



Viking, \$24.95, out now  
Is there life after prison?

## 3/21/04 **Out of prison,** An ex-con tries to get a life

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**G**ordon Loomis, a big, lumbering fellow, entered prison at age 18 and has just been released, 25 years later.

The sad irony at the heart of Mary McGarry Morris' fifth novel, "A Hole in the Universe" (Viking, \$24.95) is that the man known to everyone in town as the murderer of a pregnant

woman is perhaps the most honorable person around.

But this doesn't matter to Loomis. He seems determined to make himself as small as possible, hide away in the home of his late parents and get through the rest of his miserable, ruined life without ever causing anyone else any pain ever again.

Loomis' life is just as crum-

# but not out of harm's way

bling as the once-vibrant neighborhood he's trapped in.

Across the street is a crack addict who can't be bothered to pay attention to her little daughter, Jada.

Jada tries to latch onto Loomis, but he does everything he can to dissuade this desperate little girl from worming her way into his life.

Just as persistent is the needy, talkative Delores, a friend of Loomis who visited him regu-

larly in prison — more than his own family — and who holds out hope of becoming more than friends.

Morris has been nominated for a National Book Award for one novel, had another singled out by Time as one of the best of the year and even won the literary equivalent of the lottery when Oprah chose "Songs in Ordinary Time" for her book club.

But it all seems a little too familiar. The characters are losers

to a fault, with blunt details about their inner lives spelled out for anyone who can't figure out that little Jada is hungry for attention (and just plain hungry), that Delores has a poor self-image and that Loomis isn't really cold or distant, just afraid of causing any more damage than he already has to the people he cares for.

The drug dealers, the crack addict, the cranky neighbor who doesn't trust him — it all feels rather obvious.

One emotional breakthrough for Loomis feels earned; when he finally says something sincere and simple in its honesty to Delores, you're relieved.

Then Morris has to spoil it by letting him have a second emotional breakthrough when speaking to his brother Dennis.

She should have learned the lessons Loomis did in prison: Take it slow, take it easy or you're liable to ruin whatever progress you've achieved.