



Risk

Colin Harrison

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An honest lawyer, a Czech hand model, and a box of mysterious Christmas ornaments, each play their part in Harrison's intricate mystery

George Young never thought of himself as a detective, but that's pretty much his vocation--an attorney for a top insurance firm, it's his job to pin down suspicious claims. But Mrs. Corbett, the rich, eccentric wife of the firm's founder, has it in mind to put George's skills to a peculiar assignment. With only a few months to live, her one desire is to know the true circumstance of her son Roger's violent death. George's investigation leads him to Roger's mistress, a cagy Czech hand model named Eliska, whose motives for latching on to Mrs. Corbett's son may have gotten him killed. Set against a brilliantly-drawn Manhattan, at once volatile and vivid, Risk is prime Colin Harrison.

Risk Details

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Author : Colin Harrison

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From Reader Review Risk for online ebook

Linda says

I know this is tacky but I'm trying to add to my list without writing my own reviews. I need this info for my own memory jogging. You gotta love an insurance adjuster as hero.

From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com Reviewed by by Patrick Anderson Colin Harrison writes sophisticated novels set in New York. They earn excellent reviews but aren't as well known as they should be. Typically in Harrison's novels, a man who operates at the city's more rarefied levels makes a mistake that puts him at the mercy of denizens of its lower depths. In "Risk," his seventh novel, his imperiled Everyman is lawyer George Young. He has a nice wife who works for a bank, a daughter in college and an apartment on the Upper West Side. He likes to come home at night, watch a Yankees game on TV and drink \$14 red wine, which he calls cheap wine, proving once again that all things are relative. As the story begins, the widow of the founding partner of Young's law firm asks a favor. Her middle-aged son Roger died recently. He was hit by a truck as he left a downtown bar where he had been drinking alone for several hours. The woman is herself dying, and she wants Young to find out what her son was doing and thinking in the hours before his death. It's an impossible assignment, but she insists, and Young, who was both fond of and indebted to her late husband, accepts. The first thing he learns is that Roger, who'd once made a fortune on Wall Street, had lost his money, been divorced by his wife and was living in a cheap apartment downtown. Roger was a loser, Young decides, "but on Wall Street you can be an inflatable clown and make a lot of money if you are in the right place at the right time, like America in the eighties and nineties." Young starts digging. He talks to a private investigator who'd previously looked into the case and warns him to stay away from it. Another warning comes from the bartender who served Roger on his last night and says that a mob-type character had also been around asking questions. The super in the dead man's building demands a bribe before doling out information. Eventually, Young makes his way to Roger's last girlfriend. She's young and Czech and rather ordinary except that she has beautiful hands: "I am sorry I cannot shake hands. I am hand model and must protect them." Harrison views New York with a cool but compassionate eye. What distinguishes "Risk" is not its plot -- investigation, danger, resolution -- but the people, the digressions, the details along the way. In an East Side apartment building, "the tall bellman was a piece of fossilized Irish timber, and his white hair and stiff blue uniform made him look like a retired admiral." In a Lexington Avenue antique map store, Young meets a former "dentist for movie and television stars" who has lost an arm. Asked for details, he explains, "Subway-car door. My own fault. I was saved by a Japanese tourist who used her dress belt as a tourniquet. Wonderful woman." Here's part of a remarkable description of the Czech model: "She rotated her hands in space, as if each held an invisible fruit. These were ethereal fingers that touched only luxuries: diamonds, gold, watches, the smooth skin of cars that cost more than houses." And this reflection on the city: "After you've lived in New York for a while, say twenty years, you begin to see the unending conflict between the city that was and the city that will be. . . . My mother remembered when they tore down Pennsylvania Station, where Madison Square Garden is now. She used to read about New York, study the history. Canal Street was a canal. Bryant Park was a reservoir. Battery Park is called that because there was a battery of cannons out in the water to protect the harbor. Coney Island was once a real island. The city is always changing, and I find this sad and mystifying." Note also this memory of summer vacations at Cape May: "I like the town's cheesy Middle Americanness. The kids in flip-flops dragging sandy towels, the saltwater taffy, the miniature golf, the landscape of obesity roasting contentedly on the beach. I fit in just fine." Amid these elegant digressions -- I will not soon forget that "landscape of obesity" or the humanizing "I fit in just fine" that follows -- Young learns that Roger had been involved with some very hard characters, and inevitably the well-meaning lawyer falls into their clutches. Predictably, he triumphs over them; then, unpredictably, he discovers secrets that end the story on a touching note. "Risk"

was originally published as a 15-part serial in the New York Times magazine. I didn't read it there because if I'm enjoying a novel I don't want to wait a week for the next installment. It's good that it's out in book form now, somewhat edited and expanded. As crime fiction goes, it's a small gem. bookworld@washpost.com
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Ed says

What is it with Colin Harrison? I read *The Finder* and *The Havana Room*, two complex, rich and taut stories in vividly painted worlds. On that strength, I read *Bodies Electric*, a miserable slog that shattered all the good will that led me to it. I said then that it'd be a while until I tried Harrison again. This one is somewhere in the middle despite my star rating matching *Bodies Electric*. This is actually a novella, which I didn't realize and is probably the excuse for so little happening. The set-up is intriguing and like all of Harrison's work, upper class Manhattan is well rendered. However, this story seems to be straining for the literary (read: dull) and a whole chapter is someone just data dumping. So, Harrison is batting about 500 and it's gonna be a real long time to see which way the steak goes. Again, what is it with this guy?

Susan Miller says

This short novel was commissioned as a fifteen part weekly serial for "The New York Times". I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The story was tight and well developed. The characters were believable and the main character was intriguing, thoughtfully developed and totally believable. The book made sense. This story could have happened in real life.

This book could be read in an afternoon, although it took me longer due to other commitments. I liked it so much that when I returned it to the Berkley Public Library, MI, I immediately checked out another book by this author.

Stephen Selbst says

Another of Colin Harrison's satisfying but offbeat thrillers. An elderly widow asks a middle-aged lawyer to solve an apparent mystery surrounding the death of her son. The lawyer finds himself involved with a mysterious Czech hand model, Russian thugs and a cache of rhodium worth perhaps \$1 million. The breadcrumbs are all there, but I'll admit I didn't figure this one out.

Steve Thomson says

Easy quick read from an excellent author on New York's hidden sleaze.

Michael says

George Young is an attorney for a New York insurance firm. His work involves analysis of suspicious insurance claims.

One day he's called to the home of Mrs. Corbett, widow of the firm's founder. She's in poor health and wants George to look into what her son, Roger, was doing prior to the time he walked into the path of an oncoming truck and was killed.

In a story that "The Washington Post" compares to "The Bonfire of Vanities," George does some research and finds that Roger was in a bar with a girlfriend prior to his accident. Eliska Sedlacek, a Czech had a relationship with a Russian and carried items into the country for him. In his last trip, he asked her to carry a larger amount. The man is later killed and Eliska is informed that the man took something that didn't belong to him and they want it back. She had stored the items, which were in the shape of ornaments, in Roger's apartment.

Through the investigation, George learns things about himself that are significant. The author has written a nice story that was a fun read.

Boris Feldman says

The reigning king of New York Noir?

The plot is good (3 * good), but the prose and tone are spot on.

Joyce says

Colin Harrison is one of those writers that I _want_ to like, and can always see what he was trying to do... but maybe that's the problem. I'm down with the regrets, ennui, and petty compromises of early middle age; but a TINY bit less exposition about them might have been all to the good. And I like how the thriller elements drive the action forward, but somehow the McGuffin doesn't end up supporting the themes of the rest of the story. And although the characters are vividly sketched in their compact format, most of them ultimately seem to do nothing but provide one crucial piece of information and a bonus portentous warning to the protagonist. Lots of craftsmanship on display, for better and worse.

Brian says

I won this book as a giveaway from Goodreads. When I received it, I was surprised to see that it was very short - only about 180 pages. Unfortunately, it felt too short.

The story was good, and the book had a nice and fast pace to it which kept me reading, but it didn't get me attached or invested in any way. The characters were underdeveloped, which made the ending feel less impacting than it should have, which was a shame because there was a ton of potential for the characters to be extremely interesting.

That being said, it did only take me about 5 hours to read, the concept was interesting and the writing was fast-paced - so if you're looking for a quick and relatively entertaining read (maybe for a flight) I'd

recommend this book.

Becky says

I finished this book. It's a short book, but now what I would call quick. I wasn't interested in the book enough to be quick. It actually took me much longer than it should have to read.

It's not poorly written, doesn't involve blood, gore or other things that would immediately turn a reader off, but I just wasn't into it. I wasn't connected to any of the characters. In fact, I can't remember the names of them without opening the book, or looking in the summary. The author really tries to create an image of a secondary character, the girl-friend of the dead guy, but she's not even a big part, yet I remember more about her than anyone else in the book!

The fact that this old woman contacts a young lawyer who worked for her late husband in order for him to do some investigavie work seems a bit out of place. Granted, the ending kind of tries to put that piece together, but I still think it was odd.

Basically it boils down to this: The lawyer figures out what happened the night that the son of the rich woman died. I knew he would solve it before I was half-way through the book. I couldn't predict the exact outcome, so a couple of points there. Otherwise, this book didn't make my top 100 list for the year! But, don't take my word for it! It might appeal to you!

John says

I've read several of the novels that started off as serials commissioned by the *New York Times Magazine*, and so far they've all been pretty flat. *Risk* is perhaps the best of them (memory of the others is a bit hazy), but that's not saying a great deal. It's by no means a bad novel, just a little unambitious and formulaic.

Some years ago the man who created the NYC legal firm of Patton, Corbett & Strode died, and more recently his son Roger was run over late at night by a garbage truck. One of the company's attorneys, George Young, is called in by the old man's ailing widow to investigate not Roger's death -- which she accepts was an accident -- but the events leading up to it. Since ol' man Wilson Corbett essentially pulled George out of nowhere and gave him his career, George doesn't feel he can rightly refuse her request. And, although he tells himself and everyone else that being a PI isn't really his bag, since the specialty of Patton, Corbett & Strode is investigating dubious insurance claims, he's as qualified as most.

He soon realizes that he's finding out the secrets of not just Roger but the old man, who was apparently a serial philanderer. The novel's first few chapters have a sort of mechanical construction: George meets up with someone who knew Roger or Wilson, he gets some more pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, he gets yelled at by his wife Carol for devoting so much of his precious bodily fluids to the quest, he meets up with someone *else* who knew Roger or Wilson . . . and so the pattern repeats. Some of those characters are quite interesting, but even so this grows a little irksome.

Except that one of the characters really *is* interesting. Roger wasn't doing too well in business, and his

marriage had broken down. At the time of his death he was living in a crappy apartment in a building full of other crappy apartments. His upstairs neighbor was a Czech emigre, Eliska Sedlacek, who'd come to the US to try to build her career as a hand model. She and Roger, two lonely people in the city, formed a liaison -- no great love affair, but a matter of friendship and intimate companionship. As George interviews her more than once, he become fascinated with her -- not attracted, precisely, but fascinated -- and so do we. She's dispassionate and coldly graceful, yet intriguingly brittle. On the rare occasion she removes the gloves she must wear in order to protect her precious hands, it's almost as if she's gingerly offering herself to him.

We learn -- as does George -- that Eliska was half-unwittingly involved in a smuggling operation, which has put her in the cross-hairs of the nasty Russian gang from whom the smuggled goods were stolen. (I had the oddest sensation that I'd encountered the smuggling *modus operandi* somewhere else, but this may have been just *deja vu*.) The trouble is that the Russian thugs are nowhere near brutish enough; they sort of play patty cake with paunchy middle-aged George and, once they've gotten what they wanted, they ensure his silence by making diabolical threats against his nearest and dearest rather than simply bumping him off.

This isn't the only plot problem. The twist at the end of the book is several times so clumsily telegraphed from quite early on that I assumed Harrison was making a hamfisted effort to slyly introduce a red herring; the final reveal thus made my jaw drop for all the wrong reasons. And, when it came, it suddenly made the prior actions of a minor but pivotal character completely incomprehensible.

In short, then, while the book's flowingly readable and generally entertaining throughout, it doesn't quite hang together and it doesn't feel as if the author is entirely invested in it. But the character of Eliska is a splendid, hauntingly memorable creation, and on her own just about makes *Risk* worth the price of admission.

Certainly, on the basis of this novel, I'll be giving Harrison another try.

Sam Reaves says

Colin Harrison writes "literary thrillers", and his best books rank high in both dimensions, literary quality and the punch we expect from a good crime novel. He's the New York writer I recommend when people start talking about New York writers. His books always show you something interesting about the Big Apple. A lawyer at a firm which specializes in investigating fraudulent claims for a big insurer is tasked by the widow of the firm's founder with discovering what drove her son to such distraction that he walked out in front of a truck. The lawyer is a placid soul who would much rather sit and watch the Yankees game than chase clues around Greenwich Village, but he says yes out of a sense of obligation. The quest takes our hero into deep waters involving a mysterious Czech beauty who always wears gloves, a box full of Christmas ornaments and a van full of thugs who are ready to bust heads to get the baubles back.

It has all the humor and insight we expect from the author, but for my tastes it comes up a little short in the thrills department; the bad guys aren't that scary, the intrigue isn't all that consequential, and in the end it's more about the hero's personal history than anything else. A nice little New York story, but a bit genteel for hardened fans of the crime genre.

Eric_W says

Got this as a freebie from Picador.

Another reviewer described this book as "modern noir." Wish I had thought of that. George Young works for a law firm with one client, a large European insurance company. The firm's role is to investigate suspected fraudulent claims. The founder's widow asks George, who has a reputation for tenacity, to look into the death of her son, a man killed in an accident. There was no question it was an accident, the man had been drinking for hours before he inadvertently stepped in front of a garbage truck. She wants to know why he had been imbibing for so long, behavior totally uncharacteristic.

At first glance, Roger Corbett appears to be the normal, middling level, investment banker, whose career began optimistically, but then moved from one job to another as vapor-ware financial instruments and desire for instant riches began his downward spiral. Divorced, struggling to hold things together, Roger meets a Czech hand model (did I mention ordinary?) who has been bringing little Christmas figurines into the country.

Young begins asking questions, discouraged initially by the ex-cop detective Roger's mother had originally hired to investigate. He soon finds himself learning a lot about rhodium, a precious metal worth \$9,000 per ounce.

Harrison writes well. It's a good novella, reminiscent of the better Block and McBain, and I discovered it was difficult to put down despite the lack of murder, sex or violence. It's to Harrison's credit that he can build such a fascinating story from a combination of otherwise ordinary people living ordinary lives who find themselves caught up in extraordinary situations.

My congratulations to Picador the publishers of this short novel for the binding, a combination dust jacket, trade paperback, and nice design. It's light and will stand up under use. Makes a lot more sense than hardcover as we know it. Love to see more like this. It seems to me, if my memory serves me correctly, this kind of binding was relatively common in Europe years ago. Of course, ebook format works even better.

I've ordered several other titles by Harrison.

Larry says

George Young, a middle-level attorney for a law firm that services one client—a large insurance company—is asked to investigate the death of his mentor's son. The son, a failed hedge fund plunger, walked into the path of a truck while preoccupied with something. The cause of death being obvious, George is asked to find out what the something was. Early in the investigation, George's wife cautions him to not upset their comfortable life by engaging in a quixotic chase into the ruins of a failed life. George goes ahead, even when the dead man's connection to a criminal enterprise via his exotic Eastern European girlfriend becomes obvious.

"Risk" is a novella that moves briskly and is well written, save for George remaining something of a cipher himself. His career having plateaued, though comfortably, George continues to pay off an old sense of debt even when it is apparent that trouble lies at the end of the quest. Why does he carry on? That's the unexplored mystery of the book

Elaine Gottlieb says

An short entertaining read. Harrison is a smooth, engaging writer. Well-written fun mystery novel.
