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THE LOVER OF HISTORY

By Jonathan Dee

228 pp. Ticknor & Fields.

The political focus lacing Jonathan Dee's tale costs this first novel some fictional interest but gives it a palpable weight. The 28 year-old author has much to say in addition to a story to tell. In a vividly evoked Manhattan where "yellow taxis darted in and out of each other's company like fish," Mr. Dee spins a cat's cradle of connections among three characters' relationships to each other, to their personal histories and to world events unfolding around them. Diane Kendall and her roommate, Robert Warner, (always referred to by their last names) live in a cold world where "eating alone seemed the norm." Sharing a thinly partitioned bedroom for two years, they barely know each other. Kendall hates her job as radio engineer at an all-news station and grows weary of her lover Julian's lack of ambition to move beyond singing radio jingles. Then the United States Secretary of State is assassinated in the tiny island nation of Colozan, and America declares war. The murder and its formulaic reportage in the media become catalysts for varying degrees of growth in each character. Julian, the innocuous charmer who signs petitions without reading them, grows least. Kendall, however, sees links between her lack of a personal history and her estrangement from the outer world, recognizes that "the source of things might be found outside herself" and edges beyond Julian's sphere. Most intriguing is the high-minded if sanctimonious Warner, the lover of history who urges his prep school students to see their role in and responsibility for the world around them, yet is himself adrift in time and place. Some of Mr. Dee's pre-Iraq politics are already obsolete, but more often prove prophetic. This gifted young author, aware of how lives intersect with history, weds art to wisdom with an authority that will command attention.