

BOOK REVIEWS: BRIEFLY NOTED. (PERSPECTIVE) (Book review).
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North River

Pete Hamill

Little, Brown, 352 pp., \$25.99

REVIEWED BY JOHN ESPOSITO

The rich narrative style and attention to craft that has defined Pete Hamill as a journalist and best-selling novelist is especially apparent when the subject matter includes Manhattan.

Hamill's latest offering, "North River," has its roots in the original Dutch name for the Hudson. The river is central to this tale, casting a looming presence over the inhabitants who live near its shore.

The story begins on a snowy New Year's Day in the Depression year of 1934. James Delaney, a physician and wounded World War I veteran, lives and practices in the West Village. He treats housewives, day laborers, prostitutes, gangsters and veterans; if they can't afford to pay, he treats them for free.

Returning home from a predawn house call, he enters the vestibule to find his two-year-old grandson, Carlos, in a stroller with a note from his daughter, Grace, explaining that she has gone off in search of her husband in Spain and placed the child in his care.

Delaney's life has already reached a crisis without the added burden of becoming guardian for the young boy. Sixteen months earlier, his wife, Molly, vanished while walking to the river. The police were unable to determine if she was abducted, drowned or disappeared by choice.

Enter Rose, a respectable Sicilian housekeeper who appears at Delaney's door. She soon becomes a surrogate mother to Carlos and eventually the doctor's lover. Such turn-around good fortune is accompanied by the complicated return of Grace and news of Molly.

Hamill has woven an enchanting love story for grown-ups infused with noteworthy people and events of the era. The North River serves as a metaphor for Delaney's life, frozen as the novel begins, then melting under the influence of the little boy and caring housekeeper. This is a captivating tale about family, loyalty, courage and rebirth.

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