

# Books

TWO TRAINS RUNNING ANDREW VACHSS (PANTHEON)

## The Roots of Evil

In his new historical crime novel, Andrew Vachss charts today's horrors in yesterday's corruption.

By Elizabeth M. Tamny

Andrew Vachss has always been able to make other writers look candy-assed. Not because his books are so much more violent (although they can give the most hardboiled reader nightmares) and not because of his tough-guy image, complete with black eye patch. And it's not because he successfully manages to marry grim idealism to action-driven plots. It's because of the unflinching way he looks at evil.

Vachss is a lawyer specializing in—and devoted to—the rights of children; his books take him and his readers to the dark, murky places he can't go to in court. They look long and hard at the damage done by child abuse, detail how it's done, and then slowly, thoroughly, decimate the evildoers. They are satisfying and scary, touching some deep part that still believes in things like bloody retribution.

Vachss has said repeatedly that his "religion" is revenge: there's not a lot of violence for its own sake in his books. His latest novel, *Two Trains Running*, is full of his signature infatuation with gadgetry, guns, cars, and women's posteriors, but the violence, while as heartbreaking as ever, is muted and more diffuse. *Two Trains Running* is also a departure in that it's historical—taking place during one two-week period in 1959—and is narrated in the third person, not the first as the titles in his popular Burke series (named for their private-eye antihero) are. Vachss's credos that society "makes our monsters" through neglect of the child and that "child protection and crime prevention are inextricably intertwined" are still in evidence, but instances of child abuse are confined to individual backstories and the political powers at work are much larger than any single

malefactor.

*Two Trains Running* is set in crime-ridden Locke City, USA, to which a shadowy figure called Walker Dett (so dubbed because he's a "debt walking"), has been summoned by Royal Beaumont, the wheelchair-bound local boss who's feeling his control start to slip. The town is a dingy microcosm of 1950s America, riddled with power struggles and covert conspiracies, government-fomented race wars and secret cabals.

**Andrew Vachss**  
**WHEN** Sat 7/9,  
6:30 PM  
**WHERE** Centuries  
& Sleuths  
Bookstore,  
7419 W. Madison,  
Forest Park  
**INFO** 708-771-7243

**WHEN** Mon 7/11,  
7:30 PM  
**WHERE** Barbara's  
Bookstore,  
1218 S. Halsted  
**INFO** 312-413-2665

Those vying for control of the town include the KKK, the FBI, the Irish, the blacks, the Mafia, and juvenile gangs, all enmeshed in a web of alliances and betrayals. In their midst Dett is the killer for hire, but also a listener and a watcher, self-sufficient to the end.

If you're starting to scratch your chin in recognition, that's because *Two Trains Running* does bear a remarkable resemblance to Dashiell Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest*—strong enough that Vachss's publishers are putting it up front in their promotional materials. Hammett's book is set in "Poisonville," USA, a corrupt mining town where an operative from the Continental Detective Agency (like Dett, the Op never gets a real name) has been called in to clean house.

In the fight between good and evil, both Dett and the Op are just there to stir things up. As the Op says, "Anybody that

brings any ethics to Poisonville is going to get them all rusty." Both characters know their employers are as rotten as those they seek to crush, that there are no good guys really anyhow—certainly not themselves. *Two Trains Running* explains Dett's role through the title, which is from an old blues song. "Two trains coming, son," an elderly wise-woman tells him, "headed for the junction. You can't stop either one. But you can slow the dark one down. You can put a log across the tracks, make Satan late enough so that the righteous train gets by clean."

But where *Red Harvest* is the purest detective novel ever written, a breathless violent gallop that comes out blasting at the beginning and never stops, *Two Trains Running*, despite some early mayhem, builds and builds to its final blowup through dialogue, dialogue that's always explaining, gradually revealing the field and the players' motivations. *Red Harvest* is a study in sheer animal instinct; *Two Trains Running* is a book about politics,

**Vachss's books take him to the dark, murky places he can't go to in court. They look long and hard at the damage done by child abuse, detail how it's done, and then slowly, thoroughly, decimate the evildoers.**

power, and corruption. Looming over everything are issues like the coming election of John F. Kennedy, the murder of Emmett Till, and postwar disillusionment with government. One whole section is devoted to the theory that the FBI gave Capone syphilis. It's sort of the anti-*Red*



*Harvest*, explaining life in contemporary America via a world-weary snapshot of the past. Vachss does the same thing in his other novels, but more persuasively—the Burke books feel lurid but have proven to be fairly prescient about the forms malfeasance will take in the future: human organ trafficking, Internet child porn, Columbine-style massacres.

*Two Trains Running* unfolds

watching Dett, the elevator man is watching the bellhop, the clerk is watching them all, everyone scheming and selling their secrets but no one detecting Dett's habit of slipping out unnoticed in the middle of the night. By the end Vachss's narrator has exposed everyone's secret doings, letting the reader decide how best to judge their actions as all hell breaks loose.

Not only does Vachss thoroughly uncover the inner workings of Locke City, he also explains the inner workings of Dett, giving him a backstory he tells to Tussy, a sweet, sexy local waitress with whom he has found something like love and the only woman to whom he can reveal his conflicted past. Tussy, who like many Vachss women has been sanctified by pain and placed on a pedestal, serves as a beacon of the kind of idealism that illuminates Vachss's dark world.

Vachss has called *Two Trains Running* his tribute to "the one reliable guardian of democracy: investigative journalism." Given the minimal role and cheerless fate of the novel's lone journalist,

that's a puzzling (and depressing) assertion until you realize that Vachss must see himself, the novelist, in that role. An advocate first and writer of "investigative novels" second, he's uniquely suited to bear witness to the truth and force readers to look evil in the eye. ■

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## Letters

continued from page 3

clean lobbies, among other tasks. But the general public, abetted by mainstream media reports, have subscribed to the stereotype that the bad conditions in CHA buildings are the fault of the residents.

Since *Residents' Journal* was launched in 1996, we have challenged these misconceptions with investigative reports and community news written by the residents themselves. "A Questionable Connection" was only one among our many reports which have changed the policies and practices of city departments while prompting follow-up coverage in the mainstream media. Readers can check out "A Questionable Connection" and our other work at [www.wethepeoplemedia.org](http://www.wethepeoplemedia.org).

**Ethan Michaeli**

Publisher  
*Residents' Journal*

*Martha Bayne replies:*

I credited the *Sun-Times* with reporting that CHA contractors had contributed money; I didn't mean to imply that it had done an investigation.

## Ink Well by Ben Tausig

### Loafing Around

#### ACROSS

- Fresh
- Cancel, as a plan
- Syringe units
- Part of WASP
- Type of house or buff
- A question of execution
- Doughy Genesis founder?
- In the style of
- Personal profile shots
- With a twang
- Slurping soup, e.g.
- Survey choice
- Ballerina's knee bend
- Arabian sultanate
- Launderer's unit
- Sounded like sheep
- Personal matter?
- Gram Parsons, for one album
- \_\_\_ Ness
- Frank Miller graphic novel
- Where power is restored
- Loafer, e.g.
- Curry and Rice

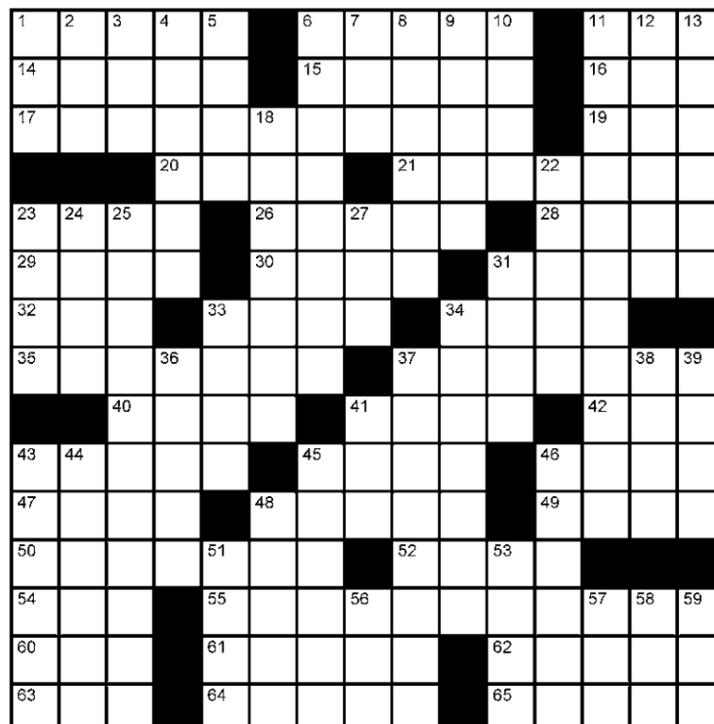
#### LAST WEEK: CHAIN OF COMMANDS

C	E	L	I	N	S	E	A	M	O	F	F	S
L	A	I	R	E	P	E	N	T	G	A	L	A
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S	P	A	M	A	O	R	T	A	E	M	R	C
Y	A	K	S	R	E	B	O	R	N	E	E	K

- PIN requester
- Vans alternatives
- Rain delay cover
- Official records
- Starting with
- Dice, e.g.
- Fight enders
- Bar player
- "Silence!"
- "Taking Heat" author Fleischer
- Remarks on a deli choice?
- Like presidents 1 through 43
- Noted father/son actors
- Open, as a gate
- Home of J.L. Borges
- Mr. Magoo, for one
- Deposed Russian despots

#### DOWN

- Rubber source
- Illinois cheerleader's need, three times
- Pepper preceder, briefly
- Apply haphazardly
- Bhagavad Gita reader
- Pitiful tale
- Red Cross course
- Curbed, with "in"
- Toward the back
- Good buddies
- Opposite side of a Shabbat staple?
- Sheep herding breed
- Convinced
- Devotee
- On the double
- Agrees silently
- Prefix with science
- Treating an Indian dish with mesquite?
- Ate
- Head honcho



- Backgrounds on book jackets
- All-inclusive payment
- Rub raw
- Hydrant attachment
- Palindromic "Simpsons" character
- Dec. 25
- What a regular runs in a bar
- Party with pillow fights
- Loan shark
- Penguin's "outfit"
- Hometown for Elephant 6 and the B-52's
- In a coquettish manner
- Dracula's creator, familiarly
- Blue material
- Mushroom part
- Bulls grp.
- Blacken
- Grads. to be

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