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HARD, HARD CITY

By Jim Fusilli

Putnam, 288 pp.

Jim Fusilli's thriller series receives justified praise for its pitch-perfect rendering of New York. No less authority than Old Blue Eyes says that if we can make it there we can make it anywhere. Even the ball fields in Manhattan are blacktop.

But the titular hard city in this fourth Terry Orr novel may be supremely affluent Silver Haven, N.J. across the Hudson where middle schools kids don't even lock their bikes. It's not a place where people steal small.

New York City, that unlivable place filled with people who wouldn't live anywhere else, has been hard enough on Orr for half a decade, since his wife Marina and infant son Davy died on midtown subway tracks. Someone had pushed Davy's stroller onto the tracks, and Marina died trying to save him, leaving Orr to raise their daughter Gabriella alone.

In the last novel, Orr learned something that forced him to stop idealizing Marina, if not completely. She was delayed in saving Davy because just then she was kissing someone else. Images of Marina and Davy still visit Orr's mind continually, a leitmotif running through this latest entry. Yet now Orr's conflicted whether to "dismiss her...send her back ... to the corner of the cosmos preserved for women who betrayed their vows" or to "deliver her to a magnificent place among the angels...where women who surrendered their lives for their children are rightfully exalted."

Scarred deeply, Orr can't even tell assistant D.A. Julie Giada—the faithful girlfriend who laughs and watches *I Love Lucy* reruns with now 15-year-old Gabriella—that he loves her. "You're my favorite person in the world...in the Adult, Female category" is the best he can do.

Though frozen personally, when Orr learns that Gabriella's devoted best friend Daniel Wu is worried about a classmate, the plot quickens. Gifted artist Allie Powell, 14, is missing from Silver Haven High and special classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology. It seems Allie's terrified of his father, Harlan Powell, a "white-collar low-life," filthy rich from a "pump-and-dump" stock scheme in which he'd swindled old high school friends.

Orr quickly learns that this father who calls his artist son "faggot" is indeed someone to inspire terror. Powell employs local Silver Haven gorillas who pound fists into curious private investigators and try to run them off the Garden State Parkway. No wonder Orr needs massive infusions of analgesics to get through a typical day.

By the time Orr finds kindly old John McPorter, at whose Upper East Side apartment Allie'd been hiding, Allie is long gone and so are some envelopes that both Allie's father and mother are eager to find. When McPorter gets thrown from his apartment window and impaled on an iron gate, clearly someone is homicidally eager to find those envelopes. Is it Harlan, reeking "the scent of arrogance," or bitter Alexandra Powell, who'd sooner let her son roam the streets than miss a chance to ruin her husband?

Fusilli plots each Orr novel more tightly than the last, but fans will savor even more the deepening characterizations of his colorful ensemble cast.

There's Dennis Diddio, "rock critic by profession, pothead by choice," now running a struggling TriBeCa tea bar catering to "young marrieds who had leveraged everything but their children to afford their million-dollar, 1,000-square-foot apartments."

Fusilli skillfully characterizes even minor roles, like Diddio's waitress Wendy who shows superb tact when Gabriella and Daniel feel compelled to redesign Diddio's tea bar, garishly crammed with eclectic furniture in do-not-adjust-your-set colors. "Mr. Diddio," she says, "I think that what they are telling us is that you make the very best tea under the worst circumstances."

Orr himself, former writer and constant NPR listener, has sleuthed long enough now to sound at times like Philip Marlowe; after a run-in with a Harlan thug, Orr notes, "I knew I'd be seeing him again and only one of us was going to like it."

As ever, Gabriella provides the brightest light in Orr's life and remains Fusilli's most appealing character. She's Wolfgang Mozart precocious: speaks Italian, turns first in the Times to the Arts page, and has written a publishable historical crime thriller for which she credibly aspires to a \$250,000 advance.

Yet Gabriella is 15 and can be "prickly," which for a teenaged daughter is pretty much part of the job description. She constantly offers benign criticism ("You go to hell for wasting your talent, you know"), and when her father laughs it off, she'll prophesy: "You laugh now, but we'll see in a thousand years who's laughing." She studies Vonnegut and World Religions, names her basset hound Beagle and "dresses as if she had raced through a thrift store and wore whatever stuck."

It is Gabriella who encourages Julie to be patient, to hang in there with Orr. Julie will need that encouragement, as even by the epilogue, where other loose ends are either tied up or smacked around, Orr still tries to justify to his therapist why he can't say "I love you" to Julie: "I know some people need the words, but Julie's smart, she's aware."

Fusilli's readers must wait till next time to learn if Orr makes progress, if Julie is aware or gone.