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Taut crime novel has many layers

Black Heron Press is a serious literary press that exists out on the outskirts of Seattle. For a couple of decades now, it has published novels, nonfiction and poetry volumes that, in one way or another, examine the underbelly of the American promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Author Leonard Chang is one of Black Heron's great finds. New York-born, Harvard-educated, and now making a living as a screenwriter in Los Angeles, Chang's first novel, "The Fruit 'N Food," won the Black Heron Press Award for Social Fiction and was published in 1994. Since then, the press has published several more of Chang's books.

The latest is a crime novel called "The Lockpicker."

The title character is Jake Ahn, who lives in Seattle. He works by day in a restaurant and in his off-hours as a professional thief.

Against his better judgment, Jake teams up to do a home

burglary with Tommy, a psychopath with an amphetamine problem. Their effort begins to go sideways when Tommy overreacts during the getaway.

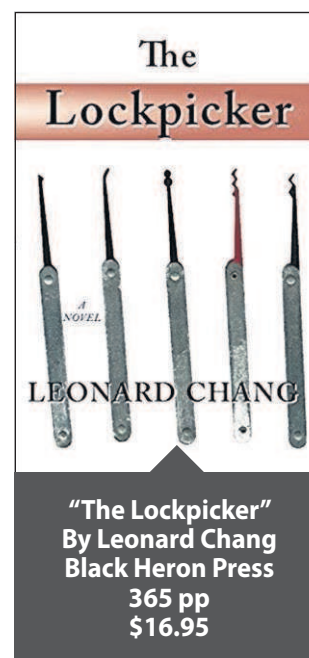
Then it gets worse: Tommy pulls a gun and tries to pull a double-cross. Jake resists, and in the ensuing tussle, Tommy gets shot in the gut.

Jake leaves him for dead in a dumpster, and splits to the Bay Area to lie low at his brother's place.

But life hasn't been treating Eugene Ahn so well. He has been working long hours for a high-tech start-up that is beginning to lose steam. Eugene's wife, Rachel, is likewise disenchanted with her work as a banker and is about to quit her job. They are weighed down by debt. There is tension in their marriage.

Jake's arrival does nothing to help matters between the couple. The Ahn brothers haven't kept in close touch over the years. Eugene disapproves of Jake's criminal activity and has made it clear he wants nothing to do with it. But Rachel is intrigued, and wants to know more.

With Jake, she also probes another topic her husband won't talk about much — the Ahn boys' childhood in a dys-



functional family.

Instead of finding temporary sanctuary with Eugene, Jake only brings more chaos into his brother's disintegrating household. It turns out to be impossible to dispose of the past. Hobgoblins always find a way to return to haunt the survivors.

Chang layers suspense, betrayal and revenge with the same precision he uses to describe casing a joint, picking a lot, extracting information or making love. "The Lockpicker" is taut and literally gut-wrenching entertainment, excellently conceived.

But it is also so much more. Caught up in the throes of the action, or distracted by the various specters that wisp through the text, the reader may not pay attention to the rich symbolism in this work, or to the essential framework that Chang quietly begins constructing from the get-go, as elemental to human existence as DNA — values such as compassion, trustworthiness and justice that, if not annealed by love, ultimately will fail.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com

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