

May 15, 2008

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

## Hit Man's Dilemma: Sly Widow, Nasty Boss

By JANET MASLIN

A third of the way into Thomas Perry's latest game of strategy, two strangers find themselves at an impasse. They are both in her bedroom. He is a hired killer. She is a recent widow. She has been sleeping; he's been watching. He wants her dead.

### FIDELITY

By Thomas Perry

357 pages. Harcourt. \$25.

As is always the case with Mr. Perry's ingeniously plotted stories, there are complications. Big ones. The killer, an ex-con named Jerry Hobart, who would look scary even without his ski mask, pocketknife and rubber gloves, needs information. The widow, Emily Kramer, may have it. Hobart has already shot Emily's husband, Phil Kramer, to secure the information. But that backfired. Hobart failed to get the file he was being paid to steal.

Here's where "Fidelity" shows the mark of a coolly cerebral Perry puzzle: Hobart doesn't know whether Emily is privy to the same secrets. She was Phil's partner in a detective agency, so it would stand to reason that they compared notes. But "Fidelity," as its title sardonically hints, is full of people who are not entirely forthcoming with their partners. For instance Phil didn't tell Emily that he had a girlfriend. "I would have died before I ever did this to you," Emily hissed at Phil's fresh grave.

So maybe Hobart can shake the information out of Emily. And maybe he can't. If he fails, he'll have to make sure she can't identify him. But if he harms her, all hell will break loose. The police will descend on the Kramer office and sift through evidence. They just may stumble onto whatever Hobart was after. At this stage of the game Mr. Perry has given the reader no idea exactly what it is.

A little bit deeper into this conundrum Hobart's trouble has gotten even worse. He has failed to silence Emily and instead made her deeply suspicious — and she, like her husband, is an experienced private investigator. Emily just may figure out who hired Hobart in the first place. And if the trail leads to the very spoiled and wealthy man whose actions Hobart has been paid to conceal, Hobart already knows his employer has no scruples. By this point in Mr. Perry's expertly constructed cat-and-mouse game we know it too.

The rich guy is Ted Forrest, heir to a sizeable chunk of the San Joaquin Valley. On a typical evening he sneaks away from his wife and makes a cellphone call to someone he calls "Baby." But the nickname is no joke: he's chasing a 14-year-old girl. So how honorable would Ted be if anyone linked him to a hired killer? Is there any doubt Ted would betray his own hit man? Nope. Hobart is in the kind of jam that would be much less fun in real life than it is on the page.

Mr. Perry doesn't break much of a sweat in constructing this book. Even for a writer who so expertly specializes in the nuts and bolts of crime fiction, "Fidelity" is on the mechanical side. Though he is always a top-notch creator of agile puzzle plots, Mr. Perry has drawn more nuanced characters than the one-note characters with which he stocks this story.

So we don't know much about Phil, except that he left Emily with no money and a set of unwelcome revelations. We don't know much about Emily, except that she's another of the smart, strong-willed women who populate Mr. Perry's stories. Maybe this skimpiness is why the last page of "Fidelity" announces so enthusiastically that Mr. Perry's next book will bring back his long-established heroine, Jane Whitefield. But the quietly canny books that he has written since she last appeared nine years ago (newer titles include "Pursuit," "Death Benefits" and "Nightlife") have worked just fine without Jane.

"Fidelity" still does what it needs to. It rivets attention, races fast and displays distinctive Perry hallmarks, especially in its standoffs. His characters are uncannily good at sizing one another up and anticipating what the next moves will be. Though he briefly equates Hobart's tactics to the ways a coyote slinks through a neighborhood, Mr. Perry need not even articulate this. It's always built into his storytelling, and it's already on the page.

Pure instinct counts for a lot in "Fidelity." One of the key plot points here is that Phil had a distinctive way of hiding things — and that the way a person conceals secrets can be as interesting as the secrets themselves. Emily, of course, has Phil's number. And the book greatly enjoys Ted Forrest's misguided sense of entitlement, as expressed by the impatience with which he treats post-adolescent women who have ceased to interest him. Ted has a wife, Caroline, who won't let him spoil her makeup but will happily be kissed by the family pets. So he also has a girlfriend named Kylie. Ted marvels that names like Kylie didn't exist when he was young.

If there is any evidence in the bare-bones "Fidelity" that Mr. Perry is ready to retrench, it's the occasional plot opportunity that goes unexplored. Phil and Emily had a son who died in a car crash. Though that might strongly affect the shape of this story, it surfaces only indirectly. And Mr. Perry too briefly sets up what might be a running motif about women, violins and survival skills, once Caroline throws a benefit for music lovers. Since it's happening in his own palatial home, Ted is forced to attend.

Ted finds himself stuck talking to a violinist who is too adult, successful and accomplished to amuse him. That she is married to a sports star annoys him even more. He much prefers to cheat on his wife with little Kylie, who works as a coffee-shop barista and is lamely taking violin lessons in her free time. Any coyote, or any student of Mr. Perry's cautionary tales, knows that someone this weak hasn't the wiles to play tricks indefinitely. He will be overmatched before "Fidelity" is over.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)