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General

The Lola Quartet
Emily St. John Mandel
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The swamps that encircle Sebastian, Florida, are brackish incubators where abandoned pets grow into tropical predators, threatening the well-lit monotony of manicured lawns and fenced-in yards. But the paved streets and gated developments can't tame the murky, monster-populated marshland the community is built around. It's this sense of latent, but prevalent, danger of meandering through life on the edge of something savage that a group of teens struggle to overcome as they build their adult lives on a bog of bad choices.

Unfortunately, the former members of a jazz group, the eponymous Lola Quartet—as in the movie from which the book takes its inspiration: *Run Lola Run*—learn that dark histories and poor choices aren't so easily forgotten. And as a single, fateful photograph proves, actions have consequences that can't be so easily outrun. When Gavin Sasaki learns that his high-school girlfriend, Anna, might have had his baby, his increasing insecurity peaks, and he slides, one slippery step after another, down an ethical slope to journalistic fraud. Unemployed and disgraced, Gavin returns to Sebastian to find out what happened to Anna, the girlfriend he never bothered to search for when she disappeared all those years ago.

What he finds in the sanitized suburbs of Sebastian is a dump of broken dreams. Complete with roadside diners and jazz bands, reporters and private investigators, trench coats and fedoras (in Florida!), Mandel channels Raymond Chandler. Unfortunately, the mystery—what happened to Anna in the intervening years—is not much of one, but like the best of the genre, the insights to be had here are psychological: How are we to reconcile the tension between the lives we wanted and the lives we got? Is accepting responsibility for your actions enough?

Emily St. John Mandel, author of *The Last Night in Montreal* and the Indie Bookseller's

Choice award-winner *The Singer's Gun*, is an engaging writer with a talent for descriptions. Suburbs extend through the greenery like "two teams of miners tunneling toward one another under the earth," and towns along the interstate differ only in name "like envelopes with all the contents the same." But, while Mandel's characters are inherently captivating, the plot restrictions dampen them; the book feels most real when centered on Anna's life with Liam Deval, a wannabe Django Reinhardt, and his musical development. Nevertheless, this is a rewarding read from a talented writer.

Devon Shepherd