

By Ben Martin

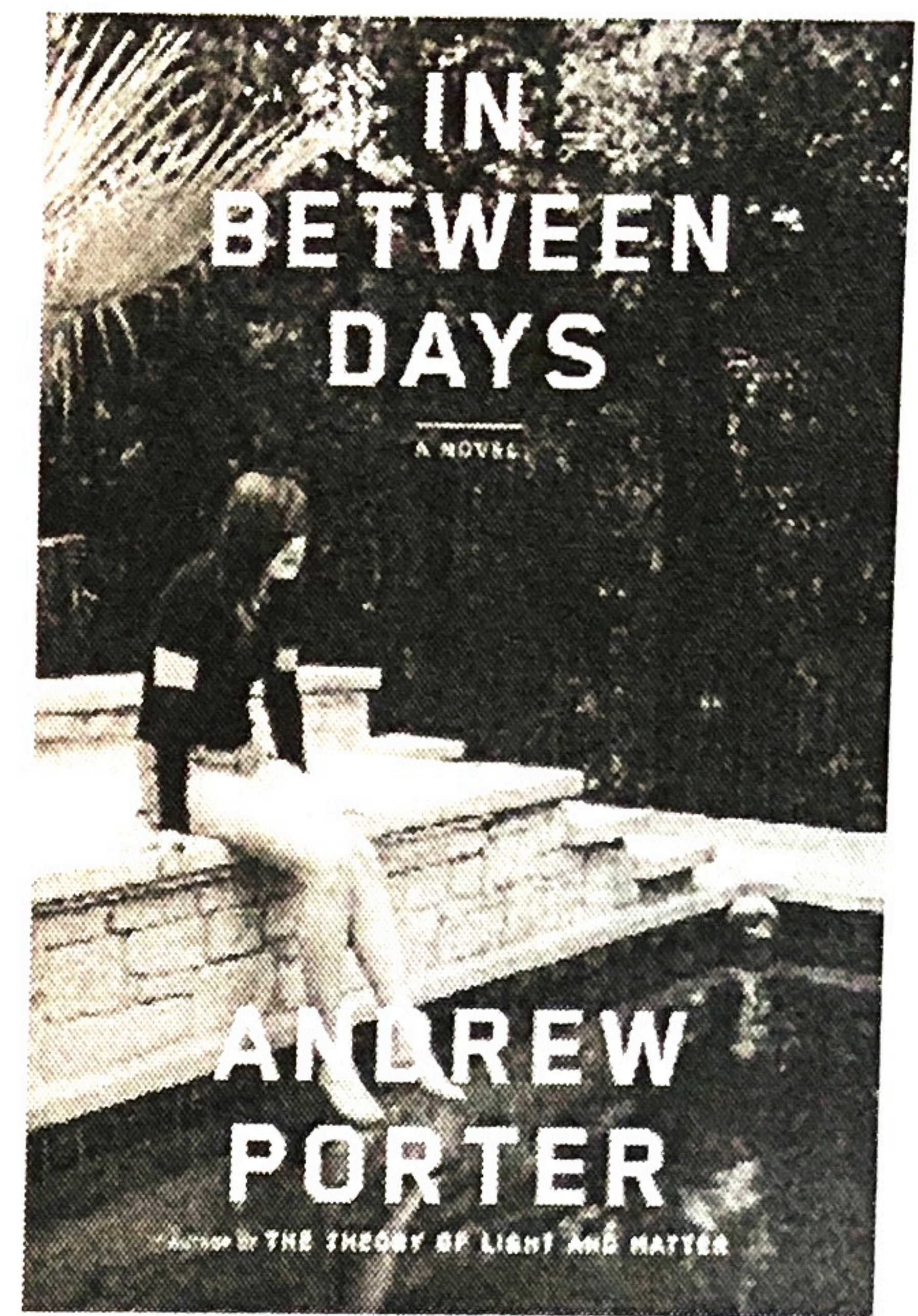
Special to Magazine

IN BETWEEN DAYS

By Andrew Porter

Knopf, \$24.95; 321 pp.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”: so begins Leo Tolstoy’s masterpiece, *Anna Karenina*. The unhappiness of the Harding family in Andrew Porter’s first novel, *In Between Days*, is familiar in modern America: the boredom of the overindulged.



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Elson Harding is the former rising star among Houston’s architects, his aesthetic now “too severe, too cold” for an economy less certain of its way. The hard edge has worn badly as well on his wife, Cadence, and he wonders “what happened to all of that early optimism.” He won her with the promise of security: “It made her feel safe to know that he would always keep their refrigerator stocked with food and their cabinets stocked with booze.” Twenty-five years later, she believes that she gave up her freedom too easily and too soon, “that the strange uncertain terrain of her early twenties was something she had missed ... cheated out of a life she hadn’t thought she’d wanted until she’d realized it was lost.”

Their son, Richard, has majored in English, lives at home, works in a coffee shop, tries to write poetry, and finds consolation among hard-partying young Houston gays. Graduate school tempts him, but he fears being revealed as mediocre. Already, his choices disgust him. “Have you ever felt like you’ve lost a part of yourself because of something you’ve done?” he asks fellow carouser, “how do you get it back, that part of yourself you’ve lost?” The reply hits like a tequila shot: “You don’t. You just have to figure out a way to live with it.”

His younger sister, Chloe, is all too aware “that no matter how far we go, we can never truly escape what’s happened before.” At Stratham College in distant New England, she majors in history, and hangs out at the Open Forum for Political Thought, where the students are “radically bent. ... the campus revolutionaries and nonconformists. ... the environmentalists, the feminists, the Marxists, and pagans.” She takes an Indian student, Raja Kittappa, as her lover, and when his dispute with

an antagonist at the college turns violent, she involves herself by sheltering him.

The divorce Elson and Cadence are trying to finalize, the makeshift relationships they have begun as proof that they are still attractive, the nullity and hedonism Richard is living — all are cast aside when Chloe is suspended by her college and flies home to Houston. But she refuses to provide details even when detectives from Stratham follow. Instead, she plots a future with Raja imaginable only to someone sated in romanticism and accustomed to getting her way. Because she refuses rescue from her family, her parents and brother tear at each other over how to save her.

Porter, whose short-story collection, *The Theory of Light and Matter* (2008), won high praise, quietly — and masterfully — creates the context in which this quartet of characters display not just their vulnerabilities but their desperate comprehension. Richard worries that he has shown Chloe “the path of his own bad behavior.” Elson tells Cadence, “I’ve tried the best I could ... and apparently I’ve failed.” The bonds of the Harding family unravel slowly until crisis requires a denouement. Because *In Between Days* is as complex and sensitive in psychology as it is credible and compelling in narrative, judging the resolution is a test of compassion.

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