

*Human Capital* by Stephen Amidon (Penguin Viking, R140)

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A group of intersecting lives sharing a geographical space, a neighbourhood, a village, with a narrative that explores and exploits the random links between these contiguous lives: that is the basic recipe for any number of soap operas, from *Dallas* to *EastEnders* and *Melrose Place*.

*Human Capital* shares this narrative structure; indeed, it has all the best qualities of a good soap opera: the sense that we are tuning in to lives more interesting than our own, the delight in coincidental couplings and separations, the equal division of the story amongst an apparently random group of protagonists who yet turn out to be connected in a variety of generally disreputable ways.

But unlike the soap opera, whose plot line is determined only by the need to keep audiences guessing and coming back, *Human Capital* is, as its title indicates, structured around a single idea: the commodification of human lives, about which more later.

Like most soap operas, *Human Capital* is set in a fairly well-heeled corner of the earth: here it is Totten Crossing, an affluent Connecticut suburb in the spring of 2001. As has become customary in American novels, the green lawns, blue pools and shiny motor cars are the accessories to dysfunctional lives and, especially, dysfunctional families. Parents are too insecure and too involved in the pursuit of their own material ends to attend to the emotional needs of their children, and by the time they notice it, the children have become too alienated to be wooed back.

Amidon divides the telling of his story amongst four main characters: Drew, a failing estate agent; Shannon, his troubled, remote daughter by a flighty first wife; Carrie, the arty, idealistic wife of Quint, the wonderboy investment specialist; and David, the down-but-not-quite-out uncle and guardian of the orphaned Ian, Shannon's young lover.

The novel is very skilfully constructed on a narrative that passes from one perspective to the other, reversing and progressing according to each character's location in the plot at that moment. Gradually the narratives converge, until by the end of the novel all four perspectives have a single focus.

We gradually gather that Shannon, feeling betrayed by the flight of her mother, has chosen to blame this on her father. Drew, lonely and confused, has married Ronny, a clinical psychologist described by one of her patients as "well-meaning in the way of people with too much education and not enough street sense."

Shannon has terminated a relationship with Jamie, the handsome, popular but over-driven son of Quint and Carrie. Jamie, resenting his father's expectations, drinks too much and is in danger of going off the rails altogether: "Always trying to make the grade. Always trying to be the boy his father wanted him to be, then drinking himself stupid when he understood it would never happen."

Ian, the sensitive, artistic young man Shannon has now fallen in love with, is on probation after having been caught in possession of drugs. He is also, by court order, a patient of Ronnie's.

Drew, hoping to get rid of all his debts in one go, has invested all he owns, and more besides, in Quint's mysterious investment fund.

These are clearly the ingredients of a good yarn, and Amidon spins it for all it's worth, devising one of those situations in which everything goes from bad to awful and the characters get themselves ever more immersed in sticky stuff the more they struggle to get out of it.

But *Human Capital* is more than a tense page-turner, although it is also that. It is a scathing satire on the values and customs of up-market suburbia, in particular its worship of success, as measured, of course, in material wealth. It is a value system perfected in America, but flourishing wherever four-by-fours straddle suburban pavements.

The novel starts at a prize-giving ceremony at Country Day, the affluent high school serving the community, presided over by "Tricia Windham, the school's black-haired, brown-nosed head": "The very first thing Carrie had ever heard her say was that 'kids are our most precious commodities.'"

The concept of kids as commodities is extended into the more general notion of "human capital": a person's worth calculated in dollars and cents. The children are both the beneficiaries and the victims of this ethos. Jamie is given a Jeep Wrangler with which to impress his friends and cow his enemies, but is under constant threat of having the car taken away if he doesn't perform according to expectations. Though, for the sake of the Wrangler, he tries to conform, he has no illusions about his father's values: "he knew that his father's famous rectitude served no greater purpose than making obscene amounts of money for people who already had more than enough."

The prizes handed out at school are more about lording it over the losers than about rewarding merit. "The parents," Carrie reflects, "forced their kids to be perfect students and then told them that the lesson on offer was that you'd better win. If you had to lie and cheat, then you lied and you cheated."

The children, though, soon learn the rules of the game, and turn them to their advantage against the parents. "[I]t was all a big con, this teen crisis thing," Shannon reflects. "[She] saw it every day, the way her classmates manipulated adults with syndromes and conditions that were nothing more than camouflage for laziness and selfishness."

Amidon clearly has a somewhat jaundiced view of his society. This does not, however, make for the dreary read one might expect: Amidon's observations are too sharp for that, too much spiked with dark humour, and his characters, fallible as they are, too human to be written off as a collection of Stepford Wives and Husbands.

If Totten Crossing comes to seem like yet another air-conditioned nightmare, it is one inhabited by human beings. That is what redeems it, but also what makes it so scary.