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FOLEY'S LUCK

[Stories] By Tom Chiarella

181 pp. Alfred A. Knopf.

While many of the interrelated stories in this affecting debut collection feel too thin to stand alone, they gain a cumulative power as the pieces of Dan Foley's life coalesce into an increasingly wistful whole. From our first glimpse of Foley as an undertaker's 12 year-old son "on removal" of his first dead body, we sense he will prove ill equipped to ever take control of his life. "You're a real Foley," his father praises. "A Foley can look anything straight in the face." Yet, his father's Oedipal competitiveness turns Foley's older brother into a drunken vagabond who blames "the fates" for his failures, while Foley grows almost Walter Mittyish in his ineffectual docility. From "Foley's Confessions," a beguiling account of teenaged Foley's meeting his future wife during the summer he'd decided "to become a bad person", to "Foley the Great," when at 63 Foley gropes for some final sense of accomplishment, Mr. Chiarella's ingenuous prose and compassionate eye stir sympathy while raising weighty questions about truth, destiny and individual autonomy. Shot at by a turtle farmer, exploited by a criminal cousin., kicked out by his wife and even assaulted by an owl, Foley tiptoes impotently through his allotted time trying to discern some pattern to his life through the systematic charting of "bad luck," telling innocuous lies and adopting mottoes. Always searching outside himself for sources of meaning, he grows aware only of his unawareness and becomes a poignant emblem of humanity drowning in the swirl of life's current.