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## MYSTERY

*Canary* by Duane Swierczynski  
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*"Raskolnikov this isn't, but it's a convincing reproduction of an American teenager in the wild"*

## BOOK REVIEW: Start Snitching

BY ADAM ROSEN



In the annals of famous, self-serving quotes, "good reading is damn hard writing" is tough to beat. Writers love it, but no one really knows who coined it. The line — or at least the sentiment — has been credited to Maya Angelou, Byron, the Irish poet Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, among other well-regarded quippers. For her part, Angelou credited Hawthorne.

Worry not about the particulars. The point, made again and again and again, is that it takes serious skill to render a lump of text into something gripping. On this count, Duane Swierczynski might be considered a damn hard writer. His new novel *Canary* is a nearly perfect crime story, a narrative polished into prose so smooth you could glide across it.

The story begins not with a bang, but with a diary entry. The recorder is Serafina "Sarie" Holland, a half-Mexican, half-white college freshman living in Philadelphia. Sarie goes to school close to where she grew up, and lives at home with her 13-year-old brother and her father, whose pet name for her is "Sarie Canary." The diary is

Sarie's way of communicating with her mother, who died the previous year from brain cancer.

As she explains to her mom in the book's opening pages, Sarie's gotten herself into some serious trouble. The night before, after heading out from a party off-campus, she agreed to give a classmate she's vaguely romantically interested in a ride. Though it's almost midnight and Thanksgiving is the next day, the classmate, known as "D.," claims he has to stop by a friend's house and pick up a book, a ruse so fishy it could only be considered seriously by characters in a fiction plot, or college undergrads.

The reader's (and Sarie's) suspicions are quickly confirmed. While Sarie waits nervously in her car, D. runs into a rowhouse in South Philly just blocks away from Pat's Cheesesteaks, the famous late night face-stuffing institution. His "book" successfully retrieved, D. heads over to Pat's, but not before dropping off his jacket in Sarie's car. As she circles around the crowded block rightfully cursing her bad decision-making skills, a police officer pulls her over. D. eyes the scene from afar and flees, leaving a Ziploc bag full of pills in the car and his driver to face the cop.

The officer, a black narcotics veteran named Benjamin Wildey, has been staking out the rowhouse D. just visited. He's a star in the force's undercover unit, and through a circle of confidential informants — or snitches — he's verified that the house is a favored business site of a local drug dealer nicknamed Chuckie Morphine. All Wildey's got is intel, however; if he wants to nail Chuckie, he'll need a way to get deep enough inside of the organization to make a buy, which will give the unit probable cause for a raid. Lucky for him, Sarie Holland comes stumbling into his life. For her good deed, Wildey takes her downtown.

Despite D.'s abandonment and generally unchivalrous behavior, Sarie refuses to rat him out. Isn't there something else she can offer up to the state, she asks Wildey? As it turns out, there is: she can bring him a solid lead on Chuckie, and do it soon, since the department doesn't care if it's finals week. In this way honors student and erstwhile observer of her dad's curfew Sarie Holland becomes the Philadelphia Police Department's Confidential Informant #137.

Unfortunately for Sarie, this is not a particularly good time to rat. "Snitches get stitches," as the saying goes, but in Philly they're also getting their body parts chopped off and left in abandoned buildings. Sarie doesn't know it, but there's a leak in the police department, and local mafia figures have assembled an all-star team of assassins with colorful names like Frankenstein and Ringo to act on the inside information.

We care if Sarie gets whacked. Part of this is because we feel bad that she's been duped by her jerky would-be boyfriend, but also because she's so self-possessed, a one-woman rebuke to the worst Millennial stereotypes. She's brave, and occasionally stupid, and plenty cheeky, but — bless her — not precocious. She speaks like someone her age just might, not in poignant bon mots better ascribed to octogenarian philosophers on their deathbed. For example, here's Sarie writing to her mom about an attempt she made to find a new drug connection at a bar on South Second Street:

I tell them the mini-story I practiced in my head: My boyfriend was a small-time dealer with an awesome supply, but then I caught him cheating on me and I dumped his sorry ass. Which I regret, because now it's hard to find shit as good as the shit he had. "I should have just let him keep banging that skank." (I had to practice saying that line without giggling.)

Raskolnikov this isn't, but it's a convincing reproduction of an American teenager in the wild. Sarie's richness is a testament to Swierczynski's skill. In too many thrillers dialogue is an afterthought, treated either as a dumping ground for exposition or a cheap place to gin up melodrama. Not so in



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*Canary*, which channels Elmore Leonard at his snappiest, and this little something extra makes the book even more entertaining than its expertly executed crime story would on its own. It's also not the only trick Swierczynski's got up his sleeve. The book constantly shifts perspectives between characters, even in the middle of the same scene, an approach that imbues the scene with a bonus of complexity and surprise. Rather than just serving as a backdrop or bullet-receptacle, secondary characters are transformed from passive actors who get bad things done to them to fleshed-out humans, even if they only make a brief appearance.

This includes Letitia Braly, the receptionist at a dodgy OB-GYN clinic downtown that runs a prescription-selling business on the side. Sarie finds her way to the clinic after her night out at the bar yields a lead. She's able to buy a bottle of OxyContin from the doctor who runs the operation, but it still isn't enough to pacify Wildey. He moves in, undercover, to make a proper bust when the point-of-view shifts to Letitia. Learning that Letitia's been expecting a visit from the local drug-dispensing competition — and that she keeps a Glock under her desk — ramps up the tension considerably. Someone's going to get hurt:

The moment the big guy in the dark gray hoodie and ratty baseball cap steps into the waiting room, Letitia Braly knows he's the one...Dr. Hill assured her it would never come to this, that there were good people in this neighborhood. But Letitia knew this area better than that. Word had a way of spreading. Sooner or later, this was bound to happen.

After additional dramatic buildup, the story boomerangs back to Wildey's view. Executed poorly, the quick shifts might become irritating, but they wind up producing a kind of rousing cinematic sequence.

There's not much that can bring *Canary* down. Sarie's father might sulk a bit too excessively, but he's a rare lightweight, and even he has occasional moments of wryness. No big message comes through the story apart from warning us to stay off drugs and beware of criminals with silly nicknames, but this hardly matters. *Canary* isn't interested in grappling with universal truths or agonizing over the human condition. It's pure, 100 percent Grade-A uncut plot — and blessedly so.

Like his crew of assassins, Swierczynski is nothing if not disciplined. He's done his due diligence. The book's acknowledgments pay tribute to "dozens of crime stories in Philadelphia and across the country." Accordingly, Philadelphia is as much of a character in *Canary* as the damaged humans hustling in its streets, and Swierczynski's mentions of regional delicacies like Tastykakes snack foods and Pat's enhance its local flavor. The setting isn't as essential to the story as Los Angeles is to a Chandler novel or *Chinatown*, but its ambiance is distinctively urban. Characters are alternately beaten up, arrested, dealt drugs to, served coffee to, tortured, and executed in areas like the Badlands and the Northern Liberties, all of which makes for a classic big-city pulp feel.

This is no environment for such an upstanding young woman, but Sarie takes to her dangerous new life with the same enthusiasm she puts in to her psych exams. Ultimately, Sarie the honors student gets an education in Philly; it just takes a few dead bodies and run-ins with the mafia to school her.

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