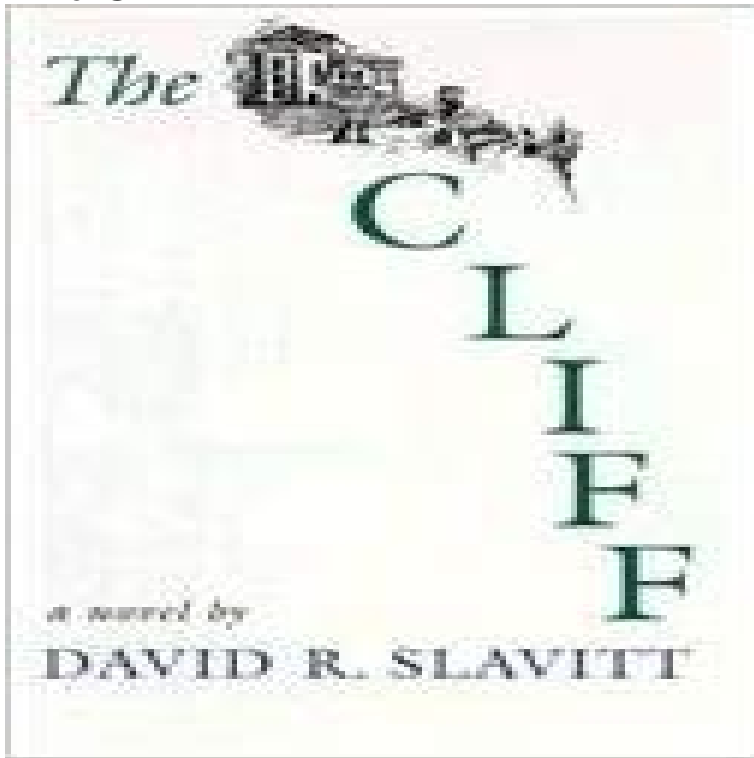


The Cliff



John Smith is an eminent historian, secure in his well-paid position as an endowed professor at a major university. Any day he expects a favorable reply to his application for a residency at the Villa Sfrondata, a foundation-supported colony for artists and intellectuals on the banks of Italys Lake Como, where he hopes to finish work on a study of Mussolini. John Smith - the other John Smith - is a bitter and failed novelist, an adjunct assistant professor of English at the same university. Suffering from writers block, ignored by his daughter, hounded by his former wives attorney for back alimony, and about to lose his job, his prospects could not be dimmer - that is, until the day the Villa Sfrondatas invitation to the eminent historian is delivered to him by mistake. Before you know it, the down-and-out-how-can-things-get-worse-what-have-I-got-to-lose John Smith is in Italy, ensconced, imposter though he is, in a room at the centuries-old villa. But what had promised to be a blissful if ill-gotten idyll quickly sours. The villa is drafty and decaying, the staff are surly and incompetent, and the other residents - among them a Nigerian economist, a Washington lawyer, a book designer, and art historian, and a feminist poet from California - are a motley and eccentric group whom Smith finds all but insufferable. He seizes every opportunity to deflate their overblown pretensions with a razor-sharp wit, which he possesses in astonishing abundance. At the same time, he must take care that some misstep does not reveal him as a fraud. His life is further complicated when one of the guests - the despised feminist poet - mysteriously disappears. After passing through what he calls a cloudy afternoon of the soul, including the very real fear that he will be implicated in the disappearance of the poet, Smith contrives in the end to amend his life and even to revive his all but abandoned literary career. This devastatingly satiric

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