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A WELL-KNOWN SECRET

By Jim Fusilli

G.P.Putnam's Sons. 288 pp.

Readers who missed Jim Fusilli's 2001 debut thriller *Closing Time* can catch up immediately on private investigator Terry Orr, as this sequel opens with a fictitious New York Times story offering three pages on Orr's background.

He sounds like an intriguing guy. Orr is "very bright, very passionate," according to a Manhattan assistant d.a., and he'd shown his passion as early as his college days when he lost a St. Johns Univ. basketball scholarship for knocking four teeth from the mouth of a teammate. Four years before the current story begins, Orr turned from writer to private eye when his wife and infant son were thrown onto the tracks and crushed by a midtown subway train, leaving 36-year-old Orr to raise alone his 14-year-old daughter Gabriella.

Not only has Orr in those four years solved murders and uncovered extortion rings, but his film-optioned book on the Tweed Ring and the sale of his deceased artist wife's paintings have left Gabriella an estate worth over \$20 million.

Yet, when Orr meets the author of that Times story 200 pages into this novel and the reporter tells him, "Your daughter is what makes you interesting," we see in one sentence not only the greatest strength of this book but the reason it fails as a thriller.

The material is all here for it not to be that way. After the Times piece, the story begins with Orr hearing a plea from his housekeeper, Mrs. Maoli. Her friend Dorotea Salgado's daughter Sonia has just disappeared after spending 30 years in a Westchester maximum security prison for the murder of elderly Asher Glatzer, who was carrying \$600,000 in uncut diamonds at the time. The diamonds were never recovered, but Glatzer's wallet and blood were found in Sonia's apartment, and off she went to prison.

Orr finds Sonia immediately, dead, her neck snapped, and he quickly suspects that whoever murdered her did so to conceal having also committed Glatzer's murder 30 years before. Soon, all investigative roads lead through a group of Sonia's friends from DeWitt Clinton High School and a traffic ticket one received from a bad cop who is father of a worse cop now telling Orr to back off the case.

Fusilli's plot is moderately complex but formulaic and, worse, unengaging until a mild tension forms briefly toward the end. He generates little sympathy for the murder victim and no interest in any suspects.

One flaw lies in the weakness of Orr's first person narration. When the detective tells the story, he or she needs a compelling sound—the jaded poetry of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe or endearing wit of Brian McGrory's Jack Flynn—but Orr sounds like a pen, not a voice. His tone smells of ink: "The guy looked like Tommy shrunken down by age, by life, by memory's echo voices." He compounds this pretentiousness by constantly tossing out dialogue from *Hamlet* that is self-congratulatory erudition, not characterization integrated into the narrative.

One cardinal principle of fair reviewing is: review the book the author wrote, not the one the reviewer wishes the author had written. This once, that wisdom must be

ignored, because inside this middling thriller there is a beautiful story struggling to get out. That's the one the fictitious Times reporter saw.

The detective here is clichéd and dull. But Fusilli, music critic for The Wall Street Journal, renders Terry Orr as widower and single father with deeply poignant sensitivity, and that feels like the tale Fusilli is genuinely interested in.

He finds the task easier for his exceptional gift for evoking New York City, from his painfully clear recreation of the Sept. 11 attack to the NYU campus where students “in tight blouses and funky skirts ambled along the street, not quite moved to urgency by the pounding drums and clanking cowbells that rose from amid robust, leafless trees in Washington Square Park.”

He paints how Little Italy has become a cubby hole of its former self, and he places characters before a televised Mets game to conjure the vivid Big Apple atmosphere we felt a generation ago when Kojak's squad huddled around the set to cheer the Knicks.

When the setting feels real, the actions taking place there feel more real. We can suffer, then, the melancholy in Orr's apartment on the night Gabriella sat clandestinely before his computer reading the love letters he still wrote to her deceased mother. We can feel how, as he tries to take care of her, she tries to take care of him, to get him to try to live and know human contact again, to overcome his post-traumatic phobia of entering a subway station.

The case he's taken on, Sonia's disappearance and murder, itself sprung from his affection for Mrs. Maoli and her being a “surrogate grandmother” to Orr's motherless girl.

Orr sits home, listening to NPR and Sibelius, trying to read Sinclair Lewis, and he wonders what his wife might have said that night at dinner, what his son would be doing now that he would have been six. But mostly he thinks of his precocious daughter who could by her fourth birthday read the Times editorial page and has at 14 just finished writing her first book, who reads biographies of Emily Dickinson and ponders questions like “When did people start to want more than they need?”

Readers may forget the crime story of Sonia Salgado even as they are reading it. It might be a long time, though, before the image fades of a haunted, still-young widower raising a bright girl at that lively and exhausting stage where she has one foot still planted in childhood while the toes of the other test the waters of womanhood. When he's swelling with pride in Gabriella one moment, and the next he's daunted by the limits of a man's capacity to teach her the subtleties of growing up female, Terry Orr's becomes a highly engrossing story.
