intelligence officer's bookshelf

Compiled and reviewed by Hayden Peake, Anthony Sutton, John Ehrman, and Resolute Lee.

Contemporary Issues

Authoritarianism: A Very Short Introduction
By James Loxton
(Oxford University Press, 2024), 89 pages, index.
Reviewed by Anthony Sutton, an analyst in the Strategic Futures Group of the National Intelligence Council

Intelligence officers are often proud experts in a field, yet new problems and new assignments ask officers to build competence without time for a full course of study. James Loxton, a senior lecturer in comparative politics at the University of Sydney, offers a boon to officers newly encountering autocratic regimes. He delivers on the subtitle's promise, providing "a very short introduction" that makes the reader conversant in authoritarianism after an evening's effort.

Following modern convention, Loxton defines authoritarianism as everything other than democracy in the form of competitive elections decided by inclusive voter rolls. He subdivides autocracies into military, party, and personalist systems, modifying the most-popular typology by folding monarchs into the personalist set.

Readers glimpse how autocracies come about, especially through democratic breakdowns enabled by polarized citizenries or semi-loyal opposition parties that tolerate antidemocratic wings. Authoritarian regimes typically struggle to maintain popular legitimacy, collect accurate information, prevent elite defections, and manage leadership successions. Nonetheless, autocracies can endure, especially those with centrally controlled resources such as oil or revolutionary heritages that destroy rivals and bind elites.

Autocracies become more likely to evolve into democracies amid certain structural changes, like socioeconomic modernization, as well as more specific events, such as crises, mass mobilizations, and pacts with opposition leaders. Dying autocracies commonly bequeath constitutional carve-outs and successor parties that protect the interests and individuals that made up the predecessor regimes.

Loxton encapsulates his topic with breezy prose that invites straight-ahead reading. Yet the book earns shelf space as a reference, given its descriptive subheadings, tidy index, and generous guide to further reading. Loxton name-checks the giants of the field and conveys a sense of historical trends, preparing the reader to engage with specialists. He hints at the statistics underlying his summations but rarely slows to present numbers and never offers a chart. Instead, he relies on pithy lines like, "People loyal to democracy do not make deals with Nazis."

Loxton's work competes well with earlier introductions to authoritarianism. Erica Frantz's slightly more academic overview features more data, more depth on subcategories of autocracy, and more details about the fates of autocratic leaders.[a] Milan Svolik's opus provides a stronger organizing principle, inviting readers to derive authoritarian tendencies from the fact that leaders cannot credibly commit to share spoils with supporters, leaving potential or actual violence as the only arbiter of power struggles.[b] Ultimately, all three books are compatible. Loxton's introduction has the advantage of being newer, and —considering the relatively little time needed to take in 89 pocket-sized pages— he offers a great return on investment. ■

a. Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
b. Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The Academic-Practitioner Divide in Intelligence Studies
Edited by Rubén Arcos, Nicole K. Drumhiller, and Mark Phythian
(Rowman & Littlefield, 2022) 318 pages, index

Will students taking intelligence courses benefit more from a teacher who has learned the subject in academia or from one who has experience working in the intelligence profession? This formulation of the academic-practitioner divide in intelligence studies has no simple answer. In the early 1980s the question wouldn't have received much attention, at a time when there were few intelligence courses being offered at the college level. The circumstances are much different now, as the 31 contributors—four with prior service in intelligence organizations—from institutions teaching intelligence in Europe, North and South America and Australia make clear in 14 chapters.

Contributors David Omand (former director of GCHQ, now Teaching at Kings College) and Nicholas Dujmovic (former CIA analyst and historian and professor at Catholic University) discuss their experiences as practioners-turned adademics. Omand's purpose is "to describe the nature of the inevitable and necessary divide there has to be between the worlds of the practitioner and of the academic studying the specialized subject of secret intelligence, and to add my own testimony on how I made that transition myself and how best to construct secure connecting bridges across that divide." (4) Dujmovic views "the question of the academic-practitioner divide in the study of intelligence at colleges and universities is really the question of "who is teaching this subject?" and explains why. (59)

One view from an academic-only is given by Damien Van Puyvelde, a lecturer in intelligence and international security at the University of Glasgow and a research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM, French Ministry for Armed Forces). He discusses the divide between academics and intelligence practitioners in France from the establishment of the "French school" of intelligence studies in the 1990s to today. (179)

The other contributors argue issues like who can best teach intelligence-related subjects and what should be the purpose of teaching or studying intelligence? Some insist that little can be learned "from intelligence studies faculty who lack a prior employment history with a three-letter agency or other organization that conducts intelligence." Others take the position "that faculty members without direct intelligence work experience can add value to the field, develop its conceptual underpinnings, research and explain aspects of its history, address problems of practice, and effectively teach intelligence-related topics." (1) The Army War College contribution (Genevieve Lester, James Breckenridge, Thomas Spahr) discusses these and related issues from the positions of a former intelligence officer and those from academia only.

The sourcing is excellent and includes mention of publicly available journals (e.g., *Studies in Intelligence*, and the *Romanian Intelligence Studies Review*). (254)

The Academic-Practitioner Divide in Intelligence Studies doesn't provide single best answers to the questions raised. But it does offer "a menu of ways in which the academic-practitioner divide can be mitigated … in pursuit of shared goals based around increasing knowledge and improving understanding of intelligence." (253).A valuable contribution. ■

History

Anti-American Terrorism: From Eisenhower to Trump—A Chronicle of the Threat and Response, Volume III The Clinton Administration
By Dennis A. Pluchinsky
(World Scientific, 2025) 984 pages, index.

After graduating from Madison College (now James Madison University) with a BA in Sino-Soviet Relations, Dennis Pluchinsky studied Russian at the Defense Language Institute, earned an MA in International Affairs from George Washington University, and in 1976, joined the US Department of State's Threat Analysis Group, one of the first government units to monitor terrorism.

For the next 28 years, he studied the anti-American terrorist threat and how the US government responded to it. From 1990 to 2015, he also taught counterterrorism-related courses at universities in the Washington area, at CIA's Kent School for Intelligence Analysis, and DIA's Joint Military Intelligence Training Center. In 2004, he was selected for the Director of Central Intelligence's Exceptional Intelligence Officer program, during which he conducted research on terrorist surveillance

methods, ruses, and disguises. He retired from the State Department in 2005.

Pluchinsky then became an adjunct professor, teaching terrorism courses at several private institutions, including George Washington, George Mason, and Georgetown Universities. While preparing for these courses, he "discovered that there was no single work that addressed the threat and response in terms of terrorism in the U.S. and overseas in the post-World War II era." He decided to write one that turned into five volumes. Three volumes, including this one have been completed. The first two were: *Volume I: The Eisenhower Through Carter Administrations*, which was published in March 2020, and *Volume II: The Reagan and George H.W. Bush Administrations*, which. appeared in June 2020. (16) Volume IV will examine the George W. Bush administration, and Volume V will cover the Obama and first Trump administrations. His goal is to create a work that will become a standard reference for future scholars, intelligence analysts, policymakers and historians.

As terrorist activity increased in each administration, so did the involvement of intelligence agencies. Volume III discusses the sometimes overlapping roles of the FBI, NSA, and CIA as they responded to three suicide terrorist operations against the United States. It also treats the growing role of CIA in monitoring al-Qa'ida, including the establishment of Alec Station, the unit created to track Usama bin Ladin. (647)

Each volume is thoroughly documented and includes Pluchinsky's assessment of actions discussed and opportunities missed. After noting that the "Clinton administration was the first to confront the global jihadist terrorist threat," Volume III adds it should have realized sooner that the United States needed to get much more aggressive and lethal with al-Qa'ida and the Taliban (933) The solution to that problem is left to Volume IV ■.

Book and Dagger: How Scholars and Librarians Became the Unlikely Spies of World War II

By Elyse Graham
(Ecco, 2024), 376 pages, index.

The first US centralized intelligence orgnization, the Office of the Coordinator of Information, was created on July 11, 1941. It was succeeded by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) on June 13, 1942. OSS has been the subject of many books, but Stony Brook University historian Elyse Graham, who holds degrees from Princeton, Yale, and MIT, takes the position in *Book and Dagger* that OSS "reinvented intelligence" (xiv) But, like a pilot's first solo flight, things can only be invented once, and Graham would have been closer to the truth if she had merely pointed out that the OSS Research and Analysis Branch (R&A) was the first of its kind in an intelligence agency.

Graham makes two other claims about R&A worth noting. First, she writes that R&A would "reshape the global system of espionage," employing "scholars and the wonders they could work in the world of books and paper." (xiv) Second, this "Chairborne Division—depended on and produced hair-raising adventures in the field.... The war may have been fought on battlefields, but it was won in libraries." (xv) *Book and Dagger* does not support these assertions. It focuses instead on how, with the exception of Yale historian Sherman Kent, scholars with expertise were recruited, trained and sent overseas to conduct espionage, not what they did inside R&A or what intelligence they provided.

Book and Dagger, for example, describes the activities of several officers, including Joseph Curtiss—the "mild-mannered English professor from Yale"—and Adele Kibre—"dark-haired, wicked-eyed, a classicist by training" with a PhD in Latin from the University of Chicago. (4) To improve "reader understanding," of the events Graham describes, she admits to adding fictional material to her purported history, justifying the tactic by noting that for "the sake of continuity, I have included occasional imagined scenes in this book." (3, xx)

Graham spends considerable time commenting on OSS and its British and German counterparts. Before discussing any operations, she notes that the British SOE and "the OSS didn't yet know it, but the very weaknesses that made their own governments look down on them—they had to pull recruits out of libraries, for heaven's sake—would force them to introduce methods of information gathering and analysis that were so good they forever transformed the world of spycraft." (45) Neither assertion is accurate. Information gathering, gradually improved by technology, had been around for centuries, and analysis was a matter of adapting scholarly methods by specialists. Graham never realizes that academics and librarians were recruited only because they had needed expertise whether as an analyst or in field work.

The operations mentioned in *Book and Dagger* raise other issues. One example is the comment that "the most

famous deception operation of the war [was] the British-run Operation Mincemeat." (213) Many would argue that the D-Day deception, Operation Fortitude, deserves this honor. Another example is Graham's discussion of the Vermehren defection in Turkey. It was, as she notes, a very public embarrassment for Germany, but it didn't involve OSS.

Graham reaches some other conclusions that are not documented. For example she writes that "In the right hands, paper could be more effective than bombs as a weapon in the war." (85) And later clams that "because they weren't tied down by established ways of doing things, the professors and librarians of the OSS, and the refugees who joined them, were able to create something new." (297) But she doesn't say what was new.

Book and Dagger, in short, tells a little about what a few OSS officers did during WWII but almost nothing about the value of their work. Moreover, while most of the academics and librarians in OSS worked in the R&A Branch, she discusses many who performed clandestine operations overseas. Graham provides a mix of organizational confusion and operational misjudgments. Caveat Lector. ■

The Invisible Spy: Churchill's Rockefeller Center Spy Ring and America's First Secret Agent of World War II
By Thomas Maier
(Hanover Square Press, 2025), 479 pages, index.

The Invisible Spy accurately describes the book's central figure, Ernest Cuneo, as an ex-NFL player, attorney, and "liaison between White House and Churchill's spies." He was all those things and more, but his liaison work with British intelligence in New York did not make him a spy and certainly not "the first American spy of World War II." (13) And his wartime liaison work with OSS and the FBI didn't make him a spy either. But he was an interesting figure, and journalist/TV producer Thomas Maier tells his story well.

Ernest Cuneo was born in New Jersey on May 27, 1905, the son of Italian immigrants. He graduated from Columbia University and earned a law degree at St. Johns University. After a short professional football career with the Brooklyn Dodgers, he went to work for Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia, a job that started his lifelong devotion to politics, though he also retained private clients such as columnists Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson. Both played roles in Cuneo's liaison work.

Cuneo was also friends with several Columbia graduates were members of FDR's so-called "Brain Trust" and by the mid-1930s, he was appointed associate general counsel of the Democratic National Committee. He soon became a political operative for FDR, traveling back and forth between New York City and Washington, DC. (50)

Then, according to Maier, shortly before the United States entered WWII, the British sent William Stephenson to establish an intelligence station in New York. Stephenson's mission was to quietly promote US support for the war against Germany. Cuneo served as "Roosevelt's secret go-between the White House and the British … [and] formalized Cuneo's 'unofficial status as a spy for the president.'" During the war, Cuneo's liaison role was extended to the FBI and OSS. As liaison for Donovan, he dealt with the military, the Justice Department, Congress, and the press. (83)

The Invisible Spy relates anecdotes about the intelligence officers Cuneo met, some of them, like Ian Fleming, would later become famous. Maier provides detailed, though not always accurate, background on each one. In Fleming's case, he is given credit for "Operation Mincemeat," the British deception using a "corpse … to fool the Nazis" prior to the invasion of Sicily. Fleming had no involvement in "Mincemeat." (142)

For historical context, Maier also comments on intelligence operations occurring before, during, and after WWII, operations that did not involve Cuneo and don't do credit to Maier's grasp of his subject. For example, he labels Soviet agent Kim Phiby and Hitler's spy chief Wilhelm Canaris as double agents. (18) And then he misconstrues the message of a genuine double agent, Dusko Popov, when claiming Popov warned the FBI about the pending attack on Pearly Harbor. (108) A final example, when discussing Soviet defectors, he writes that Elizabeth Bentley turned herself into an "FBI satellite office in New Haven, Connecticut." (328) The event occurred in New York City.

The Invisible Spy summarizes Cuneo's postwar life and at one point quotes him as saying "I actually think I have cracked the code of history." (407) But Maier concludes that "spying remained the most enigmatic part of Cuneo's life, the most difficult to track, document and understand." (409) If fact, though much is revealed about those Cuneo knew, the specifics of his liaisons are not discussed, and no evidence of any spying is presented. And Maier himself seems unsure, when he concludes

that Cuneo knew that "a nebulous status as 'liaison' to a foreign intelligence agency … left him bereft of any recognition." (414)

Ernest Cuneo died in March 1988, leaving the details of his liaison work a mystery. ■

An O.S.S. Secret Agent Behind Enemy Lines: The Second World War Exploits of Lieutenant Leif Bangsbøll
By Brook G. Bangsbøll
(Frontline Books, 2024), 308 pages, no index.

After the death of Leif Bangsbøll, Lt. Col. (USA, Ret), in 2001, his son Brook discovered evidence of his father's military career during and after WWII of which he had been unaware. Before joining the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Lief had been a pilot, learned several languages, served in the Royal Danish Navy, the Royal Norwegian Air Force, and the US Army. He would end his WWII service in OSS, supporting the Danish Resistance. His postwar career saw service in Korea, the 82nd Airborne Division, and as a Special Forces Green Beret. There was too much material for one book, so Brook decided to tell his father's story in two volumes. The first, *An O.S.S. Secret Agent Behind Enemy Lines*, deals with Leif's WWII service. The second, *U.S. Special Forces Commando*, will be published later.

Brook Bangsbøll acknowledges that his book lacks source notes, but he adds that, with one exception, "all the central events described in the book are in some way corroborated … by extracts from military records or other documented media or reference materials, including medal citations, letters and photographs with handwritten notes on the back." He explains the exception by writing: "I have taken literary license to generate much of the dialogue between the characters, but the entire storyline of events is firmly based on historical facts." (xv)

An O.S.S. Secret Agent Behind Enemy Lines tells how Lief began his military service, the unusual circumstances that led to his OSS recruitment, his training in Canada, and his "night parachute mission behind enemy lines in the European theater of war as an agent in the OSS." (xxiii) His most important operation as an "OSS field agent, codenamed Alexander Hudson," (170) was to support the Danish resistance. One operation involved sabotaging German supply trains and freeing a group of Danish Resistance members. (219)

Although a better chronological fit for the second book, Brad includes a moving chapter on his father, "the Danish descendant of Vikings and the patriarch of the Sørensen-Bangsbøll clan," and his burial service in Arlington National Cemetery. ■

The Umbrella Murder: The Hunt for the Cold War's Most Notorious Killer
By Ulrik Skotte
(WH Allen, 2024), 323 pages, index.

After defecting to the United Kingdom in 1969, Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov worked for the BBC. On September 7, 1978, while waiting for a bus on the Waterloo Bridge, Markov was injected with a pellet containing ricin poison administered by a modified umbrella. According to Danish journalist Ulrik Skotte, the murderer was not identified until 2021. *The Umbrella Murder* tells his story.

After the collapse of communism the Bulgarian intelligence service on orders from the new Bulgarian president, told Scotland Yard it had located several file folders on the agent who appeared to have been given the job of killing Markov. This agent's codename was "Piccadilly," and he was living in Denmark. His name was Francesco Gullino, sometime called "The Italian."

Scotland Yard assigned two detectives to the case. They learned the suspect was living in Copenhagen and made arrangements with the Danish security service to interview him in 1993. After the interview, the detectives concluded they had little evidence of guilt, and Gullino was freed. But Gullino knew he needed help, and while he could have turned to any number of people, he chose film maker, Franco Invernizzi. (57)

A colleague of Danish journalist Ulrik Skotte at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, told him about Franco's new contact and put them in touch. When Skotte asked Franco why they should meet, Franco said "all you need to know for now is that I have cracked the case." (7)

The Umbrella Murder discusses the history of the Markov assassination, and the slow accumulation of evidence that eventually convinced Skotte that Gullino was guilty. He acknowledges that his evidence is persuasive but not conclusive and that Gullino would never be formally charged. (302) An interesting contribution to a famous still unsolved case. ■

Fiction

Counterfeit Spies: How World War II Intelligence Operations Shape Cold War Spy Fiction

By Oliver Buckton
(Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 267 pages, index.

In the introduction to his 1998 book, *Counterfeit Spies*, intelligence historian Nigel West writes that the 17 books he discussed in it "are based on nothing more substantive than a fertile imagination." In his study of how "actual World War II espionage and deception operations influenced postwar spy fiction," Florida Atlantic University English Professor Oliver Buckton applies a different and puzzling definition of *Counterfeit Spies*. In Buckton's view, it is the "authors who produced 'the bodyguard of lies' surrounding the truth of wartime espionage, intelligence, and deception [that] may be considered counterfeit spies." (19) Why the authors and not their fictional creations are so designated is discussed but not clarified. (20)

For reasons never explained, Buckton acknowledges at the outset that he begins each chapter with a fictional scene "featuring speculative dialogue that represents an imagined version of how a significant documented episode in the life of the subject of the chapter might have unfolded." (10) These speculations are not delineated as such, thus the reader must decide when the fiction ends and the non-fiction narrative begins; the distinction is not always clear.

Buckton's method is straight forward. Most of his subject authors are well known, for example John Bingham and Ian Fleming. Buckton cites traces in Fleming's novels of his involvement in wartime deception operations, citing Operation Mincemeat as one example, a poor choice since Fleming was not involved.

Buckton's method is straight forward though his contextual comments are frequently wrong. For example the statement that Felix Cowgill was head of Section IX; that was Philby. (78) Most of the authors discussed are well known, for example John Bingham and Ian Fleming. Buckton cites traces in Fleming's novels of his involvement in wartime deception operations, citing Operation Mincemeat as one example, a poor choice since Fleming was not involved.

A better example is the work of novelist Graham Greene, who served in MI6 under Kim Philby during WWII. Buckton discusses a number of Greene's books in which he finds connections to his wartime experiences. In the case of *The Third Man,* he finds echoes of a relationship to "double agent" Philby, though that book is not a spy story. Greene's *Human Factor* is a better example. Buckton also sees elements of the wartime Garbo deception network in "his brilliant satire of British intelligence and debunking of the myth of Bond, *Our Man in Havana*." (14) He argues that "Greene's merciless satire of the incompetence and gullibility of British intelligence surely pulls the rug from under the illusion that the British were the best at the Great Game."

Counterfeit Spies also explores the "writings of a new generation of spy novelists who missed wartime service but served in British intelligence after World War II, whether in SIS or MI5," who benefited from the "enduring influence of World War II counterfeit spies working in deception, propaganda." They include John le Carré, John Bingham (model for George Smiley), and Helen MacInnes. Buckton makes this claim despite asserting that the "focus of this book has been on a specific group of British writers who served as agents and officers in British intelligence during World War II and went on to make use of these wartime experiences in writing postwar spy fiction." (287)

It is very likely that espionage-related books by former intelligence officers turned writers draw on their own experiences. *Counterfeit Spies* offers some speculative examples amidst a profusion of confusion and factual errors. Only the authors know whether Buxton is right. ■

The Snares: A Novel

By Rav Grewal-Kök
(Random House, 2025) 320 pages
Reviewed by John Ehrman.

Neel Chima, a deputy assistant attorney general in the waning days of the second George W. Bush administration, gets a call one day. "Are you happy where you are? Toiling in the trenches of the Justice Department?" asks the caller, who works at the highest-levels of the CIA and is known simply as "the priest" because of his single-minded dedication. "You're a good lawyer but…you're never going to be a great one," the type who makes it to the top at Justice, the priest tells him. Perhaps, instead, Neel would be interested in a job that will enable him to "vault past all the timekeepers at Main Justice"?

The answer, of course, is yes, and soon Neel, anxious to make his career mean something, finds himself the

principal deputy director of the Freedom Center. It's a counterterrorism fusion center of sorts, loosely modeled after National Counterterrorism Center. In the Freedom Center analysts pore over reports from other agencies to search for intelligence nuggets others may have missed. The analysts then add the names to an ever-growing threat matrix, with "every name implicating more names…[as] the lists grew longer, and the matrix deepened." Names of people in the United States go out for investigation and surveillance, while those outside the country are ranked for strikes in the wilds of the Middle East and South Asia. Neel takes to his work diligently, if with some confusion in his new surroundings. "He had to find his way in a world of bureaucrats and operators he only dimly understood. Most of all, he had a career to make."

But Neel has a problem: he doesn't fit in. He's the son of Punjabi immigrants who has married the daughter of a wealthy WASP Republican lawyer; he's no longer part of one community but not accepted by the other. At work, he's a lawyer among intelligence officers and operators, and does not understand their tribal ways. "You want, on an almost primal level, to belong," the priest tells him, but it's not happening. It's no surprise that Neel drinks too much or, late at night, watches porn videos on his computer while his wife and daughters are asleep.

And that's not the least of Neel's problems. Sam Jones, a mysterious CIA officer has been watching Neel for months and occasionally taunting him over the phone. After Neel comes under investigation for a security violation while on TDY in Bangkok, Sam emerges from the shadows with an offer to make the inquiry go away. All Neel has to do is remove from the threat matrix a young American in Chicago who looks to be self-radicalizing so that he'll be forgotten by the bureaucracy and Sam's hit squad can quietly kill him. At the same time, a drone strike in Waziristan goes wrong, and a dogged reporter uncovers Neel's role in identifying the target and planning the attack, spreading his name across the national media. Meanwhile, Neel's marriage collapses under all the pressure.

Grewal-Kök is an editor and writer primarily of short fiction; *The Snares* is his debut novel. Rather than a conventional tale of espionage, he gives us a story about the intersection of the politics and bureaucracy of intelligence and how it chews up one man. This is Graham Greene territory—one thinks of *The Human Factor*—and Grewal-Kök creates a layered and subtle narrative that looks at questions of identity, choice, and morality. He writes with a deft touch, telling his story in spare prose that nonetheless gives depth to his characters and situations and draws in the reader. Neel's plight may be extreme, but you'll still sympathize with him because you can see how something like this could happen to you. *The Snares* will keep you turning the pages as quickly as any thriller. ■

The Spy Coast

By Tess Gerritsen
(Thomas & Mercer, 2023), 347 pages.
Reviewed by Resolute Lee

The Spy Coast is internationally bestselling author Tess Gerritsen's first foray into the espionage thriller genre. Gerritsen is a veteran author whose writing credits span drama and thriller genres, including the Rizzoli and Isles crime thriller series. In *The Spy Coast*, her writing is crisp and well-paced, weaving together exposition and prose into a well-crafted and thoroughly engaging narrative that pulled this reader through its pages—in one sitting!

The Spy Coast uses a common plot device of espionage novels in which a protagonist, in this case a retired CIA officer named Maggie Bird, finds a "visitor" from her past, a corpse, laid out in the driveway of her retirement home in a sleepy, fictional seaside village of Purity, Maine. Maggie, who had hoped to leave behind ghosts of a mission gone tragically wrong years earlier, soon recognizes the body as someone involved in that operation.

Until that discovery, Maggie had been living quietly on her chicken farm, socializing with neighbors and a local circle of other CIA retirees who call themselves the "Martini Club." She, of course, calls on club members to help her uncover why the past has returned.

Using flashbacks, Gerritsen adds dimensionality to Maggie as she steadily reveals the complexities of her past decisions and unveils the painful events that have brought Maggie to the present. Gerritsen also achieves authenticity, weaving realistic spy tradecraft into the story and offers glimpses into the challenges of human intelligence operations, which in this story mixes Maggie's operational relationships and personal relationships, including love interest, in an effort to take down a notorious international money launderer. At times the scenario stretches credulity, but in the end it addresses a main theme of the novel, do we really know who people are, even those most close to us?

Of note, Gerritsen acknowledges in an author's note that *The Spy Coast* was inspired by her discovery years ago that a good number of neighbors in her own then sleepy Maine town, Camden, were retired CIA and Foreign Service officers. The notion of unassuming retirees with secret past lives and dusty old skills made for fascinating characters to explore.

In sum, *The Spy Coast* is a well-crafted and engaging story, and, as Gerritsen continues her new series, I look forward to reading further into the past secrets—and the mysteries solved—of Maggie and her Martini Club friends. ■