

5/17/08

STICKY FINGERS

Identity theft is a voguish crime. But college students have been masters of it for years. They soak up the personalities of their favorite teachers and fellow students with unembarrassed delight. One week they're anarchists; the next, Romantic poets.

College is the central location for the unsettling, unsatisfying new novel by Charles Baxter ("The Feast of Love"). Nathaniel Mason is torn between two women: Theresa is an insecure small-town girl who cloaks herself in intellectual irony; Jamie is a lesbian who Nathaniel cajoles into loving him.



The Soul Thief
By Charles Baxter
Pantheon, \$20

Hovering is the would-be mysterious character Jerome Coolberg, who delights in banter, wordplay and taunts — never mind if it doesn't make any sense; at least he's saying something.

Nathaniel believes Coolberg is stealing his identity by appropriating his life story and filching every item of clothing and furniture from his apartment, piece by piece.

Is Coolberg a demon sucking up Nathaniel's soul? Or is he just a fellow student with a

crush? "The Soul Thief" threatens to be darker and stranger than it ultimately turns out to be.

The final twist to the tale is anticlimactic. Yes, writers are the most unrepentant soul thieves of all. They lift details from the lives of others with light-fingered ease. But when the story is well-told, no one notices or cares. It's only when the theft is clumsy and the story misshapen that people can spot the crime. In this case, Baxter has been caught red-handed.

Michael Giltz