

ARTS & SOCIETY

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Davies' 'Frog King': no judging by the cover

The Frog King, by Adam Davies. Riverhead Books. 316 pages. \$13.

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

If Harry Driscoll, the hero of *The Frog King*, really existed and picked up a copy of *The Frog King*, he would throw it away. Not just because of its cheesy subtitle, *A Love Story*, but because of the awful jacket blurb.

It says that Harry comes from a rich family, has an Ivy League education, hates his job in publishing and has a manuscript in his bottom drawer. Do we really care? You wonder if the in-house publicists (whom the author mockingly refers to as pom-poms, since they're all former high school cheerleaders) wrote the jacket copy as revenge, so you would throw this book in the trash, too.

But that would be a terrible mistake.

Granted, before you even crack the spine, you want to hate Harry. You do, sometimes. But

novelist Adam Davies (whose bio resembles Harry's a bit too closely) is that rarity in book publishing: a true talent.

He is funny. Laugh-out-loud funny. And smart. And self-deprecating. And wise. And near the end of the book, when Davies wows us with an emotional breakdown involving a field of fireflies (too complicated and beautiful to explain; you have to be there), you want to marry Harry. Or be his best man.

The plot line, at first glance, stumbles drunkenly over the same old sidewalks. It's right out of *Bright Lights, Big City*: Twenty-nothing moves to New York for big publishing job, gets drunk, loses girl, loses job, stumbles around town and, well, I don't want to ruin the ending.

But Davies makes Jay McInerney look like a tourist. His New York is the real deal: He gets wasted at the Blue and Gold, hangs at Tompkins Square Park and makes fun of the Upper East Side ("You will develop chromosomal damage if you stay up there too long," he writes). Best of all, Davies picks at the

publishing industry like a nasty scab that he really should leave alone. It will only lead to permanent scarring. But he can't help himself.

Davies, a former assistant at Random House, mocks everyone and everything, particularly an editor who uses the word "dazzling" for every book he publishes. Harry refuses to read anything "with a 'song' attached to it: Bloodsong, Painsong, Blahblablahsong. Hate them all. No singing please. Or anything with "Artist." The Pain Artist. The Bone Artist. The Ham on Rye Artist. Save me from Artists."

In his sly, slippery way, Davies picks apart language and puts it back together, offering us a tell-all expose of the publishing industry, now littered with memoirs that try to be just that.

In one scene, which takes place at an office masquerade party, Davies fells two Goliaths in a single graph: "When a hobgoblin hunched over a table takes off his mask to gobble hors d'oeuvres I am pretty sure the face I see is Norman Mailer's. A

pair of women snicker decorously as the hobgoblin spills pastry crumbs down his front. The first woman is dressed as a pig (written on her back is 'Yes I am a PIG: a Pretty Intelligent Girl') and the other as Rosie the Riveter. Is the PIG Nora Ephron? I can't tell."

Though it provides many of the biggest laughs, publishing is a mere backdrop to the love story and coming of age tale, told mostly in Howard Hawks-ish rapid-fire dialogue.

Davies' story is as touching and hilarious as Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, as heartfelt and ironic as Dave Eggers' own *Heart Breaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Unlike Eggers, Davies delivers right up to the last page.

The frog from that cover blurb turns out to be a king after all. And a dazzling king at that.

Helene Stapinski's memoir, Five-Finger Discount, explored her childhood and adolescence in Jersey City, N.J., and the social dynamics of graft, survival, love and wit. A journalist who has been both a reporter and a columnist, she lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.