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Bookmarks

THE FROG KING

By Adam Davies

(RIVERHEAD, 324 PAGES, \$13)

HARRY DRISCOLL lives a messy, energetic and, let's face it, fairly immoral life, and yet he is a charming storyteller, even if the story he tells is of a life (his own) going steadily downhill. His lowly job in book publishing, his duplicitous strategies for advancement and, most important, his wayward, playful, intensely intimate relations with his girlfriend all go wrong in a big way.

It is hard not to like Harry, as bad as he can be. For one thing, he seems to know that he is to blame for his misfortune, even if he can't find the wherewithal to do much about it. And Harry has a way with words. That is to say, Adam Davies does: The literary invention, metaphorical pizzazz and sheer cleverness of the prose and word-play in "The Frog King" is astonishing. And there is a nuance of character, too—especially in the self-contradictions of Harry himself, a rogue who can be sweetly attentive, loathsomely self-centered and carelessly appealing in the space of a short afternoon.

Yes, the novel is often over the top: There are dialogue moments that are too clever and plot moments that are too hard to believe. But it doesn't matter. Mr. Davies captures young love wonderfully, and also the agony of self-reckoning. Indeed, Harry's ultimate (and un-self-pitying) judgment of himself redeems much of the excess that has gone before.

—Erich Eichman