

Boston Globe Feb. 2000

## HARBOR LIGHTS

By Theodore Weesner

Atlantic Monthly Press. 240 pp. \$23.

Throughout 1998, as a solid year of televised round-the-clock Monica held us spellbound, Hillary Clinton stood by her man, swelling her popularity to dimensions large enough to contain senatorial aspirations. All the while, legions of women urged the First Lady, "Leave the First Rat."

Everyone found the president's behavior appalling, including him. At no time in 1998 can I recall anyone asking: are there some women who tend to get cheated on while others don't, and, if so, could there be a reason? Some questions are so dissonant with the tune of our times that we dare not ask them for fear the PC police will do a search and seizure on our psyche.

In our egalitarian era there can be only one reason why infidelity enters a marriage: men are jerks. Men cheat because they are slime. Women cheat because men are slime.

So, lobster fisherman Warren Hudon, the protagonist of Theodore Weesner's minutely observed *Harbor Lights*, is certain his wife's 30-year tryst with state senator Virgil Pound must be his own fault.

Readers, however, will be less convinced.

Beatrice Hudon offers slender ground on which to build sympathy. Her motto is, "Keep going forward.... Don't let the past drag you down like barnacles on a boat." The past is husband Warren who, more than three decades earlier, she'd admired and married. Since then, she's been going forward with Pound, a self-infatuated sleazeball Machiavellian with a tony Mercedes who has used his power and money to set former aide and long-time mistress Beatrice up with her own Pier I-like retail shop, a toy plum to prove her mettle and a legacy to leave her 27-year-old daughter Marian.

But it's not his wife's long-term adultery that makes Warren's breath shallow. When we meet the 57-year-old agonized husband, he is facing imminent death from lung cancer. Having utterly failed to find contentment with his wife this side of the grave, all Warren wants now is to make a final peace with her so she can be beside him in the next. Although we're mystified why, Warren "had no wish to lose his place next to his wife in the hereafter." Beatrice sleeps in the same house as he, and all he wants is 15 minutes of her time to set things straight in his final days. After 30 years of being unfaithful to him, is that too much to ask of her?

Evidently, yes. Despite suffering just enough moments of guilt to keep herself happy, Beatrice is firmly convinced she's been doing the right thing. Warren simply never measured up to the size of her dreams: "[He] hadn't lacked initiative so much as he had lacked flair." Virgil, though, could give her a retail store, which Beatrice interprets as her chance to be a good mother; "Believe it or not," she tells daughter Marian, "there was a time when I was crazy about your father. But what became important to me was to leave something nice for you."

Pregnant, stuck in an empty marriage to a puerile case of arrested development named Ron, Marian needs all the help she can get. Marian, too, is unfaithful, but to

herself. She'd rather be sitting on a dock reading Annie Dillard, but she works instead in her mother's store.

As for Warren's wanting a few minutes to settle his mind before death, Beatrice has neither time nor patience to offer it. "His state of mind was his to look after," she believes, and she treats her dying husband with arctic coldness. After her repeated refusals to speak with him, when Warren comes to her store she threatens to call security. Even his dying, she believes, is only a ploy to punish her.

The novel's fatal flaw, however, lies in Warren. He embodies the looking-glass morality providing the book's bizarre and ultimately infuriating foundation. If Weesner offered even a hint of irony, we might sympathize with Warren's constant sifting of why his wife's behavior is his own failing. He was too possessive, he reflects, too controlling. Like an abused child, he sees his victimization as his fault and spends his life searching for a way to please his abuser. He's surprised and disappointed in himself for feeling anger at his cuckoldry. He'd even been complicit enough to accept a state job from Virgil for eight years. And, when Beatrice repeatedly refuses his modest last wish, driving Warren to an impulsive violent action, even his daughter finds him "unforgivable."

Weesner proves perceptive and sensitive as he explores Warren, Beatrice, Marian and Virgil, though whose four braided viewpoints this story unfolds. He writes with powerful simplicity and frequent poetic turns of phrase, despite occasional clichéd and stilted syntax ("her mind traveled...she knew not where") and inapt metaphors ("the sun was a new penny on the horizon").

Unfortunately, Weesner also proves tedious, for two reasons beyond his questionable ethical premises. Almost all of the book's limited action is told in summarized narration rather than shown through vividly observed dramatization; we hear *this* story far more than see it. Instead, we spend most of our time inside the musings of characters we feel estranged from or hostile toward. That in itself need prove no problem--being inside the proleptic murderer Macbeth or morally inverted Raskolnikov isn't pleasant either--but it is interesting, which Weesner's characters never quite become.

Also, short though it is, the novel is riddled with redundancy. How many times can we hear Warren reflect, "He realized he both loved and hated his wife.... Every day he felt humiliated.... What a fool's parade his life had been."

For the first 50 pages Weesner draws us into a recognizable and powerful story, but eventually, lacking any depth in his characters to develop that story, he becomes like those journalists Adlai Stevenson once chided as "men who separate the wheat from the chaff, and then print the chaff."