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Review: The Soul Thief by Charles Baxter

A psychological gem of literary sorcery

Charles Baxter conjures a rewarding followup to "Feast of Love"

By JOSEPH PESCHEL

Special to The Star

Charles Baxter, author of *The Feast of Love*, a 2000 National Book Award nominee, is a master of conjuring serious short stories and novels.

His new novel, *The Soul Thief* a psychological gem, begins in 1973 in Buffalo, N.Y., a city "that gives off a phosphorescent decay." At a party, graduate students Nathaniel Mason and Therese, who becomes Nathaniel's girlfriend, meet the sinister polymath Jerome Coolberg. He was a thief. Nathaniel says. "and what he tried to do was steal souls. including mine."

Jamie Esterton, a sculptor, works with

Nathaniel in the People's Kitchen, where he cooks, cleans and serves. His "soul has always thrived being around cast-off people." Soon he begins an affair with Jamie, whose soul he loves.



At least one love triangle pulsates throughout this novel; two, if you count as love Jerome's desire to steal Nathaniel's identity and his soul. But it is the mysterious antibiosis between Nathaniel and Jerome that is the crux of this novel.

Ghosts, reflections and doubles — shadow

selves permeate the book. Nathaniel sees ghost women who disappear when he approaches. He cannot bear visiting the famous Samaras's Mirrored Room since it is "meant to undermine the soul by wrapping it in reflections." So many doubles infuse this story that Baxter risks overdramatizing, but this novel is exciting, interesting and occasionally humorous enough for us to overlook his exuberance.

Nathaniel is shaken when Jerome recounts to Jamie his past: it is Nathaniel's — growing up in Milwaukee, moving to New York, having a father who died of a stroke.

Therese admits giving some of Nathaniel's possessions to Jerome, who needs them for a book he is writing, *Shadow*. In it, "You're the devil," she tells Nathaniel. Later, his apartment mostly plundered, the Escher

print "Drawing Hands" stolen, Nathaniel worries that thieves may steal his name, and he warns Jamie that Jerome and Therese are after her.

In a touching scene that is sacramental, Nathaniel bows as he wipes Jamie's feet and swears his love for her. They make love and her "soul for a moment ascends above her body. Like a little metallic bird unused to flight, unsteady in its progress, her soul rises and falls, frightened by the heights and what it sees, but excited, too, by being married to him for a few seconds, just before it plummets back to earth."

It's 30 years later, but in a flashback, the People's Kitchen is torched and Jamie raped. A different person now after the attack on Jamie, Nathaniel compares himself to the knight in Keats' poem, awakening "on the cold hill's side."



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Flash forward. Married to Laura, with two sons, Nathaniel admits, "My soul was mortgaged. I paid it off through regularity, routine, and hard work, until it was mine again."

Baxter's literary sorcery conjures a natural dénouement from artful doubles and cultural allusions. Nathaniel gets a surprising call from Jerome, the host of a public radio program called "American Evenings." Nathaniel declines his invitation to be on the show but flies to Los Angeles, where Jerome finally explains his usurpation of Nathaniel's soul.

Possessing the power of a well-wrought short story, this novel is as moving as *Feast*.

The Soul Thief, by Charles Baxter (210 pages; Pantheon; \$20)

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