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Books of The Times; Lives Made No Better by Counterfeit Cash

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LEAD:

Ordinary Money

By Louis B. Jones

345 pages. Viking. \$18.95.

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At the beginning of Louis B. Jones's "Ordinary Money" - a wonderful first novel that might be described as a funny, intelligent version of the film "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World" - Wayne Paschke receives in the mail from Randy Potts a \$20 bill that Randy wants Wayne to send to the Secret Service for a test of the bill's authenticity.

Randy and Wayne are two lower-middle-class California guys who, "in a single summer, dropped out of high school together and served as best man at each other's weddings in the Silverado Room at the Holiday Inn, their smirks keeping the marriages safely facetious." That happened back during the Nixon Administration, when, "amidst assassinations and undeclared wars, things stopped meaning anything, or when things first started to mean their opposite."

The intervening years have been no better than you would expect. Randy and Wayne still live in a scruffy section of Marin Country surrounded by highways and fast-food joints. Both have unhappy teen-age daughters. Randy is now divorced. Neither makes a decent income. Randy is an unsuccessful carpenter and

Wayne is a rarely employed house painter.

As it turns out, the \$20 is one of a million similar bills that a mysterious character named Bim Aucter has hired Randy to do whatever he wants with. Since Bim Aucter has been good enough to keep the source of the money secret from Randy to protect him, Randy decides to do the same thing for Wayne. While the single bill is being tested by the Secret Service, he asks Wayne to store in his garage a wooden crate stuffed with 100,000 more of the bills (or \$2 million). He tells Wayne it's just "a bunch of stuff left over from the divorce, like probably pots and pans."

But when the single bill comes back pronounced absolutely genuine, Randy tells Wayne what's really in the crate, and the fun and agony commence. Randy starts spending the money, and he not only begins to find his life turning false, but also discovers that the authorities are closing in. Meanwhile, Wayne refuses to touch the crate in his garage, though he's repeatedly tempted to do so because of his dwindling income and mounting debt. As a reward for his abstinence, he finds his life moving in the opposite direction of Randy's.

Now the moral that this summary suggests would seem to be straightforward enough: that money can't buy happiness or even make you very comfortable in your misery. But things are never so simple in the world of "Ordinary Money." First, they are complicated by Mr. Jones's prose, which has a comically offbeat way of poking fun at reality. "Promise me you won't take yourself too seriously today," Wayne's wife, Laura, says to him on the morning he receives the \$20 bill, and though Wayne doesn't take such advice to heart, the novel's omniscient narrator certainly seems to.

Then there is the plot of "Ordinary Money," which further complicates matters amusingly. As the Secret Service keeps insisting, Randy's money appears to be genuine. This means that Bim Aucter, who disappears early in the story, has somehow achieved what every government must dread: the creation of a perfect counterfeit currency. And because Randy genuinely doesn't know the money's source, he can't be convicted of trafficking in the "false" currency.

Meanwhile, though Wayne refuses to spend what could be passed off as real money, he allows himself to be roped into a scheme of selling coins for investment over the telephone. In the novel's cleverly satirical treatment, this has all the appearance of a pyramid scam. But if you stop to reflect, it is actually an attempt to

traffic in real currency that fails because no one believes in the value of the coins.

And while Wayne's wife is happily content to be a waitress in a Denny's restaurant, serving meals like "Tater Tots and Salisbury steak," Randy's ex-wife, Mary, is so busy pursuing the self-realization that broke up their marriage that she is now driving her unhappy daughter, Cindy, further into misery.

In short, the counterfeit is real and the real is counterfeit in "Ordinary Money," and every sad or funny detail reflects this ambiguity. When Randy buys a mansion in a rich neighborhood, his next-door neighbor turns out to be an artist who got his start as a Velvet Underground groupie buying cans of Campbell's tomato soup so Andy Warhol could sign the labels and sell them as art.

The more Randy tries to buy the love of his daughter with his new-found wealth, the more bereft Cindy becomes. She is even deserted by her best friend and high-school classmate, Kim Paschke, who is of course Wayne and Laura Paschke's daughter. Kim was born without an ear, a nipple, and part of her lip, which have had to be counterfeited by plastic surgery at a cost that has placed Wayne and Laura under a mountain of debt. The doctor who rebuilt Kim may possibly have been Bim Aucter, the creator of the perfect \$20 bills.

Out of misguided pity for Kim, Cindy has tried to trick her into a physical liaison by writing phony letters to the class nerd, Eric DeBono. But confronted by counterfeit sex, Kim and Eric resort to friendship. And with companionship, the counterfeit melts away - changed "by the many late hours they'd spent in his family's rec room, slipping through each other's shifting embraces, sliding toward that precipice of pleasure where her self-consciousness of her body fell away and a dark muscular angel arose within her, an angel that could carry them both."

So just as Cindy is crushed by the really false, Kim emerges from false reality. Is there any way out of the novel's endlessly spiraling funnel of ambiguity? One is tempted to quote the conclusion of a paper Cindy Potts writes comparing and contrasting Greek and Roman civilization: "Another comparison/contrast of the Greeks and Romans is, the Greeks were very sane. For example, Plato and other world-famous philosophers pondered the greatest questions of all time. Plato believed that everything was ideal. This is still true today."

But those characters in "Ordinary Money" who pursue the ideal can be very crazy as well as "very sane." So the only way out of the novel's moral puzzles is to read it straight through to the end. Happily, that's an

unfailingly entertaining experience. Mr. Jones, who was born in in Illinois and now lives in Mill Valley, Calif., not only writes originally, he thinks originally as well. One can't help looking forward to whatever he does next. Pearson(Viking)