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SUSPICION

By Robert McCrum

Norton; 292 pp; \$23

From Cain and Abel to *Hamlet*, fraternal envy has led to appalling acts. When Julian Whyte's older brother Raymond, along with Raymond's sensuous German wife Kristina, returns to Mansfield, England after decades of absence, trouble cannot be far behind.

As a lawyer and Mansfield's coroner, 44 year-old Julian has lived a staid and consummately respectable life.

The Volvo-driving bachelor, whose idea of a good time is "the reverie of solitude," a tome of biography and a bit of Bach, confesses, "I am known for my reserve and my sense of propriety... I am, in summary, square and straight and terribly English."

When the 60-ish Raymond returns in 1991 from East Germany, where he had worked for the Communist Party, Julian has mixed feelings. Raymond had been the passionate idealist, but his ideals have crumbled with the Berlin Wall. So his return signals to Julian "the triumph of David over Goliath, the stay-at-home stripling over the worldly collosus."

But as he reacquaints himself with Raymond, Julian finds "that in his new, English guise, it was a pleasure to sit and talk to him.... He was, for all his faults, one of the sweetest and most natural men I have ever known."

Kristina, however, no longer thinks so. The awe she'd felt once as Raymond's student is long past, and they sleep apart. When she sympathizes with Julian's loneliness, he responds, and before long they begin an affair that slowly brings Julian to life. He spends more and more time with her and with her young children, who awaken long-dormant aspirations of fatherhood: "That was the summer I discovered the meaning of family.... I acknowledged the surprising pleasure of playing games and practicing card tricks."

When Raymond begins suspecting Kristina is having an affair, ironically it is to Julian that he turns for help, even evoking echoes of Othello leaning on Iago. It is true, Julian eventually tells Raymond, Kristina does love another man.

Raymond had known this for years, for the other man turns out not to be Julian. Back in Germany, Kristina had fallen for a tall, blond poet named Walter Krokowski. When Raymond learned of this, he'd arranged to have Krokowski imprisoned on false charges. But now Krokowski is out, and he's determined to rescue Kristina from England and bring her home to Germany. With three men loving one woman, the stage is set for disaster.

McCrum uses his crumbling Cold War setting to advantage, a time of transition, with the ground shifting both politically and socially, so that no one is quite sure what will happen next.

If the intended passion never quite assumes full shape in this novel--too tightly buckled within the belt of Julian's conventionality--the writing compensates with other virtues, including touches of wry humor arising from its British reserve. McCrum's deft prose enlivens descriptions of scenes as diverse as an English countryside picnic and a postmortem mutilation. Co-author, with Robert MacNeil, of *The Story of English*, the erudite McCrum spices his sixth novel with literary allusions ranging from Pope to *The Winter's Tale*.

From cover to cover, readers will feel escorted by a skilled pen, a keen intelligence and a dream of passion, if only intermittently by the thing itself.