.95

Benjamin Crocker, M.D.

I rarely read mysteries, so it's hard for me to compare this convoluted tale of murder and breathless action with others of its genre, but I found *No Second Chance* interesting and entertainingly written. The action is nonstop and cinematic—an earlier Coben novel was the subject of a bidding war by the film studios.

The protagonist, Marc Seidman, is a plastic surgeon who comes out of a coma to find that he has been shot and is a suspect in the death of his wife and that his infant daughter has vanished. The twists of plot are unlikely, and the rapid adaptation—both physical and emotional—of the characters to the rapid-fire action is unconvincing at times, especially at the more or less happy ending, but I suspect that these are largely conventions of the genre. *No Second Chance* is full of familiar details of suburban life, the story of a man who lives in the neighborhood he grew up in, near his parents and his boyhood best friend, and who is also a globe-trotting international doctor who enjoys doing reconstructive surgery for people in faraway lands. It is also full of the latest electronic gadgets, such as wireless PDAs and cell-phone call logs that allow Marc's former girlfriend, Rachel, to track down suspects as they speed around the New Jersey suburbs, bloody and battered from a series of ambush battles with the bad guys.

The mental health angles to this book involve the use of psychiatric diagnosis in motivating suicidal and homicidal behavior. Two murderers display perhaps the most unambiguous romance in the book, having met "in the loony bin," in which one is saved by the other from what sounds like incipient rape by hospital orderlies, whom he fairly quickly murders. Marc's wife, Monica, and his former high school classmate Dina were both seeing the same psychiatrist, a Dr.

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Radio, who seems to have failed to help either woman, although Dina initially falsely claims that he has. Just as the gunplay that kills Monica and almost kills Marc is about to break out, Dina, who knows that something is up, waits to get Dr. Radio's advice before acting, with lethal results. Then there is Rachel's husband, the senior FBI agent who we find has met

his end through angry suicide. He is described as a manic depressive who went off his medication, at which point Rachel filed for divorce. Finally, there is the unfortunate end of Marc's sister, the drug addict, who seems to have found no help for her problem despite having a doctor for a brother, a man who gives the deformed a second chance.

I hope that when this book is made into a movie the few parts about psychiatry will be written out. However, I suspect we will see the struggle with the evil orderlies in the loony bin.

Border Crossing

by Pat Barker; New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001, 215 pages, \$22

Harvey Bluestone, M.D.

The protagonist of *Border Crossing* is Tom Seymour, a psychologist expert in child delinquency who is writing a book based on his research. He is also the failed husband of Lauren. The author, Pat Barker, is a well-known British novelist who won the Booker prize for her *Regeneration* trilogy. Her topic is timely. Horrible crimes committed by children are big news on both sides of the Atlantic.

Border Crossing starts out in highly melodramatic fashion. Tom and Lauren are walking on the deteriorating waterfront of Newcastle. They see a man take a handful of pills and dive into the river. Tom jumps in after him and saves him from drowning. The young man is Danny. Tom had testified at his trial for the murder of an old woman 13 years ago when Danny was ten years old. Danny wants to see Tom to talk with him about what happened, and Tom agrees.

Danny is smart and perceptive: "Bollocks. You need this as much as I do." It is noteworthy that Tom himself might have been a killer when he was ten and was left in charge of a four-year-old boy. A tragedy was prevented by the chance intervention of a passerby. The reader is left to wonder whether the drowning rescue was

planned by Danny, whether he killed the old lady, how he got to be the way he is, and how he will adapt to freedom after his long incarceration. Tom sets about to find the answers. He tracks down the lawyer who represented Danny at his trial. He consults with his probation officer. He finds the people who taught him when he was incarcerated. He meets one teacher whom Danny falsely accused of sexually molesting him.

Barker maintains a high level of suspense throughout the book. The answers to all the questions don't appear until the final pages, but they are so well adumbrated that they come as no surprise and are fully consistent with the characters. A plethora of borders are crossed in this book: the border between illness and evil, or "mad or bad"; the border between classes; and the ocean between practice in England and in the United States. However, the most troublesome borders crossed are those of the therapist Tom and his patient Danny. Tom is a thorough practitioner, elicits painful information—or misinformation—from Danny, and is energetic in

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