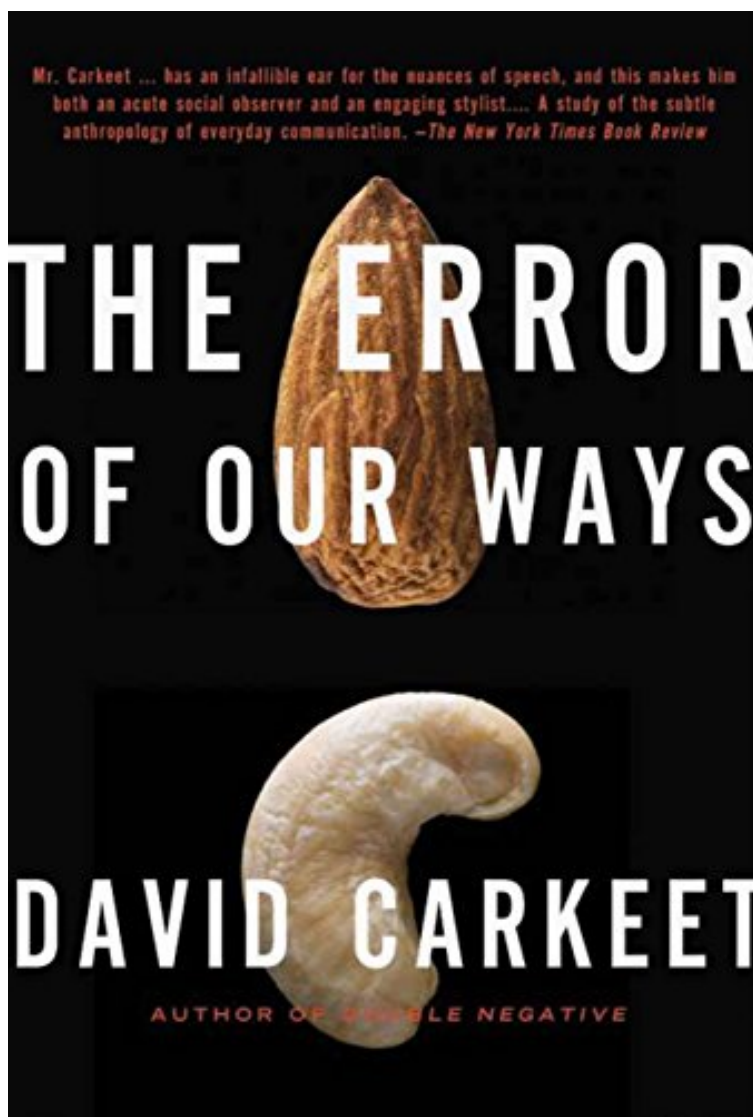


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The Error of Our Ways: A Novel



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn highly regarded novels like Double Negative and, most recently, From Away David Carkeet has won critical success and a popular audience. With the return of Jeremy Cook, Carkeet has created a modern parable that delineates the fault lines existing between the sexes and running through language itself. Extrait NOVELS BY DAVID CARKEET From Away Double Negative The Greatest Slump of All Time I Been There Before The Full Catastrophe FOR YOUNGER READERS The Silent Treatment Quiver River Copyright 1 Sesame. Buckle your high chair first. Sesame. Its coming on right now. See? Theyre thanking viewers like you, so just buckle. Cheerios. Ive got em. Can I buckle you? No! Then you buckle. I buckle. Good. Great. Good job. Heres your breakfast. Potty. Bens shoulders slumped. Negotiating with Molly was as taxing as dealing with his suppliers and customers. More taxing, actually. Adult rules remained constant, but

Mollys changed from week to week. He slid the high-chair tray out, squeezed open the plastic buckle, and lifted his daughter out. In the kitchen, he pulled down her pajama bottoms and eased her onto the blue-and-white potty stool. She immediately produced great quantities of fluid. This moment was still a miracle to him, for she was only a month out of diapers. The transition had been sloppy, and just when he and Susan were concluding that they had rushed her, Molly turned a corner and entered the sunny valley of sphincter control. It had gone faster than he remembered for his other daughters, insofar as he could remember anything about their early development. Molly didnt even wear a diaper at night now. In the crib, her unconscious would scream at her for ten hours to hold it! Then, on rising, she might dawdle for an hour before saluting the new day. She, at two and a half, had a stronger bladder than he, at forty-four. Wipe in front, Ben said. She took the toilet paper he had given her and pressed it against the side of one buttock. Here? No. Wipe in front. She switched hands and pressed the paper against her other buttock. Here? No. In front. Back to the first buttock. Here? This was her great dawn comic routine. Shall I do it? She immediately wiped in front, rose, and pulled up her pajama bottoms. Ben put her back in the high chair and stood in her line of sight to the TV. She buckled. He gave her a fresh helping of cereal, then rinsed out her potty bowl in the toilet. Now, with luck, he could eat his breakfast and read the paper. He grabbed a box of Just Right from the pantry shelf. From the feel of it, there was enough for only one serving. He put it back and searched the shelves, rejecting the several boxes of Chex cereals because Ralston was too big in town already. He finally settled down at the table with a bowlful of Shredded Wheat. After two bites he looked down. It had been years since he had eaten Shredded Wheat. It was like chewing a birds nest. He imagined tiny beaks poking up from it. Who invented this stuff? How in the hell had it been a success? Karen, their fourth-grader, came into the kitchen, dropped her backpack on the floor, put an English muffin into the toaster, and asked where the funnies were. By this time, Ben was deep in an Ask the Doctor column, trying to determine if the tendonitis described there was what shot through his right elbow every time he picked Molly up. The funnies were in the section of the paper he was reading, but he gave it to Karen and told himself he would return to the column later. Can we get a bunny? she asked. No. Id take care of it. You have a hamster. Yeah, and I take good care of him. Id take good care of the bunny, too. No. In his experience, no one could take care of a bunny. They were effluent machines. He remembered how Andreas bunny had nipped his knuckles whenever he changed the soggy newspaper in its cage. He remembered the sound of the pellets dropping onto the fresh paper before he was halfway up the basement stairs. Karen abandoned the subject, mainly because Pam, rounding the corner from the bottom of the stairs, tripped over her backpack and snapped at her. Molly, drawn to all discord, shouted nonsense from the den. Every morning, Pam complained. Every morning I trip over that butt-ugly backpack. So you should have learned by now, Karen said coolly. She took a dainty bite of her English muffin. Pam poured Just Right into a bowl and left the empty box on the counter instead of throwing it away. She sat down across from her father. When she saw that Karen had the funnies, she writhed in protest. Every time, she said. Without looking at her father, she said, Can I sleep over at Jennifers tonight? Ben couldnt think of a good reason to say no. What else do you have planned? Why? Pam snapped. Dont you trust me? Karen made a noise in her throat that could have been caused by a fragment of muffin. Pam ignored it. Just remember the new rules, Ben said. Yeah, yeah. Pam and her tight circle of five eighth-grade friends had lately redefined sleepover in bold new terms so bold that the parents of the circle had had to meet on a recent Saturday morning to establish rules. Ben was the only man there. After too many cups of coffee and far too many anecdotes from the women about their own teen years, they hammered out this code: one sleepover per weekend, on Fridays only (Saturday sleepovers left the kids still groggy on Monday); no getting into a car unless a parent was the driver; no staying out past midnight; no sneaking out of the house after curfew and roaming from one end of Aberdeen to the other; and no male visitors dropping in through basement windows or old coal chutes. For every stipulation there had been a violation, each catching Ben slack-jawed. His innocence had confounded him. Shouldnt he, with an older daughter a senior, now coming quietly into the kitchen have known this was possible? But Andrea had never had sleepovers patterned after Mardi Gras. She had never mixed Scotch and grape Kool-Aid over the laundry room sink. She had never run wild with older boys late at night on the grounds of Concordia Seminary. Instead, Ben remembered quiet visits by demure friends, one or two at a time, with a few giggles and, at worst, spilled hot chocolate. Andrea had long black hair and a narrow, almost gaunt face. He watched her taking her large vitamins and wished she smiled more. Molly shouted in the den, but she was just interacting with the TV, well ahead of the new entertainment curve. Andrea joined them at the table, and Karen looked up from the funnies. What was your bunnys name? she said. Alfred. What happened to him? Dad made me give him to a

day-care center. Andrea reached for the front section of the paper and gave him a look. The truth was worse than she knew. Alfred had died in transit. Bens surprise had been monumental as he had opened the van gate and beheld the bunny, immobile, lying on his side on fresh newspaper he had managed to soil on this, his ultimate journey. Andrea was sitting in the front seat. She was in seventh grade at the time and had agreed to the donation without much of a battle. Biting his lip, Ben asked her if she had said good-bye. She said yes, but she said it again, over her shoulder. Good-bye, Alfred. She could see only the top of the cage. Ben scooped the cage up, shielding the corpse from her view with his body, and took it to the entrance, luckily situated around the corner of the cinder-block building. Here he faced a new challenge. The day-care center was open, the eager kiddies inside. He could hardly go forward with the transfer of ownership he had so carefully set up. He kept walking to the rear of the building, where, with a Good night, sweet prince, he heaved the entire load into an open Dumpster. He lurked there for an appropriate interval, then returned to the van with a full report on the apple-cheeked joy of the youngsters. He looked across the table at Andrea. She had checked out, as she often did. Her face was flooded with emotion from a private world. He felt a shock of worry for the way she was turning out. The odd thing was, he didnt know how she was turning out. What are you thinking about? he asked, determined to get to the bottom of her. Her face cleared. I smelled ammonia when I walked by a chem class yesterday. It made me sad and I couldnt figure out why. Now I know. It reminded me of Alfred the ammonia in his pee. She looked closely at her father. Hey, I agreed to give him away. I wasnt enjoying him anymore. All he did was scratch me. Ben managed a smile. How are the essays coming? Andrea shrugged. Im done with Amhersts. Mrs. Sloak is looking at my Swarthmore one. That leaves five. One of them is a bunch of large theories about life that we have to deal with. I hate that. The one for Bryn Mawr has to be about some woman I admire someone I know. Do Roberta, Pam mumbled over her cereal. Karen laughed. Ben gave them his frowning smile his standard expression for the many occasions when they were bad but funny. Roberta was yet another female in Bens life his secretary, as painfully loyal as she was excruciatingly asexual. She had been with him from the beginning, from the day eighteen years ago when he had surveyed the St. Louis economy and declared, What this metropolitan area needs is a nut dealer. Roberta had just begun a promising career in the lower rungs of middle management at Southwestern Bell when she dropped into Bens lap, an orientation destined to remain figurative for two reasons: Bens nearly unblemished loyalty to Susan and, sufficient all by itself, Robertas personality, which Andrea once labeled extraterrestrial. When he hired Roberta, Ben was less nervous about her social skills than he was about her aspirations. Why was she willing to shift down to an executive secretary position? As it turned out, she proved to be perfect, an under-salaried partner in essence. He tried to make up the monetary inequity with bonuses and surprise vacations (she traveled abroad frequently with a female cousin living in Indianapolis), and also more personally, with frequent invitations to join the family for dinner, where her behavior provoked deep wonder. Robertas speech was blandly polite, becoming peppy only when she produced folksy clichs that gave Ben the feeling she was much older than he, when in fact she was younger. (Dancing in the hog trough was one of her favorites; Ben had no idea what it meant.) And Roberta responded to speech with an unnatural delay. Ben had watched each of his children be frustrated by this quirk into puzzled silence, and he had explained it to them afterward, so that they wouldnt blame themselves. So, Ben said, sounds like seven applications now. Yeah, said Andrea. Another fee. Sorry. Thats all right. What school have you added? Williams. Im obsessed with New England lately. Probably because of the play. Ben nodded, though his understanding was imperfect. Andrea was directing a student production of Our Town, scheduled for an early December performance. He had thought it was set in Kansas. Karen looked up from the funnies with a peaceful smile. I love Calvin, she said. Andrea gave Ben a small smile, a parents smile, as if they were both raising her. Pam shoved her chair back, gathered some of her dishes, and carried them to the sink. She went to the drawer where Ben kept his wallet. I need twenty dollars, she said not to him, but to the world in which she was forced to dwell. Ooh, said Karen. That reminds me. I need a check. Picture day. Its on the counter, said Ben. Its stapled to the form. He looked at Pam. Whats the twenty dollars for? Jennifers birthday. I cant contribute twenty dollars for all your friends on their birthdays. I just cant. Its not for all my friends. I never said it was for all my friends. I said it was for Jennifer. Im good for ten. This seemed both overgenerous and stingy to him. Pam snatched a bill angrily from his wallet. All youve got is twenties. Ill owe you. She slammed the drawer closed. Wheres my brown sweater? Andrea said, Mom brought some cleaning home yesterday. Its in the hall closet. Pam left the kitchen and began thrashing in the nearby closet. Then she stomped up the stairs. Ben expected to hear the jet-engine roar of her hair dryer next. Instead, her shoes clomped on the bare wooden steps going up to the third-floor study. Susan was about to

be interrupted. Susan wrote books for children. She had published one book five years earlier a young adult novel for readers twelve and up, but not too far up. It was a strikingly quiet event two or three reviews, small sales, and no apparent impact on the youth of today. Since then she had written two rejected manuscripts for that same age group. Her failure, which she acknowledged more openly than Ben ever would have, had led to some changes in her writing. First, her current manuscript, whose subject she kept secret from Ben so that

he could be surprised when he read it (he had a secret too: he was growing increasingly nervous about reading it), would be for younger children, kids from eight to twelve. Second, she had studied several books about writing, and one of these effectively removed her from the breakfast table. The book recommended that the writer go directly from bed to desk because the writer freshly released from sleep was a pure writer, uncorrupted by humdrum reality high-chair buckles, bunny grudges, and the like. When Susan summarized the theory for Ben and said she would like to try it, he agreed. The regimen was about four months old now. Susan would slip out of bed every morning at five-thirty, go right to her study, and emerge three hours later wearing the dreamy smile of postcoitus. As for Ben, he looked back wistfully on the eighteen-year era when

Susan rose ahead of him and did almost all of the morning labor. And he couldn't help envying her for having work that was free of economic pressure. He bore sole financial responsibility for six people. He knew he wasn't alone in the world in this regard, but sometimes, as a pure idea, it floored him. In the den, Sesame Streets Eastern European enumerator was going at it. Molly yelled Count! Karen, hunched over the funnies, imitated the counts peculiar laugh. Pam clomped back down the stairs and stormed the closet again.

Oh, excellent! she yelled. Excellent! Ben quietly noted the wisdom of Susans shift from writing books for and about people like Pam to writing books for and about people like Karen. Andrea stood up and took her dishes to the sink, then went to his wallet drawer. You've got two fives here. Can I take them for field hockey snacks? Sure, said Ben. So Pam had lied. He would take it up with her later. As Andrea returned his thinning

wallet to the drawer, he had a sudden fancy that his pockets were full of little birds, constantly flying out with a noisy flurry. Each flight made him flinch. But he would pat his pockets and think, There are plenty of birds left. Ten minutes, Andrea announced. Karen automatically rose, reading the funnies, and continued to read them as she headed up the stairs. Ben would have to learn about his possible tendonitis later. Andrea put all the dishes in the dishwasher and wiped the counter clean. In the hall, she said to Pam, Train leaves in ten minutes, to which Pam replied, That's such a Dad sentence. What are you, an old man? Ben went into the

den to check on Molly. She was watching an old Kermit the Frog sketch. Sesame Street these days was a mix of old and new skits. A rap song with quick cuts might be followed by a gentle narrative he had watched with Andrea fifteen years earlier like this one, in which Kermit was interviewing Jack of Jack and Jill. Ben wanted to call out to Andrea to see if she remembered the skit. It might bring a rare smile to her face. He would ask Karen, too, and he might even ask Pam, just to see if she was capable of speech that didn't flame from her mouth. But the girls were in a hurry. He heard their footsteps in the front hall, two of the three

called out good-bye to him and Molly, the front door closed, and they were off to their three separate schools. In the sudden quiet, the house seemed to settle a bit. Molly was almost done with her cereal, so Ben stood up to make her some toast. One of her rules was one course at a time on her tray. He was itching to get to work. He listened at the bottom of the stairs for a sign that Susan might be wrapping it up. As second best, he grabbed the wall phone and punched the buttons that would take him to his voice mail. Roberta often left

messages there on the days he left work before she did, as he had done yesterday. There was one brief message about a cable from India. Ben smiled. The cable would be from Nathan Ravindranathan, cashew processor par excellence. Ben had gotten his name from the International Tree-Nut Dealers Directory and had sent him three identical letters, figuring at least one would reach him despite Indias notorious mail system. The cable was a good sign. A bit old-fashioned, but Ben was used to that in his dealings with third-world suppliers. Ben was on a quest for a cheap cashew, inspired by the comparative bulk prices in the local

supermarket: cashews, \$5.99 per pound; peanuts, \$2.39 per pound. Between those extremes was a land waiting for him to plant his flag. People loved cashews. The kidney-shaped nuggets were like a drug. Ben believed with strange certainty that some untried route existed, some undiscovered passage that would bring a cost-effective, quality cashew to America. The route would begin on the Indian subcontinent, perhaps with Nathan Ravindranathan. He spied Karens picture-day check and form, forgotten on the counter. He would drop them off on his way to work. He didn't mind. Karen might see him in the hall, and she would say, Hey, Dad, what's up? It's weird seeing you here. As he imagined this, he realized with a pang of loss that he was basing the little drama on an actual moment with Pam in grade school. If he showed up in Pams middle

school now, she would spit on the floor. Susan came down the stairs and into the kitchen. Pam interrupt

you?No, she said spacily. Her eyes hadnt yet come to rest on anything. I mean yes, but I was done. I had a good morning.Good.I moved some stuff from one chapter to another, and then I took part of what I moved and moved it back to its original chapter.Uh-huh.It changed everything.Good.Susan stared out the window over the sink. These comments were typical of her daily report. Ben had no idea what the hell she was talking about.Roberta wont be here for dinner, he said.Those words brought Susan back into the world. What is that, the third turndown? Does she have a life all of a sudden?I hope not, said Ben. I like her the way she is.Susan smiled vaguely. I need to take a shower. Ten more minutes?Ben agreed, though Susans ten meant twenty. He remembered why he had come into the kitchen and put a slice of bread in the toaster. When it popped out with a clatter, Molly automatically yelled, Toast!Thats right.Toast!Coming at you.As he lightly buttered the slice, Ben thought of the picture book he had read to Molly the night before. To her surprise, he had read it twice, but the second time was really for himself. In it a kind-faced farmer dressed in overalls rocked his baby to sleep on the front porch. (The farmers wife was already asleep upstairs.) Once the baby had fallen asleep, the farmer held his dog in his arms and rocked it. Then he rocked his hen, his sheep, and his pig. With farm equipment he rocked his cow and his horse. He rocked the whole farm to sleep. He worked hard, this farmer, tending every creature.2I dont hope for a perfect world, Jeremy, said Duckwall. That would be asking for too much.Right.People will always trip over their feet, get a fellows name wrong, misspeak.That they will. Cook glanced around for their waiter. If he brought the check, it might bring Duckwall to the main point.What I hope for, Duckwall went on, indeed, what the institute hopes for, is major error avoidance. He leaned forward, and Cook watched his starched white shirt edge over the lip of his lunch plate into a pool of gravy. Just to show you whats possible in this realm, I personally havent committed a major error in more than eighteen months.Cook was all astonishment, even though he figured he could make the same claim about himself. Why was he here, flattering this rigidly proper man with agreement and pretending to be what he was not? Why does one ever flatter, agree, and pretend? For a job, of course. But what job? Duckwall wasnt telling. All Cook knew was that the man ran an institute devoted to the study of error and that he was bonkers on the subject.Cook was a linguist, and while error analysis was a neat little corner of the field, it wasnt clear to him how the prospective job involved linguistics, even though Duckwall had said Cook was peculiarly well equipped for the positionhad said it twice, once in his surprising letter of the week before and again over lunch. Cook had reviewed some linguistics literature for the interview and had even memorized examples of the four kinds of spoonerisms, but thus far Duckwall had dominated. He had pretty much lost himself in a review of the institutes research on classic boners from history: the charge of the Light Brigade; the sinking of the Titanic; Wrong Way Corrigan; the Cerro Tololo pulsar; and the Australian cane toad and its American counterpart, the kudzu vine.With pursed lips, Duckwall set his tea bag in his spoon and wrapped the string around it, trying to squeeze a third cup from it. His upper forehead was bald, giving his face, Cook now noticed, the exact shape of a narrow oval. Cook finally spotted their waiter, but it was a discouraging sighting. He was passing by on the other side of the plate glass window in his street clothes, lighting a cigarette. Cook resolved to take over the agenda.I can see why you might be interested in someone like me, he said.Duckwall blinked. It was a hard blink to read.Many errors have a linguistic component, Cook went on, drawing on extremely recent reading. Schiaparellis canali, for example. He was an Italian astronomer, and he used the word canali for what he saw on Mars through his telescope. It means grooves or channels, but it got translated as canals. The English word implies intelligent construction, which made many earthlings believe in Martians. Its a classic case of words making us believe something false. Linguistics and errortheres a natural connection.I would like to finish telling you about the institute. Duckwall gave each word exactly equal weight. The effect was chilling.Sorry, said Cook.Duckwall fussed with his tea bag. His top button was tight around his neck, although he wore no tie. Cook wanted to reach out and violently undo it. Six years ago, Duckwall went on, my wife drowned in a swimming pool, right under the eyes of a lifeguard. She had a heart attack in the water, but the cause of her death was drowning. She might have been saved, but no one was watching the area where she was stricken. There was prior miscommunication among the lifeguardsa routine jurisdiction error. Originally, I had no intention of taking legal action. Then I changed my mind, and heres why. I wanted to learn why such things happen. I committed myself to establishing an organization devoted to errorto understanding it, classifying it, and conquering it. I threatened to sue, we settled out of court, and with the money I founded the Error Institute.Ah, said Cook.Duckwall leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. He seemed to signal a new phase in the meeting. Im glad weve come back to the question of financing. You seemed concerned earlier about the funding.The money dried up at the last two places where I worked. Thats why.Duckwall

nodded. Insolvency always lurks. Im constantly on the prowl for funds. Riley was my first employee, the victim of an exploding oven. Her personal injury award gave her a lovely dowry for the institute. There have been others, right along, who have earned fortunes the hard way, you might say, and who look with favor on our mission. I hire them, and their injury awards keep us afloat. But were ready for a new infusion of capital.

Ive got a prospect in Toronto that Im presently wooing. Hes suing the pants off Air Canada. Cook felt he could risk raising the question again. Where do I fit in? Duckwall laughed strangely, then checked himself. Do you have to ask? Of course I do. Well, to be frank, although youve made a nice impression on me today, the initial attraction was naturally your testicles. Cook felt a slight retraction in that region. What? Your testicles. Theyre very important to us. Im sure theyre important to you too, but thats water under the bridge, isnt it? Are you talking about my guts? My balls? Them too. It takes balls to do what youre doing. Duckwall banged a fist on the table, making his spoon dance. Personal injury litigation is not for the faint of heart. Im afraid I On a one-to-one basis, it means nothing to me. Its the human condition. Hells bells, man, were all wounded in some sense. Duckwall leaned across the table. You seem uncomfortable talking about it. I assumed from your lawsuit that the subject was fair game. What lawsuit? Duckwall flinched and leaned back. Youre not going to let them cut your nuts off and get away with it, are you? Look, I dont know what youre talking about. I have two balls. Two tangible, hairy balls. Are you talking about them or something else? Duckwall blinked several times. Your testicles werent surgically removed by mistake? Cook winced.

No. What a horrible thought. Last January? In Dallas? My testicles have never been to Texas. Duckwall pursed his lips. Your name is Jeremy Cook, isnt it? Jeremy Jacob Cook? Yes. Dont tell me there are two of you. Duckwall made a peevish noise. I gave Jeremy Cook to Peoplefinders, and they found over a hundred matches in the country. I went back and did more research on the surgery, and one of the newspaper stories reproduced the hospital admissions sheet. It showed the poor devils full name. His occupation too a travel photographer. I took the full name to Peoplefinders and got just one match this time, right in my own backyard: Jeremy Jacob Cook of St. Louis, Missouri. Age: thirty-four. Unemployed. And uncastrated. Good for you, bad for me. I had hoped to get deep into the pockets of St. Anthony of Dallas. My man must have left the country. Or died. Who knows? A pox on him. Oh, I shouldnt wish him ill on top of everything else, but Duckwalls voice trailed off, leaving Cook free to contemplate his true status in his eyes: not a linguist with promise, but a nutless financial wonder. Peculiarly well equipped indeed. Cook scooted his chair back from the table. You made a mistake, he said coldly. Id call it a major mistake. Your perfect record is shot to hell. Yes, Duckwall said philosophically. The right-in-my-own-backyard element seduced me. A classic serendipity error. Ah well. I came here with hope, Cook said, rising. He had wanted to be strong, but his voice cracked. Sorry, Duckwall said crisply. Ill make it up to you. A bright smile flashed across his oval face. Ill get lunch. Hows that? Cook did something he had never done socially before. He was already standing and facing Duckwall, so it was easy. With a widespread hand he reached down and clutched himself right where it counted, right there where the initial attraction was. As Cook crossed the Buford University quadrangle, the autumn leaves blowing at his feet whispered todays theme to him: The initial attraction was naturally your testicles. You could wake up and greet the day with high hopes for a fresh start, and all the while a sentence like that was lying in wait for you. It showed how foolish it was to have any hopes at all. Gothic towers stabbed the sky on all sides of him. Because Buford was a mediocre place, its architecture made Cook think not of grand European universities but of the quality of life in the Middle Ages of pain, plague, and ignorance. But Buford had a good library, and that was his destination. Universities could be as anonymous as large cities. Cook was certainly a man without a face in this one. Paula had been teaching here for a month. He had met several of her colleagues, but they had failed, or pretended to fail, to recognize him on subsequent encounters in the two buildings where he lurked, the library and the campus bookstore. He thought of himself as the Shadow. But all he really was, he knew, was a faculty spouse. He stepped into an empty elevator and pushed the button for the top floor. Just before the doors closed completely, a meaty hand reached in and shoved them apart. A bearded buffalo of a man stepped in and grunted when he saw that the top button was already lit. Cook briefly speculated how meager his chance of surviving would be if the man chose to kill him with his bare hands. The elevator chugged to a start. The man snapped his fingers and pointed at Cook. Youre Paula Nouvelless husband. We met at a faculty party. Im Ted Chambers.

Phonetics. Cook relaxed a little. Jeremy Cook. Syntax. They shook hands. Besides being larger than Cook, Ted seemed a little older; or he could have been the same age and just dissipated. He cocked his head sideways and beamed through his beard. Im still smarting from the drubbing Paula gave me yesterday, he said. Drubbing? said Cook. Her net game is flawless. Ah. Cook found it hard to picture Ted playing tennis. Or

doing phonetics, for that matter. In Cooks experience, phoneticians were little people. Off to the Ps, are you? Ted said, referring to the call-number range for linguistics. Right. The Journal of Child Language. An exciting domain. Messy, just like the little buggers themselves, but exciting. Are you and Paula coming to the picnic this afternoon? Just Paula. Its quite an event. The elevator doors opened. They stepped out and walked toward the stacks. Ted bumped into a book cart and sent it careening. Chairman Sam has this place in the country, and a strange magic takes over out there. All the rules get suspended, if you take my meaning. Do people get drunk and make passes at each other? Good man! Youve cut right to it. Ted lacked a library voice. Half the students studying at tables were looking up at them. Softly, Cook said, Isnt that a little disruptive to workplace harmony? Oddly enough, no. When Monday comes, we all sort of say, Well, weve shown our dark sides, now lets get back to work. Does that make any sense? Cook didnt answer this question on principle. He had heard it before and not liked it. In his world, you either made sense or you didnt, and it was up to you to know which. But Teds size made the question tolerable, almost endearing. It struck Cook that big people and little people had very different constraints on their behavior. He slowed in his walk, for they had reached his row. Ted didnt seem to want to let him go. Are you working on anything in particular? Just keeping up with the literature on language acquisition. I dont have any informants right now. You sound sad about it. I have a niece in town, a two-year-old, with some interesting things. She has partial reduplication for plurals. Box-ox is her plural of box. Cook was impressed. Is it productive? Dont know. Cute girl. Molly. My sisters daughter. Ill give her a call and see if I can wangle a get-together. I dont know. Oh, come on. You dont want to be in here. You need to get out there and taste life. I think Ill pass, actually. No, no. Ill set it up. No. Really. Ill give you a call. Its what you want. Ted gave him a grin and disappeared down an aisle. Cook watched him go with the firm belief that he wasnt serious. How could he be in the face of such clear rejection? Cook tracked down his journal, grabbed the most recent volume from the shelf, and carried it off to an isolated table. He read it, then stayed there in the Ps, browsing and reading for five hours in all. He spent the last two of them researching reduplication as a spontaneous grammatical marker in child language. He knew of languages that duplicated part or all of a word to signal plurality (in Malay, kapal meant ship; kapalkapal meant ships), but he had never heard of an English speaker, young or old, doing so. Judging from his reading, neither had anyone else. Something new, perhaps. As he stared out the window, he sensed a shift in the light and looked at his watch. He packed up his notes and headed for home. He walked south across the campus into a residential neighborhood lying in the east end of Aberdeen, a near-suburb of St. Louis. Six blocks deep into this neighborhood, the narrow, treelined street opened to reveal the expansive grounds of Concordia Seminary to the right and small brick apartment buildings to the left. Cook and Paula lived in a two-bedroom corner apartment, which sat atop an antiques store operated by their landlord. Cook trudged up the outside wooden steps. He went directly to his study a designated corner of the living room. (As the only salaried member of the marriage, Paula had claimed the extra bedroom as her study with surprisingly little discussion.) He set his briefcase down on his desk actually a hollow-core door on cinder blocks. (As the only salaried member of the marriage, Paula had claimed their one true desk for herself with surprisingly little discussion.) He took off his sweater, folded it, and set it on a shelf in the hall closet. (As the only salaried member of the marriage, Paula had claimed the one closet in the bedroom with surprisingly little discussion.) He went into the kitchen and turned on the overhead light, a fluorescent ring suitable for illuminating cult mutilations. He took a bowl of yesterdays spaghetti out of the refrigerator. The answering machine blinked at him on the counter: two messages. He set the bowl down and pressed the button. Duckwalls voice invaded the apartment. Mr. Cook, its eleven-twenty A.M., and Im calling to confirm our luncheon appointment, but I suppose you must be on your way there now. There was a pause. But perhaps youre in the bathroom. If so, Ill wait. A long pause. Cook stared at the machine. But I dont want to rush you. Take your time in there. Another pause. In the meantime, Ill say this much: I hope we can move forward quickly toward a mutually beneficial agreement. Also, on a personal note, let me say that I believe manhood can take many forms, and the absence of its corporeal manifestation must count for very little in a humane and progressive social order. Enough said. Cook closed his eyes and waited for the second message. Hi hi! What a party. Wish you were here. Am I slurring my words? She was. You can always tell, you sober thing. Anyway, were at Chairman Sams, and then were going to Debbies I think Debbies. Hang on. She yelled a question to someone. Cook heard laughter, then some shouts. It sounded like a John Cheever party. Never mind. We should end up at Teds. Call me there to tell me about your interview. At Teds. Did I say that? He said he saw you today. He thinks you dont like him. I told him you like everybody. Listen, I dont have his number, so, umm, Ill call you, okay? Ill call you. From Teds. Shut up. She giggled. That wasnt for you.

Listen, that man you were going to meet called just after you left. I was in the shower. I saved the message, but for the life of me Wait! Im coming! Gotta go. Cook killed both messages and threw the bowl of spaghetti into the microwave. He stared out the kitchen window. The Asian couple in the apartment across the side street were eating dinner. In the growing dark, their kitchen was lit like a small balcony in a stage play. They were young, probably Buford U. graduate students. The man reached his chopsticks across the table and fed a little something to his wife. She did the same for him. Cook turned to the microwave and watched the plastic wrap puff up over his bowl. He left the bowl there and went into the living room, where he put on some Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf. He plopped on the couch with his earphones, powerless to do anything else. All reading he did, even leisure reading, was work related, and since he didnt feel like working, he didnt feel like reading. His mind was like a union shop, where one shutdown led to many. Some time later, Cook was awakened by a painful pressure on his head. He had rolled over on his earphones in his sleep. He yanked them off, sat up on the couch, and peered at the wall clock. One-ten in the morning. He went to the front window. Paulas car was in its usual spot. She was safely home, in bed. As he was about to turn away, he saw someone in a car parked across the street holding a hand to his head and jerking. For a moment, Cook thought the man might have been shot. Then he saw that he was just holding a car phone to his ear. For Cook, this reclassified him from victim to victimizer. The car, he now saw, was a Saab. What the hell kind of deal could the yupster be closing at this hour? Shoot him, Cook called out to the darkness. Someone shoot the sonofabitch. He flopped back onto the couch and returned to sleep. Ben held his car phone to his ear and peered through his window at the sloping lawn of Concordia Seminary. He wore a leather jacket over his bare chest and jeans over his pajama bottoms. He was searching for his daughter. He waited for Susan to answer, hoping she hadnt fallen asleep. Twenty minutes earlier, the two of them had just turned off a movie on the bedroom VCR when the phone had rung. Ben answered, knowing that the call would be about Pam. Jennifers mother told him she had just gone into the back bedroom to check on the girls and found it empty. They had left by the fire escape. Did Ben or Susan have any idea where they were? They did not. In truth, at that moment they had only one idea, which in good conscience they could not now carry out. Jennifers mother said she figured the girls were either at Concordia or at the apartment of Terris father, who was out of town. She had phoned that apartment and gotten no answer, which could mean anything. Terris mother, she said, could not be reached for an opinion. Ben wouldnt have valued it in any case. It was Terris mother who, on a previous sleepover, had permitted Pams eighth-grade gang to watch *The Lover*, a movie in which a golden-bunned thirty-two-year-old steered a pouty teenager all over his apartment floor. It was this movie that Ben and Susan had just turned off, shocked, in order to pursue its central subject on their own. Ben had said the only thing he could say: Jennifers mother should stay there at her apartment in case the girls returned, and he would go out and look for them. He had pulled on his jeans, pocketed his erection, and driven to Terris fathers apartment. In front, he saw none of the cars belonging to the sophomore boys the gang hung out with. When he listened at the apartment door, all was quiet. The girls were habitually clumsy sneaks, given to giggling and hushing that always betrayed their positions. It was a safe bet they werent there. Now his eyes scanned the dark hillside while he waited for Susan. It took four rings, but she sounded alert. He gave her an update, then asked if she had been awake. Molly, she said. She had to pee. I just settled her down. No more apple juice after eight o'clock. We can control her behavior, at least. Ben wasnt too sure about that. I need to call the other parents. Ill get the Buzzbook. Susan went away but came back surprisingly fast. Pam must have left the directory in plain view atop the devastation of her bedroom. Susan tracked down the five phone numbers and read them to him. He told her to go back to sleep. You think shes okay? she said. Yes. But someday shes not going to be if she keeps experimenting like this. I hope thats all it is. Experimenting. I hope this isnt who she is. Nah. How can you be sure? He shrugged in the darkness. Listen, whens that movie due back? Tomorrow at seven. Lets pay a late fee. He could sense her smile. Turn your ringer off and go to sleep. Im on the job. What if Pam calls? What if shes stranded somewhere? Revue de presse Praise for David Carkeet "A deftly crafted story featuring a cast of deliciously quirky, endearing characters, some of the funniest writing since Mark Twain." -Jonathan Kellerman "A delight to read." -San Francisco Chronicle