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DRAGON TEETH

By E. Howard Hunt

480 pp. Donald I. Fine

China's March 1996 missile firings and naval maneuvers around Taiwan lend chilling plausibility to the high-stakes espionage game in E. Howard Hunt's 52nd novel. At 47, widower Mark Brand's life should grow easy when he leaves the CIA to become East Asian expert for a global ecology think tank: consultant by day, playmate of lustful Nina Kenton by night. Brand seems, in fact, a James Bond wannabe with more testosterone and less taste. But when his son Peter disappears inside China and golddigger Nina proves more duplicitous than libidinous, the plot quickens. Brand races to Hong Kong, where he finds his long-lost true love, then to Beijing, where he hopes to find Peter. He does, only to discover their personal problems don't amount to a hill of beans in a crazy world where China is clandestinely aiming poison gas warheads at U.S. ally Taiwan. If they're fired, it could mean a U.S.-China war. Brand's most formidable obstacle to preserving world peace is CIA Far East Director Darman Gerold, who'd be sinister if he had a brain but is instead flakier than a pie crust and intent on leaving no sexual taboo unexplored. Former CIA agent Hunt feels licensed to deploy abundant sentence fragments and to clothe everyone in faux-GQ wardrobes, but his experience with federal security machinations makes for a riveting story, spiced with a jaded but credible view of what determines national policy: "The Administration's hell-bent on improving relations with China.... China trade translates into U.S. jobs, and jobs mean elections."