

New York Times Aug. 16, 1992 Andy Solomon

THE IMPERSONATOR

By Diana Hammond

358 pp. Doubleday.

There may be no more fatal romantic attraction for a woman, Diana Hammond's pulpy new mystery suggests, than finding a man so thoroughly devoid of character that she may write on him whatever fantasy she chooses, an empty book she drafts into a love story. All his life, Barrett Rossignol, this novel's eponymous impersonator, has lived off susceptible women. Rossignol flashes his "beautiful gray eyes that managed to combine soulfulness with dirty promise" and appropriates whatever persona he senses desired of him, then fastens himself as a soul-sapping parasite to the next woman willing to support him. Even his diary turns out to be blank. Whether Rossignol drowned cabaret star Theo Buckley, "one of the most exquisite creatures on earth," becomes chief of many stories struggling with limited success to emerge here. Unfortunately, Ms. Hammond props her worthy theme upon characters thin as angel hair. There's Theo's ex-husband, Robert de Peña, a dilettante who writes popular books on philosophy for the layman, and his second wife, Jane, who reads the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* to cull the joyous lesson that "when we leave this life for the next, we get to take our things." Marred by muddled pontification (e.g., men secretly desire their women "feminine" but not "female"), a smorgasbord of skimpy characterizations and gratuitous sensationalism ranging from pedophilic fantasies to political scandals to emotional over-reactions worthy of Medea, this whodunit/romance ties up its loose ends well after we have ceased caring.