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## **SAM'S CROSSING**

By Tommy Hays

Atheneum. 288 pp. (galley has 251pp.) \$19.

Tommy Hays's affable debut comic novel suggests that contemporary relationships frustrate women because "men expect to be loved, not counted on." Sam Marshbanks, a once-aspiring writer who has settled for shelving books in an Atlanta bookstore, provides classic evidence. Having lived with Sam for four years, 32 year-old social worker Kate is ready for marriage and children. But Sam is paralyzed by a pervasive inertia, "a subtle dread that lurked beneath everything,...not of the worst but of a redundant and featureless indifference." He can commit to nothing but the certainty he will make a mess of things, so he sits around "wondering why happiness seemed a place just off the map."

Stymied by Sam's docile Southern angst, Kate moves out and begins dating a doctor, while a mysterious redhead keeps slipping in and out of Sam's otherwise banal solitude. Sam and Kate's underlying devotion keeps the course of true love stumbling toward an unexpected and weighty climax hampered slightly by a grope for moral rectitude.

In this promising apprentice piece, Hays suffers moments of indulgence, cramming in amusing stray characters and incidents however extraneous to the novel's structure. Hays approaches his subject as Sam does his life, with faltering emotional engagement, and Sam's epiphanies seem barely worthy of fortune cookies: "The talent of living together wasn't so much to keep the other person entertained but to entertain oneself in the comfort of the other's company." Still, Hays's breezy, genial voice marks his a talent worth watching.