

## White Rook solidifies Davis' writing credentials

by Rob Farnham  
Collegian Staff Writer

When J. Madison Davis chooses a set of villains, he certainly doesn't go about it by half measures. After all, his successful first novel, *The Murder of Frau Schultz*, was set in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. No shortage of bad guys there.

His new work, the recently published *White Rook*, takes place largely among a group every bit as cheerful and cuddly as the SS officers of his debut: An enclave of militant white supremacists. (Who should he go after next? Drug-dealing South African diplomats? No, that was in *Lethal Weapon II*.)

Davis' protagonist is a Pittsburgh-based private detective named Delbert "Dub" Greenert. His usual line is gathering evidence for divorce cases, but when New Orleans' Devraix Agency needs an operative with "Pennsy papers," Greenert finds himself investigating the suspicious death of restaurateur Michael O'Dell. The most substantial lead Devraix can provide is a circled "Personal Services" ad from the back of *Mercenary* magazine.

Tracing the ad's phone number (to Erie, of all places), Dub discovers a vicious contract killer operating under the name of "Castle." Eventually, seeking to learn the identities of Castle's backers, Dub has to infiltrate a powerful racist organization, the "American Values Conservatory Nation" (AVCN). The latter part of the book concerns Dub's risky undercover sojourn at the AVCN's northern Montana fortress (the White Rook of the title).

While there is a murder to be solved, *White Rook* is more an action-adventure novel than it is a mystery. For most of the book, the question of "whodunnit?" is secondary to wondering if Greenert's cover is going to hold up under scrutiny.

In Dub Greenert, Davis has created a likeable, thoughtful protagonist, a would-be hard-boiled detective whose cynical world-weariness can't conceal his genuine courage under pressure and sympathetic nature. Vonna Saucier, the black Devraix operative with whom Dub becomes romantically involved, is also well-drawn, although both she and Dub are prone to detective-story clichés in their speech.

Davis does a credible job of understanding his villain as well. His white supremacists aren't stereotypical neo-Nazi skinheads or sheet-wearing Klansmen. Instead, they are more-or-less average Americans who, for one reason or another, want to blame America's problems on its minorities and the Communists they think they see everywhere.

Davis' heroes are resolutely unglamorous. Dub and Vonna are both significantly overweight and gorge on junk food. Greenert is divorced, lives in a shabby apartment, smokes heavily, and dresses like a slob. He's not exactly GQ cover material, but he is a refreshing change from bland superhero types, and Vonna is convincing in her wary attraction to Dub.

The subtext of *White Rook*, beneath the fight scenes and the suspense of Greenert's deception, is one of pervasive racism in all of American society. Throughout the novel, Dub has to question his own true motives and feelings toward Vonna, and she has cause to be suspicious of him at times.

Davis' sophomore effort is not without flaws. For instance, he never convincingly establishes the involvement of the AVCN in the murder of O'Dell. At the book's climax, he resorts to a *deus ex machina* device to get Dub's fat out of the fire, so to speak. And the dialogue occasionally rings false, with some sentences sounding wrong for the characters who are supposed to be speaking.

Despite these complaints, *White Rook* is an enjoyable story, one that holds the reader's attention and moves along swiftly. The white supremacists of the AVCN make superbly loathsome villains, and Dub and Vonna form a fine team to take them on.

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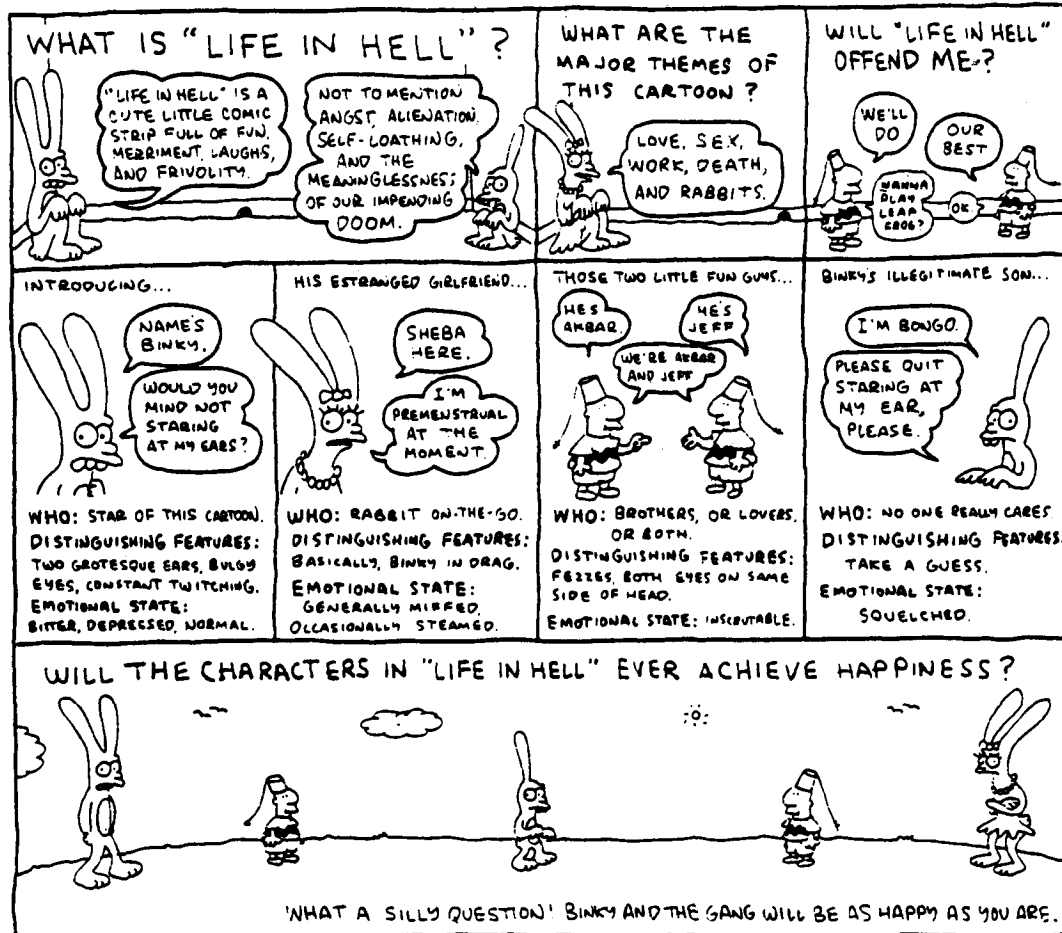
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