

Red Sparrow

Jason Matthews (New York: Scribner, 2013), 434 pp.

Reviewed by James Burridge and Michael Bradford

There exists a long tradition of former CIA operations officers turning to fiction after they leave the agency. Their experiences range from 30-plus years, as in the case of senior executive Milt Bearden (*Black Tulip*), to a bare handful of years, as in the case of Joseph Weisberg, who resigned after assignments at the Farm and Langley (*An Ordinary Spy*). For most, it's "one [book] and done." CIA officer-turned-novelist Jason Matthews appears unlikely to become "a one-hit wonder," however. He has a contract for a sequel and sold the movie rights to *Red Sparrow* for a seven-figure sum before the book was published. The movie, and to a lesser extent the books, will undoubtedly influence perceptions of the CIA for a wide swath of Americans, including among them future applicants.

The story takes place in the present in one familiar location—Langley—and four overseas ones—Moscow, Helsinki, Rome, and Athens. They host a classic confrontation, pitting the CIA against the Russian intelligence service, the SVR. At stake are both the hidden identities and thus the lives of each service's highest ranking penetrations. The CIA's is Maj. Gen. Vladimir Korchnoi, chief of the SVR's Americas Department—his codename is MARBLE. The Russian's is a senator on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, SWAN. The main characters are Nate Nash, a first-tour case officer assigned to Moscow Station, and Dominika Egorova, a ballerina-manqué-turned SVR officer.

Nash's first scheduled meeting with MARBLE goes awry, and he and the asset barely escape. Although he was blameless, Nash is now known and of no further use in Moscow. (Using a first-tour case officer to run a prize asset is plausible, but scheduling a face-to-face meeting with MARBLE, who's well supplied with up-to-date covert communications, is a stretch).

Nash is then assigned to Helsinki Station; the SVR leadership believes that he was sent to Moscow to

handle a highly placed penetration and that he will still be involved in the case in Finland. Dominika is sent to Helsinki to seduce Nash and learn the identity of the mole—and the game is on.

Most of the American characters are richly drawn. Nash is ambitious, smart, and eager to redeem himself by safely handling MARBLE in Helsinki if the opportunity arises. His immediate supervisors, the station chief, Tom Forsythe, and his deputy, Marty Gable, are cynical but protective of their young colleague and determined that he succeed. It is in the station's bullpen badinage, as Nate absorbs his two mentors' long experience, that this novel comes alive. This is how it sounds, this is how it is done.

CIA headquarters is represented by Simon Benford, a senior counterintelligence manager; Matthews wisely eschewed one of the genre's most enduring cliché characters, the buffoon from headquarters who imperils the operation. All the Americans aren't exemplary—the Moscow station chief unfairly blames Nash for the near disaster with MARBLE and all the FBI characters are clueless and referred to as "the FEEBS." The director of CIA makes a cameo appearance as the ultimate headquarters buffoon.

The Russian characters are not as nuanced as their US counterparts. Except for MARBLE and Dominika, they are one-dimensional bureaucratic thugs. Their motivations are also thinly developed. MARBLE commits treason because his wife died falling victim to the inadequacies of the Soviet medical system (as did the Russian submarine commander in the Tom Clancy novel *Hunt for Red October*).

But forget character development and motivation—this story excels when the protagonists take to the streets. An alternative marketing approach might have been to give it a yellow cover and call it "Tradecraft for Dummies." The amount of tradecraft, particularly

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surveillance and countersurveillance, will make the in-house reader wonder how he got all this past the Publications Review Board. Matthews himself said in a recent interview that he was “pleasantly surprised” by the small number of redactions and described the tradecraft as “old, classic stuff that’s been around since Biblical times.”¹ The scenes in which Nate and Dominika course through urban landscapes in intricate, hours-long surveillance detection routes in order to get clean before a clandestine operational act are accurate, richly detailed renderings of anxiety-filled tasks conducted daily by intelligence operatives around the world.

Tradecraft descriptions aside, how plausible is the book for the reader with guilty knowledge? On a scale from the deliberately low-key realism of Le Carré to the fantasies of Robert Ludlum, it’s definitely on the Le Carré end of the spectrum, with a few notable exceptions. Those interested in public perceptions of the intelligence business, particularly as it is practiced by CIA officers, should read this book.

A couple of final observations: Matthews ends every chapter with a recipe for a dish associated with that chapter’s locale. Some reviewers have found this to be a distraction, but they’re easily skipped. Finally, this novel has the most explicit sex scenes we’ve encountered in the espionage genre. Beware.



¹ Jason Matthews interview on the Diane Rehm Show, 22 August 2013.