

# Adam Davies squeezes emotions like a song in 'Goodbye Lemon'

## Goodbye Lemon

By Adam Davies  
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Paperback original

By David Daley  
Special for USA TODAY

Somewhere, a literary scholar is writing a dissertation arguing that since the mid-1980s, the most profound influence on young male

## Review

writers has not been Hemingway or Fitzgerald, but Elvis Costello.

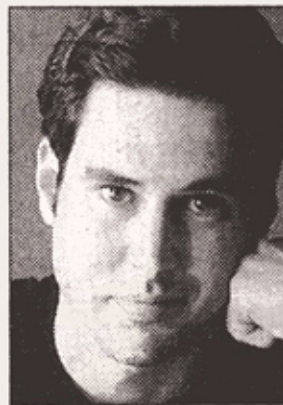
Bret Easton Ellis and Nick Hornby affirmed Costello as an influence when the two laureates of lad lit named *Less Than Zero* and *High Fidelity* after his songs. Those books have spawned a genre unto themselves. The male characters are lovable losers, overeducated and underemployed, emotionally unavailable but painfully self-aware.

*The Frog King*, Adam Davies' pleasing but ultimately by-the-numbers first novel, owed a little too much to Ellis and Hornby. His

second takes a serious step forward. Davies is definitely playing a more affecting and complex tune.

His anti-hero, Jack Tennant, a would-be classical pianist and English professor, could have written that Costello Ph.D. thesis. Instead, he's 33 and reviewing concerts for an Atlanta alt-weekly. He hasn't seen his parents in 15 years, but when his father has a debilitating stroke, his girlfriend, Hahva, convinces Jack that they should drive north and make peace.

Hahva doesn't know that she's walking into a family drama that makes Oedipus look like *The Brady Bunch*. Jack has never mentioned a second brother, Dex, who drowned at 6. For 25 years, Jack has slept with Dex's orange flip-flop under his mattress, but he can't handle saying his brother's name. Indeed, his entire family dealt with the tragedy by never discussing it again. The one time Jack tried, wagging his finger and accusing his fa-



By Todd Eberle

**Davies:** Sympathy, self-destruction.

ther of negligence, his dad broke it. The Juilliard dreams ended; his resentments began.

Davies deftly handles a large cast of characters, but his real accomplishment is retaining our sympathy for Jack as he self-destructs. He blames his father for all that has gone wrong in his life — even as we realize there's more to the story.

There are clumsy notes. A suicide attempt goes awry when a gun conveniently misfires. Jack has an obsession with his dad's pristine classic Jaguar that seems a little too close to the fear Cameron has of harming his father's Ferrari in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

But *Goodbye Lemon* is mostly funny, evocative and emotionally true. *High Fidelity* and *Less Than Zero* fans will devour it as quickly as a three-minute pop song. More important, there's every indication that Davies will be just as successful when, like Hornby and Ellis, he leaves lad lit behind for more ambitious fare.