



A Decade in Review: The Best Spy Literature, 2001-2009

Contributors:

Craig Arthur, Wesley Britton, Mark T. Hooker, Amanda Ohlke, and Bill Raetz

Introduction

by Wesley Britton

In the summer of 2009, I began musing about what changes in spy literature had occurred during the first decade of the 21st Century. After all, clear trends and shifts in tone and content are easy to trace in spy novels written before, during, and after two World Wars and the Cold War that followed. That's what my second book—*Beyond Bond: Spies in Fiction and Film* (Praeger, 2005) -- was all about. In *Beyond Bond*, generation after generation of authors were measured against the giants of their eras—the “Clubland” writers, then the more realistic Graham Green and Eric Ambler, and then those who shaped the '60s, Ian Fleming, Len Deighton, John Le Carre. Finally, it seemed Tom Clancy was the last of a breed, a novelist that influenced not only the reading public and his fellow writers but film and television projects as well.

That's the short version, of course. The new question is: after 100 years of spy fiction, can we also trace significant changes in the New Millennium?

Over the past few years, one reviewer by name of Mark T. Hooker has convincingly built a case that one important new trend is the expansion of novels written by former intelligence

officers which Mark calls “Insider’s Fiction.” (You can read Hooker’s impressive series of reviews in the “Spies in History and Literature” files here at Spywise.net.) There’s nothing new, of course, in old spies drawing from their experiences to create foundations for both fanciful (John Buchan) and realistic fiction (W. Somerset Maugham). Still, the well of intelligence officers wishing to explore their personal and professional pasts has led to a growing library of memoirs, quasi-memoirs, and fiction crafted by writers given a measure of credibility because of what they once were. Furthermore, Mark claims:

“Big-splash nonfiction memoirs are finding a ready reception in publishing houses and movie studios with deep pockets for publicity. Insiders’ spy fiction, however, is often hard to locate, as if these kinds of novels—just as their authors once were—are under cover, reflecting the reluctance of traditional publishers to take on these projects. This new spy fiction trend is, therefore, perhaps best visible on the book review webpage of the AFIO (Association For Intelligence Officers). There one can find novels from publishing houses whose names do not have the recognition factor of conventional publishing power houses such as Brassey’s Books, Forge Books, William Morrow, and Random House. This new class of books is from publishers with names like Xlibris, Infinity Publishing, First Books Library, and iUniverse.”

What distinguishes this breed of novels, Mark says, includes the fact “Twenty-first-century insider spy fiction has taken a turn away from James Bond and toward a higher proportion of realism added to the fiction mix . . . American novels of this type are represented by works like *The Dream Merchant of Lisbon* by Gene Coyle (2004), *Edge of Allegiance* by Thomas F. Murphy (2005), *A Train to Potevka* by Mike Ramsdell (2005), and *Voices Under Berlin* by T.H.E. Hill (2008).”

So the fiction is out there—but not always easy to find. Expanding on Mark’s observations, it seems to me looking back to the past is an even more pervasive shift above and beyond the authorship of former intelligence professionals. During the ‘80s and ‘90s, Tom Clancy led the wave of “speculative fiction,” the imaginative cautionary fables of “what ifs” that might occur in a dangerous world. Then came 9/11, and prophecy was fulfilled. But the lion’s share of new books that followed didn’t suddenly focus on a Middle-Eastern geo-political center. Instead,

novels tended to offer unflattering misuse of tradecraft by intelligence agencies. Returning evergreen themes include the human cost of espionage, whether these be fatalities of innocents or corruption of agents; operatives discovering their missions were red herrings while the chess masters above manipulated their pawns and knights; and newer stories tended to have more epic sweeps having characters evolve or disintegrate over decades, usually microcosms of old Cold War duels. At least, that's what I observed.

To find out what other critics think, I asked some knowledgeable readers what the best spy reading has been for them since 2000, and the results surprised me. Not the choices themselves, but rather the reasoning as to why. Well, the 007 continuation novels of Raymond Benson and Charlie Hixon likely appeal to a very specific audience, but beyond the world of Commander Bond? In two companion pieces to this article, "A Decade in Review: The Best Spy Films, Part I (2000-2004)" and "Part II, Best Spy Films (2004-2009)," most of the reviews were on the lengthy side. One reason for this was many critics could see clear trends, pointing to influential movies like *Enemy of the State* and the Bourne Trilogy as obvious influences on the productions that followed them. The contributors to that overview saw relationships and comparisons and a progression of change. Not so the experts who sent reviews for this article.

The reading list below, in fact, suggests few trends beyond the sub-genre that Mark T. Hooker described and, as I noted, a prevalent interest in espionage history. For the most part, virtually every choice showed individual tastes and very personal preferences. In terms of fiction, only two novelists earned multiple praise from the contributors, Charles Cumming and Jeremy Duns. Most surprising to me was the majority of the choices were non-fiction histories or biographies of spies from the past. Fact, in this list, trumps fiction. And most of the fiction has a healthy dose of drawing from apparent fact.

What does this say about espionage literature as a genre in the 21st Century? Well, the pot-boiling franchises built on characters created by Robert Ludlum, Tom Clancy, and Jack Higgins still prevail in book sales, but such titles aren't exactly critical darlings. Second, I get the sense readers who love this genre still prefer the Cold War or WW II as settings for both

entertainment and information. Again, the emphasis remains on the past. In the end, I suspect what you'll find below will essentially serve as a good reading list to point you to titles you might have missed the past 10 years. But, unlike spy films, writers seem far more individual, not looking to each other for direction. So here's a look back at looking back—

Oh, while I'm here, let me call your attention to one issue of *Studies in Intelligence* (Vol. 53, No. 2 [Summer Supplement 2009]) which includes a very dynamic collection of reviews written by professional officers in "Intelligence in Fictional Literature" as well as film and television. You can download the PDF version at:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/special-review-supplement/U-%20Special%20Reviews%20Supplement%20-July%202009.pdf>

For the overviews offered here, all reviews are presented in chronological order based on American publishing dates. The name of each reviewer is provided after each of their discussions—short bios of all the contributors are at the end of this article. If you have other nominations, feel free to send them along for a possible supplement later this year.

A Spy By Nature (2001)

Charles Cumming

Without question the most important literary debut in the spy genre since Deighton and le Carre. Perhaps the best spy novel of not only this decade but the 1990s as well – the decade in which the novel began its composition and in which it is set. Its anti-hero Alec Milius bears more similarity to Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley than to James Bond. This novel, like many by John le Carre, focuses on the human cost of espionage. In doing so, it explores a hitherto uncharted aspect of British and American foreign policy – the two allies spying on one another. Cumming writes with similar stylistic ability to Eric Ambler and

Graham Greene. *A Spy By Nature* is worthy of being classed with Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden*. The sequel, *The Spanish Game* is damn good as well. (Craig Arthur)

The Code Snatch (2001)

Alan Stripp

Alan Stripp's non-fiction has been well-received, and is highly recommended, but his novel, *The Code Snatch* (2001), is under-appreciated. It is the fictionalized tale of Operation Paperchase, the daring mission to steal a new Japanese codebook before it replaced the one that the British were already reading. In an "Author's Note," Stripp says that even though he has taken liberties with some of the technical details of this "unusual, colorful and successful operation," he hopes that the novel "will fill a gap in the history of secret intelligence" in World War II.

As an author Stripp has an easy-to-read, relaxed style that carries the sequence of events inexorably through to the mission's conclusion. It reads more like a participant's memoir told with the cold precision of history than the text of an Ian Fleming James Bond novel. Stripp's narrative is full of local color, and technical details, but lacks the drama of Fleming's tales, even though the participants' lives are very much on the line. This does not, however, make it an any less-absorbing tale to read. (Mark T. Hooker)

Never Dream of Dying (2001)

Raymond Benson

The culmination of Benson's superb James Bond "Union Trilogy". Each of the novels in this trilogy stands out as memorable in different ways. There is no confusing one of these Bond novels with the others. Each is distinctive. In *Never Dream of Dying* we have superb Bondian locations – the South of France and Corsica with the Cannes film festival providing the backdrop for the climax. The blind villain Le Gerant is the most vivid and omnipotent since Fleming's monsters. As in all Benson Bond novels, the female characters have life and

warmth about them. Telyn, based on French actress Irene Jacob (who owns a copy of the novel), is no exception and her romance with Bond is reminiscent of the courtship of Tracy in the film version of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. Draco from *OHMSS* makes a reappearance and provides the culmination of the novel with much conflict and tension. The only thing lacking in Raymond's Bond novels is prose style. Gone is the splendid, colourful descriptive language of Ian Fleming and the almost stream of consciousness explorations of Bond's thoughts via free indirect discourse. Benson's language is very spare, his explorations of Bond's inner life minimal. But then Benson is from a different generation to Fleming. Raymond is a 'baby boomer', a child of rock and roll and suburbia, whereas the First World War (in which his father was killed) defined Fleming's childhood and he made his mark in the Second. Fleming's writing is equivalent to complex, swinging big band arrangements. Raymond, on the other hand, sticks to guitar, bass and drums in strict 4/4 time. (Craig Arthur)

Absolute Friends (2003)

John le Carre

Le Carre's previous novel, *The Constant Gardener*, attracted more hype and this novel retreads old ground. But, stylistically, this is a superior work. A very traditional le Carre novel, showing us what he is best at. The bleak world of Cold War betrayal accompanied the story this time around with the betrayals of the Bush/Blair era. (Craig Arthur)

Stasiland: True Stories From Behind The Berlin Wall (2003)

Anna Funder (*non-fiction*)

Anna Funder brings us the tales of those who resisted the Stasi, painting a vivid picture of Cold War Berlin. An amazing read from a superbly talented new author, *Stasiland* is probably the best history lesson to come along in quite some time. (Bill Raetz)

Edge of Allegiance: A Cold War Spy Novel (2005)

Thomas Murphy

Edge of Allegiance is the fictional postmortem of a failed Cold-War HUMINT operation that the author calls the Bagatelle case. It takes the reader from Rio de Janeiro, to Washington and Moscow, from Budapest to Vienna, Prague, and Paris, following the source (Bagatelle) and his case officer (Frank Manion), while the narrator explains where and why things went wrong.

The process of discovering the truth from Murphy is well worth the effort. The narration of the novel deceptively speeds up the glacial movement of a HUMINT operation the same way that a naturalist filmmaker compresses the blooming of a flower into a one-minute segment of action. The nine months of a Hungarian language course is bridged with a single Christmas party episode. The week-long tedium of waiting for an asset to show up is skillfully covered in a single paragraph. The result is as readable as the filmmaker's stop-action movie of a blooming flower is viewable.

While Murphy quite correctly says that *Edge of Allegiance* "is not a boom and bang thriller," it is a page-turner. More than half of those who posted reviews of *Edge of Allegiance* on Amazon.com said that they were looking forward to reading another novel by Murphy with the same characters. The language is lively, and the jargon authentic; the Russian cursing especially so. For those who have been there and done that, the dialogue and the action immediately feel as comfortable as a pair of well broken-in shoes. For those who have never been there or done that, this is what it is really like. (Mark T. Hooker)

Silverfin (2005), Blood Fever (2006), Double or Die (2007), Hurricane Gold (2007) and By Royal Command (2008)

Charlie Higson

Although written for children and obviously inspired by the publishing success of Harry Potter, these stories about a teenage James Bond are too fantastical to connect with the adult Bond of Ian Fleming, but are nonetheless very well written and entertaining. My only regret is that they did not exist when I was a child. (Craig Arthur)

Capturing Jonathan Pollard: How One of the Most Notorious Spies in American History was Brought to Justice (2006)

Ron J. Olive (non-fiction)

As the assistant special agent in charge of counterintelligence in the Washington office of the Naval Investigative Service when Jonathan Pollard was arrested, Ron J. Olive shares never-before revealed details from this shocking case and how he elicited the spy's confession. (Amanda Ohlke)

The Berlin Assignment (2006), Borderless Deceit (2007)

Adrian De Hoog

Adrian de Hoog, an author from the wide-open prairies and icy-cold of Canada, delivers a fresh, new perspective on the game of espionage in his two novels: *The Berlin Assignment* (2006) and *Borderless Deceit* (2007). These are not bang and boom spy thrillers, but are rather novels with spies in them. *The Berlin Assignment* plays out against the backdrop of post-wall Berlin and the problems of German reunification. *Borderless Deceit* is the tale of the Canadian role in the intelligence war against illicit weapons trafficking and money laundering that begins with the same kind of cyber attack that was launched on Georgia before the Russians invaded in August 2008. The world of fiction, however, was ahead of the real world on this one. *Borderless Deceit* came out before the attack became a fact.

The main attraction of De Hoog's novels are the people who inhabit them. His visual portraits are economic, but his psychological profiles are detailed and filled with subtle brush strokes. In both the novels, the main show is a search to understand the relationships between the characters. The central characters of the story line are an introverted male lead and an extroverted female lead. The key issue in their relationship is best reflected in one of the questions that the female lead in *Borderless Deceit* asks herself: "where lies the line between being alone and being lonely?" (BD p. 179) De Hoog's novels explore the consequences of crossing this line. Recommended for those looking for something more than boom and bang

in their spy fiction. These are 'literary' spy novels that make you think. *The Berlin Assignment* is especially interesting for its illumination of the social dynamics of post-wall Berlin. *Borderless Deceit* will appeal to those with an appetite for stories of the intricacies of technical intelligence collection and analysis. (Mark T. Hooker)

True Believer: Inside the Investigation and Capture of Ana Montes, Cuba's Master Spy (2007)

Scott W. Carmichael (non-fiction)

Scott Carmichael, the DIA's senior counterintelligence investigator, explores how Ana Montes, the intelligence community's top Cuban analyst, spied for Cuba throughout her 16-year career and influenced opinion about the island nation. This comprehensive book reveals how Carmichael became suspicious of her and details of the spy hunt which ended her espionage career less than twenty-four hours before she would have learned details of the U.S. plan to invade Afghanistan post-September 11. (Amanda Ohlke)

Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double-Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Reporter and Vietnamese Communist Agent (2007)

Larry Berman (non-fiction)

During the Vietnam War, An, Time's first Vietnamese full-time staff correspondent befriended everyone in Saigon from American journalists to generals, yet no one knew he was a Communist agent. Larry Berman's fascinating account of An's twenty years of spying reflects months of personal interviews conducted with this "Hero of the People's Army." (Amanda Ohlke)

Femme Fatale: Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari (2007)

Pat Shipman (non-fiction)

Pat Shipmans' biography of the most famous female spy of all time lifts the veil on her none-too-successful exploits and her difficult personal life. Although a poor spy, Mata Hari remains a great character. (Amanda Ohlke)

The Accident Man (2007)

Tom Cain

Although this novel is based on the conspiracy theories that surrounded the death of Princess Diana in 1997, do not expect an ugly fictional 'what-if' expose. Cain delivers a page-turning entertainment in the tradition of Sapper, John Buchan and Ian Fleming with clear-cut heroes and villains. Cain understands what made Ian Fleming successful in a way that Sebastian Faulks does not, from the use of technical detail to the flawed beauty of Fleming's heroines. The action is breathless as the movie adaptations of Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne series and the hero on the run, Samuel Carver, bears more than a passing resemblance to Daniel Craig's portrayal of James Bond. But, in fact, Cain 'cast' Daniel Craig as Carver in his imagination years before Craig took over from Pierce Brosnan as Bond. Sam Carver was originally Daniel Carver as a sly reference to the actor. However, when Craig was cast as Bond, Cain changed the character's name to Samuel. Cain delivered the manuscript to his publisher a day before going to see *Casino Royale* in the cinema. He was surprised and horrified by the similarities between the reinvented Bond and Carver. (Craig Arthur)

Voices Under Berlin: The Tale of a Monterey Mary (2008)

T.H.E. Hill

If one were to follow the formulas of most spy fiction, the Berlin Tunnel might not have all the drama of a best-selling Ludlum pot-boiler. However, if a writer was to take his attention off spy vs. spy molds and focus instead on the cryptographers, linguists, and analysts sifting through intercepted intelligence, then a long neglected cadre of Cold War warriors could be something fresh to explore.

Does the image of code-breakers sitting in dusty rooms wearing headphones while scribbling on notepads sound a bit on the dry side? Not in the hands of T.H.E. Hill. His 2008 *Voices under Berlin: the Tale of a Monterey Mary* is, in fact, perhaps the funniest spy book ever written. It's not a parody or satire of the 007 mythos nor is it a continuation of themes in the novels by the likes of Graham Greene or Eric Ambler poking fun at the ineptitude of clandestine services. Still, in the tradition of Greene and Ambler, *Voices Under Berlin* contains many literate qualities that make it a work of special consideration, worthy of an audience much broader than that of espionage enthusiasts or those interested in Cold War history.

Hill's humor, justly, has been compared with that of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Richard Hooker's *M*A*S*H*. Like Heller and Hooker, Hill's characters and comic situations draw from military life, in this case playing with the foibles and pitfalls inside military intelligence—a term many have long considered an oxymoron. But the book is deepened with Hill's research into the actual circumstances surrounding the tunnel spiced with stories from his own time in Berlin as a linguist. (Wesley Britton)

Typhoon (2008)

Charles Cumming

Another stunner from Charlie. Spanning a decade from Hong Kong on the eve of the 1997 handover to the present, *Typhoon* is more ambitious in its scope than his two Alec Milius novels, yet without losing the subtle and emotionally engaging character depictions in *A Spy By Nature* and *The Spanish Game*. Joe Lennox and the narrator, William Lasker, resemble a Graham Greene character in the manner in which we see Lennox through Lasker's eyes (much like we see Pyle in *The Quiet American*), while the poetic prose style evokes Len Deighton at his best: "his smile of gratitude was a broken piano of blackened teeth." And once again, Charlie proves he is the equal of John le Carre in his prime, creating a Far East thriller as good as *The Honourable Schoolboy* while breaking fresh ground, exploring the uncharted territory of China's other Tibet, Xinjiang. (Craig Arthur)

The Envoy (2008)

Edward Wilson

Many novelists enjoy playing with the days when the CIA was new and the West and East were beginning to form the rules of the Cold War game. Few have painted the 1950s so vividly as Edward Wilson who draws in historical personages like the Dulles brothers and the goals of warring intelligence agencies as the backdrop for the disintegration of a very promising agent named Kit Fournier.

Fournier, the CIA's Chief of Staff in London, is given the task of undermining England's quest to have a nuclear bomb to ensure the Brits will become beholden to the U.S. The first half of the novel is Kit's mission unfolding while a range of fictional supporting characters and layers of clues are introduced that are developed in the very fast-paced second half. What Wilson succeeds at most brilliantly is giving depth, quirks, and even kinks to all the players while providing twist after twist—and the mysteries are not resolved until the epilogue. Perhaps a few scenes are a bit melodramatic, but in the main Kit's story is believable, occasionally poignant, but always engaging. It seems Brit readers love this book—the Americans are still catching on. (Wes Britton)

Spies of Warsaw: A Novel (2008)

Alan Furst

The depiction of pre-World War II Warsaw is worth reading even without the engaging story of spies at work. The interwoven characters make for interesting changes of scenery and Mercier is rendered as a truly realized character and not just a cut-out. The intertwined story enables the author to pull back the curtain to show how different operations were run in a time and place both familiar and unfamiliar. (Amanda Ohlke)

A Most Wanted Man (2008)

John le Carre

After a very disappointing effort in *The Mission Song*, le Carre returns to fine form in a novel that explores the subject of 'extraordinary rendition' with as much passion and depth as any of his Cold War novels. A gripping read. (Craig Arthur)

Free Agent (2009)

Jeremy Duns

Like Charles Cumming, Jeremy Duns manages to present an aspect of espionage overlooked in espionage fiction. In Duns' case, the Nigerian Civil War. But where Cumming breaks new ground in the genre, Jeremy celebrates the tradition of Cold War spy novels. With its 1960s Cold War setting in Lagos, Nigeria and its focus on treachery, reading *Free Agent* is like watching a black and white episode of Patrick McGoohan's *Danger Man*. But with a twist. The protagonist, Paul Dark, unlike John Drake, is a double agent and we experience the slow-burning suspense, wondering how long he can protect his secret. (Craig Arthur)

Contributors

Craig Arthur lives in Dunedin, New Zealand where he is currently writing a spy novel. He studied English Literature at the University of Otago. His articles on James Bond are frequently published on the main page at commanderbond.net.

Dr. Wesley Britton is the author of four books on espionage in the media and literature. Many of his book reviews can be found in the "Spies in History and Literature" files here at www.spywise.net.

Mark T. Hooker is a specialist in Comparative Translation at Indiana University's Russian and East-European Institute. Retired, he conducts research for publication. He is the author of "The Military Uses of Literature: Fiction and the Armed Forces in the Soviet Union," an analysis of works of literary fiction written by serving and retired Russian military officers and "Tolkien Through Russian Eyes," an analysis of the nine Russian translations of "The Lord of the Rings." He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Russian Institute (USARI) at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.

Amanda A. Ohlke is the Adult Education Director at the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC. Where she has developed such innovative programming as "Spy in the City™", GPS-based interactive missions drawn from real spy cases; "Spy City Tours™," an interactive bus tour of spy-related sites in DC featuring a spy tradecraft-based mission; "Dinner with a Spy," intimate evenings with former intelligence operatives; "Excellent, Ultimate, and Super Scavenger Hunts" for public and corporate audiences; and "Surveillance Workshops" taught in the streets and historic buildings of DC.

Bill Raetz is the creator of the long-running World Espionage Bureau novels. Drawing from his background in law enforcement and information technology, as well as his interest in

foreign languages and cultures, in 2005 Raetz introduced his WEB agents in his first novel, *Berlin Files*. His savvy with self-publishing and online marketing then led to a series of highly successful WEB novels including *Romanian Skylark* (2006) and *Surveillance* (2007). For more on this series, Bill's very creative website is:

www.worldespionagebureau.com

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