

Boston Globe Oct. 2003

TRIBECA BLUES

By Jim Fusilli

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

When we left writer-turned-private-investigator Terry Orr last year at the end of *A Well-Known Secret*, he'd just solved a murder case that led through a group of Bronx high school friends to some rotten New York City cops.

The killer he most wanted to find, however, still eluded him, the one eyewitnesses claimed threw Orr's wife and infant son onto the tracks to be crushed by a midtown subway train, leaving 36-year-old Orr to raise alone his 14-year-old daughter Gabriella. This proved to be the novel's primary flaw, that its back story was far more engaging than its plot.

In this far superior third novel in Jim Fusilli's series, that back story moves to the front.

Fusilli brings readers up to date immediately with two pages of case notes from Orr's psychiatrist, Elizabeth Hartevelde. She finds Orr "playful and charming" but "contentious" and "narcissistic," clinging to the image of his wife and son's deaths and his lingering guilt for not having been there to protect them. Readers, though, may feel more sympathetic to Orr's pain than to Hartevelde's diagnosis, sensing that it praises him with faint damnation. After all, she lists among his symptoms "the idealization of his spouse." Who, except perhaps a second wife, would blame the widower for that?

As the novel opens, Orr's friend Leo has died, leaving his bar to mutual buddy and rock music critic Dennis Diddio. Leo leaves Orr a request: find Leo's vulturous ex, Loretta, and "make her pay" for what she did to him.

With Diddio, Gabriella, Gabriella's friend Daniel Wu, and New York district attorney Julie Giada whom Orr's been dating warily for a year, Orr heads to New Orleans for Leo's funeral. There, he receives news of a death that shakes him even more. Elizabeth Montgomery Weisz, one-time scheming social climber who'd married a dotting philanthropist, has died. She'd aspired to New York's cultural elite so obsessively that she badgered her son Raymond into becoming a piano prodigy who gave public recitals at 10, and into becoming psychotic by 14, when he ran away and was found living near-naked with wolves in the Bronx Zoo.

There's no one Orr wants so badly to find as Raymond Weisz, the man eyewitnesses said shoved his baby son's stroller onto the subway tracks. He rushes back to Elizabeth Weisz's funeral in the hope her son will appear. Weisz doesn't attend, but Jean-Pierre Coceau, a witness to the subway deaths whom Orr hadn't yet interviewed, does. Coceau relates an account far different than Orr had heard: Weisz didn't shove the stroller but tried to grab it to save the toddler. Worse, there may have been a painful reason Orr's wife was delayed in reaching their son.

This is where Fusilli begins displaying an artistry far beyond his earlier books.

In those, we saw a story that can turn most of us to mush: the bereft widower who has lost the love of his life and now, alone, must raise their child. A second-rate writer wrings from this theme all its sentimental juice and lets his reader float along on its

wistfulness. The courageous and original writer works against the grain of expectations, looking to make our experience not easy but illuminative and true.

To Orr, Weisz becomes now an object of compassion. Orr views him in terms that to Red Sox fans of a certain age will evoke echoes of outfielder Jimmy Piersall, who's more well-meaning but equally driven father, like Weisz's mother, also hectored a child in order to live vicarious dreams through him and bask in his reflected glory. The idealization of Orr's spouse, too, may be in jeopardy. In an old PBS program, Orr's painter wife Marina had said, "What it is we see isn't necessarily what it is. It is what we believe it is. What you bring to your vision is your emotions. This changes everything." Orr begins learning what she meant.

He begins, too, pursuing a cat's cradle of connections from Weisz to Coceau to Leo's ex Loretta and back to Weisz, from murder to art fraud to schizophrenia, and from New York to New Orleans and back and forth again.

Unlike the prequels, here plot tension remains taut, and earlier flaws ripen into virtues. The previous novel was blemished by obtrusive erudition as Orr, for no reason, kept quoting *Hamlet*. Now Fusilli suits the word to the action and shows virtue her own feature, using his expertise (he is music critic for The Wall Street Journal) to add texture as he describes Weisz playing Rachmaninoff's Concerto #2. His widely-praised rendering of post 9/11 New York City continues vivid.

One serious flaw remains. Readers will feel cheated by how little we see this time of Gabriella, by far the most engaging of Fusilli's characters. As can happen in single parent/only child situations, Orr has turned her into his ideal companion, capable of conversation worthy of a bright adult yet every inch a teenager.

This endearingly precocious 15 year-old with a fancy for fedoras and bowling shirts displays a spectacular range of color in the landscape of her sensibilities. She has completed a publishable novel manuscript, says of Julie Giada that she "resembled the leisurely courtesan in Manet's *Olympia*," calls her father from New Orleans to say she "saw a bus named Desire," names a pet basset hound Beagle and has friends named Glo-Bug, Grumpy Eleanor and Benny the Girl.

At the pace this novel shows Fusilli's craftsmanship to be growing, though, who knows what twists Terry and Gabriella Orr's lives will take next time.
