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## **IMPERFECT STRANGERS**

By Stuart Woods

HarperCollins. 288 pp. \$23.

If immature artists immitate while mature artists steal, veteran Stuart Woods demonstrates his maturity right off by lifting the premise of Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, unabashedly making that classic the in-flight movie watched by seatmates Sandy Kinsolving and Peter Martindale.

Wine merchant Kinsolving is a man of action, balancing sex and a transAtlantic phone conversation simultaneously in the novel's opening paragraphs. The call summons him home from London to New York where his father-in-law and employer hovers near death. Once aloft, drinking heavily, Kinsolving shares his life story with stranger-on-a-plane Martindale. If her father dies, he says, Kinsolving's wife will not only ignore the old man's promise to make him a partner but will fire and divorce him.

Martindale, a San Francisco art dealer, professes a similar plight, claiming an equally avaricious spouse back home. These parallel dilemmas inspire in the men more than passing interest in Hitchcock's plot about exchange murders.

Which doesn't make Kinsolving a bad guy. His wife proves a heartless, blackmailing witch far worse than he'd described. Her own son wouldn't miss her. And he doesn't, after Martindale kills her even though Kinsolving had called off the plan. Unfortunately, the newly rich wine merchant has entered into a mortal bargain with a lying psychopath.

With a polish that some will find too slick, the story races at a dizzying pace from London's Garrick Club to Martha's Vineyard to Alcatraz, offering art forgeries and capricious homicides, suicides and assassinations. Woods' world is populated by distrustful New York detectives, tenacious Napa Valley deputies and handy London barristers, plus beautiful strangers who use aliases, ably pilot fancy yachts and make love to the bereaved Kinsolving on corporate jets when he's not sipping Le Montrachet '55 or Veuve Cliquot '66. Woods won't make anyone forget Dostoevsky, or even Hitchcock, but he does show a reader a good time.