

American "Insider" Spy Fiction in the Twenty-First Century: Gene Coyle's Second Novel by Mark T. Hooker

In my article on Dame Stella Rimington's "insider" spy novels,ⁱ I commented that while Dame Stella was working on her fifth novel, none of the American authors of "insider" spy fiction had as yet had a second novel published. Gene Coyle's new novel *No Game for Amateurs* shows that the Americans can get more than one novel published. Coyle's first novel, *The Dream Merchant of Lisbon*, is reviewed in "An Emerging Trend in Spy Fiction: Retired James Bonds Become Ian Flemings" on SpyWise.net at <http://www.spywise.net/trend.html>.

The Plot

The action of the novel unfolds on the eve of America's entry into the armed conflicts already raging in Europe and the Far East in 1941. The American intelligence establishment is in disarray, so President Franklin D. Roosevelt gives intelligence collection assignments to an old and trusted friend, Vincent Astor, the wealthiest man in America at the time. The actual execution of most of the President's tasks falls to Astor's personal assistant Charles Worthington, a recent Harvard Law graduate. Charles is initially reluctant to enter the shadow world of espionage, where things are seldom as they seem, but the plot thickens when the U.S. breaks the Japanese diplomatic code, and President Roosevelt learns that there is a Japanese mole within U.S. Intelligence in New York. Charles is the amateur spy who gets the job of locating the traitor. His hunt for the mole takes the reader on a merry chase, during the course of which the reader learns that Charles is not really who he claims to be, nor is Amanda, his girlfriend, nor Takada, a fun-loving Japanese journalist, nor Olga, a sensuous, Russian journalist, nor even Charles' Italian mobster bodyguard. Life becomes more and more complicated for Charles as his field of suspects narrows and December 7th approaches. The only thing that Charles was sure of "was that intelligence work was a world of mirrors within mirrors" (p. 111), an image that Coyle used before in *The Dream Merchant of Lisbon*. (p. 125)

This historic setting puts *No Game for Amateurs* in the same category as such other works of twenty-first-century "insider" spy fiction as Alan Stripp's *The Code Snatch*,ⁱⁱ a tale of cryptologic derring-do in Burma during World War II, and T.H.E. Hill's *Voices Under Berlin: The Tale of a Monterey Mary*,ⁱⁱⁱ which plays against the backdrop of the Berlin cable-tap tunnel in the mid-1950s. The historic setting is not the only thing these three novels have in common.

One of the true events that went into *No Game for Amateurs* is the American cryptologic success against the Japanese code known as PURPLE, the intelligence from which was distributed under the codename MAGIC. Unlike *Voices Under Berlin* (2008) and *The Miernik Dossier* (1973, a novel by twentieth-century "insider" spy fiction author Charles McCarry), where the texts of the intercepts are worked into the body of the novel to be shared with the reader, the MAGIC intercepts in *No Game for Amateurs* are kept off-page, so that the reader only learns about them, but never sees them. This is the same approach that Alan Stripp used in *The Code Snatch*.

The historical tone of the novel is set in part by all the name-dropping that takes place during the course of the tale. In addition to the hero's boss Vincent Astor, there are President Franklin D. Roosevelt, General and Mrs. MacArthur, General (them Lieutenant Colonel) Eisenhower, "Dizzy"

Gillespie, "Wild Bill" Donovan, Kermit Roosevelt (son of Theodore Roosevelt), Walter G. Krivitsky (a Soviet spy who defected before World War II^{iv}), John Wayne and Fred Astaire, just to name a few. There are so many of them that they soon lose their celebrity status and become "part of the furniture," as the song goes in *Oliver!*^v The furniture, however, is all 1940s vintage.

"Relevant for Today"

While the three twenty-first-century "insider" spy novels mentioned above all have a historic nature, they are, nevertheless, as a reviewer of *Voices Under Berlin* terms it on Amazon.com: "relevant for today."^{vi} One of the problems that *Voices Under Berlin* and *No Game for Amateurs* point out is that America's potential enemies do not communicate in English, and without skilled dedicated linguists on-hand to process the information in a timely manner the information is useless. In *Voices Under Berlin*, the tunnel was discovered because the linguist who had the skills to comprehend the information that could have prevented the discovery had been taken off the project. In *No Game For Amateurs*, information that could have provided a warning of the attack on Pearl Harbor was not acted upon until it was too late, because there was no linguist available who could read it.

A report in USA Today on 20 April 2009^{vii} says that only 18% of those in the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence, which handles the analysis of the information collected, and 28% of those in the National Clandestine Service, which runs collection operations, have foreign language skills.

Linguistic preparedness is not the only "current" theme that Coyle's novel touches upon. One of its recurring points of concern is the state of readiness of the U.S. Intelligence establishment on the eve of World War II. Roosevelt's use of "The Club" led by Astor as an intelligence gathering organization is another of the historical facts upon which the novel is built.^{viii} Coyle has President Roosevelt explain his reasons for doing so in a conversation with Charles.

"Well, now, I'm not sure that I do have that many better sources than Vincent," says Roosevelt, "that's one of the reasons I depend on him and a few of his friends to find out things for me. Trying to get the Army, Navy and FBI, State Department to cooperate in intelligence matters isn't easy." (pp. 32-33)

This comment has resonances with the report of the 9/11 Commission,^{ix} which recommended a realignment of the U.S. Intelligence structure for essentially the same reason. Roosevelt's real-life solution was similar to the Commission's recommendation: Astor was appointed Coordinator for Intelligence in the New York Area in March 1941.^x This happens on page 98 of *No Game for Amateurs*. History may not repeat itself word for word, but it does rhyme.

Even after Astor was in charge, Charles found out that he had more success getting information from his Army and his Navy contacts when he met with them alone, because "while not keen on sharing information with Astor, both the Navy and the Army were even more reluctant to let the other service know what they were doing or thinking." (p. 128)

In his paper "Spy Fiction, Spy Reality,"^{xi} written to justify the teaching of a course on spy fiction at The National Defense Intelligence College (NDIC),^{xii} Jon A. Wiant, who holds the Department of State Chair

at the NDIC, says that one of the four compelling reasons for reading spy fiction is that "at its best the literature gives us a window into the organizational pathologies that complicate the lives of the modern intelligence officer" (p. 115). Despite its historic background, *No Game for Amateurs* covers a number of contemporary organizational pathologies.

The Ethics of Espionage

In a conversation with his fiancée Amanda, Charles remarks that he can "see the contradictions and ethical issues" of spying. On the one hand, he doesn't like the idea of Japanese or German agents trying to recruit Americans to spy for them, but on the other, he knows that there are Americans trying to do the same thing to Germans and Japanese. Caught between the two faces of the same coin, he feels like a hypocrite.

To provide Amanda with a case in point, he explores his relationship with Olga, a beautiful GRU agent he has met in New York. On the one hand, he wants to prevent her from spying against America, but what if he found a way to turn her so that she would provide America with useful information? He is not sure that he "would want her welfare on [his] conscience." (p. 81)

This is an issue that Coyle already explored in *The Dream Merchant of Lisbon*, where Reilly's conscience makes him take extreme, illegal action to protect his source from the lethal danger that Reilly has placed him in by recruiting him. This is Coyle's answer to a significant ethical question that has been treated over and over again in spy film and fiction. In John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963), Leamas does not climb over the Berlin Wall to safety, leaving Liz to her fate alone on the eastern side of the Wall. In David Ignatius' *Body of Lies* (2007), Ferris puts his life at risk to save Aisha. In *Voices Under Berlin*, Kevin goes off the reservation to save someone he has never met. The answer that each individual gives to this question is what separates espionage's knights-errant in shining armor from the unscrupulous practitioners of this art. It all comes down to a matter of conscience.

Later, Coyle resurfaces this topic in a conversation between Charles and Astor. Charles expresses his doubts about the ethics of spying, and Astor responds that "a lot of Americans have always thought of spying as something a bit shady. It goes against our basic instincts of being open and honest, but I would argue that there are times, certainly in wartime, when we have to fight back in every way that we can. ... Being underhanded or cheating in sports is reprehensible, but this is not a game." (p. 102)

This is the same point that Alan Stripp made in *The Code Snatch* (2001). Stripp's General Greatorex is "an honest, sensible chap. Reliable for orthodox military matters; all at sea with the unexpected." He is the type of officer who was "brought up to think of war as a game," not a game in the playful sense, but a game with rules that both players observe. "Unfortunately the Japanese invented new rules and did not bother to send him a copy, and he's too hidebound to learn them." (p. 75) Because Stripp's novel is a tale of SIGINT derring-do, he then moves to the heart of the matter for any SIGINT operation, repeating the adage that U.S. Secretary of State Stimson made famous in 1929 when he shut down "the Black Chamber," the U.S. cryptanalytic effort: "Gentlemen do not read other gentlemen's mail." Preston says that General Greatorex shares this view about SIGINT, "even in

wartime" (p. 75), an allusion to the fact that Stimson changed his views on the value of SIGINT when he became Secretary of War during WWII.

The goal of the operations in both *The Code Snatch* and in *No Game for Amateurs* is to save lives on the battlefield. Stripp explains that without the intelligence that they were obtaining from the compromised Japanese code, the war in Burma could be extended by as much as a year, costing the lives of thousands or more allied soldiers and airmen, and prolonging the suffering of those being held prisoner by the Japanese. Coyle says that "war is an ugly, dirty business and if one becomes necessary, anything that can bring it to an end even one day sooner is worth doing." (p. 103) "I seem to remember something about being here to protect American lives and interests," says Kevin in *Voices Under Berlin*. (p. 149)

While Charles likes to "think an issue to death" (p. 81), as Amanda puts it, there is a parallel "show me" thread that explores the issue of ethics. Charles has an Italian mobster bodyguard, and other connections with the mob that will not be revealed here so as to preserve the surprise for those who have not yet read the book. The mobsters are uniformly shown to be ethically honorable American patriots. These "shady" characters form a subtle counterpoise to the question of "is there such a thing as an ethical spy?"

The answer that Dr. David L. Charney, a CIA-approved psychiatrist, gives to this question is that case officers "really are at a very high level of honor, integrity and patriotism ... [and] feel extremely bound by a conventional, and strongly held moral sense. You won't find anyone, generally speaking, who will treat you better or correctly."^{xiii}

After his discussion with Astor, Charles comes to the conclusion that while espionage is "a dirty business with many ethical issues, ... it was best to have fundamentally ethical individuals, as he viewed himself, doing such work, rather than leaving it to people who might not be." (p. 103) The problem is, however, that more often than not, these knights-errant are forced out of the system: Reilly in *The Dream Merchant of Lisbon*, Kevin in *Voices Under Berlin*, and Ferris in *Body of Lies*. Charles, however, is not, and therein lies the hint of a third Coyle novel.

Cover

The question of cover is, of course, critical to any counter-espionage operation. To find out who the spy is, you have to unwrap his/her cover, and Charles is very busy trying to do so. Just as with the parallel between the ethics of the mobsters and the ethics of spying, Charles has a cover too. He has to hide his "shady" past from those around him including Astor and Amanda, because if they found out, he would probably lose both his job and his fiancée. (p. 88) And as Charles discovers, hiding the "shady" things is not the only problem of cover. Cover also keeps you from telling people what great things you have done. (p. 35) Charles eventually does get to brief Amanda on his job as a spy, which does a lot to allay her jealousy. "So you weren't just out chasing women all those evenings?" asked Amada "as a little grin came to the corner of her lips." (p. 64)

In *The Dream Merchant of Lisbon*, Coyle points out that Reilly's official cover is "one of the worst kept secrets in the embassy." (p. 15) In *No Game for Amateurs*, Coyle shows how the same shoe fits the Japanese, when he describes how the Japanese Chief of Naval Intelligence at the embassy has his star non-official-cover officer come in to the New York consulate to meet the head of the Americas' Department of Naval Intelligence from HQs in Tokyo. "Takada thought it foolhardy for him to make a visit to the consulate on the day that such a senior intelligence official was in the building, even if he was traveling in alias. It could put at risk his cover and all his operations" (p. 230), but his boss had him do it anyway.

Doubt About Field Reporting

When Charles and Astor return to Hawaii from their cruise of the South Pacific, Astor goes to see the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, and reports that they discovered a Japanese intelligence officer collecting data on Guadalcanal and laying out an airfield there. The Admiral and his senior intelligence officer dismiss the information lightly. "Nothing like having a bored, rich guy out doing a little amateur spying!" says the Admiral. "Secret airfields my brass buttons," says his staff officer. (p. 17) The same problem gets much more extensive treatment in *Voices Under Berlin*, where Kevin's information is repeatedly rejected as a fabrication by Fast Eddie, the analyst who is supposed to report it. "Fast Eddie looked the script over slowly. He turned the page upside down, left-side-up, right-side-up and looked at the back of the page. 'I don't see any 20 Guards or any training area. I'm not going to report this! And quit bugging me with this made-up shit!' He was obviously not in a good mood." (p. 99)

Espionage in the Movies

As is typical for twenty-first-century "insider" spy fiction, the representation of espionage in the movies is a topic of interest in *No Game For Amateurs*. Charles Worthington is the amateur spy of the title, and the movies are one of the threads in the novel that provide a reference point upon which Coyle can build a contrast between the perception of spying and the reality of spying. Charles finds that "real intelligence work" is "much less glamorous than it was in the movies." (p. 128)

One of the problems for Charles is figuring out who the real spies are. The narrator explains that, "contrary to the movies, in real life, no ominous music played in the background when a spy entered the room to give [Charles] a hint as to who they were." (p. 48) Coyle returns to this theme a bit later, when Charles is talking with "Diplomat," the *nom-de-plume* of the spy-fiction author John Carter,^{xiv} another real-life person from the period who appears in the novel. Carter tells Charles that "the first rule of a really good spy of course is not to behave like one, or at least not like the public expects from watching the movies." (p. 72)

Coyle brings the action of the novel back onto the same track as the movies, when one of the Army counterintelligence officers is killed under suspicious circumstances in a car wreck. Charles thinks he sounds like Charlie Chan^{xv} when he says "Well, if it's like the movies, you either have a real mystery and a great clue, or you just have one of those funny coincidences in life." (p. 229) It turns out to be a coincidence.

Charles tries to imagine "how one of the famous movie detectives" would approach his counterespionage problem, considering Sherlock Holmes, Charlie Chan and Nick Charles, the Thin Man. (p. 111) Amanda, Charles' girlfriend, of course, volunteers to play the role that Myrna Loy played in the *Thin Man* mysteries. (p. 81)^{xvi} When Charles finally confronts the miscreants as the action of the novel reaches its climax, he thinks to himself that "it was too early in the morning for being subtle or clever like Nick Charles at the end of those *Thin Man* mysteries." (p. 250) He just gets right down to cases, and it works.

All this talk of screen sleuths named *Charles* (Nick Charles and Charlie Chan) creates a subtle suggestion that Charles Worthington is really another one of them. It is a very interesting technical writing trick that worked rather well.

No Game for Amateurs is a good read that would make a good movie. It is recommended not only for aficionados of spy fiction, but also for those interested in the reality of the human condition of America's spies, which is what "insider" spy fiction is all about.

About the author: Before retiring in 2006, Mr. Coyle spent 30 years as a field operations officer in the CIA's Directorate of Operations, spending almost half of that time working abroad undercover. He now lectures at Indiana University. He is a recipient of the CIA's Intelligence Medal of Merit.

Notes:

ⁱ "British 'Insider' Spy Fiction in the Twenty-First Century: Dame Stella Rimington's Novels," <http://www.spywise.net/rimington.html>.

ⁱⁱ Reviewed in: "British 'Insider' Spy Fiction in the Twenty-First Century: Alan Stripp's Novel *The Code Snatch*," http://www.spywise.net/The_code_snatch.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reviewed in: "An Emerging Trend in Spy Fiction: Retired James Bonds Become Ian Flemings," <http://www.spywise.net/trend.html>.

^{iv} See: Walter G. Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, Home Farm Books, 2007, ISBN 978-1406715439; and Gary Kern, *A Death in Washington: Walter G. Krivitsky and the Stalin Terror*, Enigma Books, 2003, ISBN 978-1929631148.

^v *Oliver!* (1968, Runtime: 153 min), directed by Carol Reed, book, music & lyrics by Lionel Bart.

^{vi} http://www.amazon.com/review/R3LL7GHZ6OLT1U/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

^{vii} Pete Eisler, "Despite heavy recruitment, CIA still short on bilingual staff," *USA TODAY*, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-04-19-language_N.htm.

^{viii} For more on "The Club," see: Jeffery M. Dorwart, "The Roosevelt-Astor Espionage Ring," *New York History: Quarterly Journal of New York State Historical Association*, Volume LXII, Number 3, July 1981, pp. 307-322.

^{ix} http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/hearings/hearing5/witness_deutch.htm.

^x Francis MacDonnell, *Insidious foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 169.

^{xi} Jon A. Wiant, "Spy Fiction, Spy Reality," *Learning with Professionals: Selected Works from the Joint Military Intelligence College*, Washington, D.C., 2005, pp. 111-123.

^{xii} Formerly known as The Joint Military Intelligence College.

^{xiii} Quoted in: Jeff Stein, "CIA-Approved Psychiatrist Treats Cloak and Dagger Set's Woes," *The Intelligencer*, volume 17, number 1 (winter/spring 2009), p. 26.

^{xiv} John Franklin Carter (1897 - 1967) published under the pen-name of "Diplomat". He was the author of a series of detective novels: *Murder in the Embassy* (1930), *Murder in the State Department* (1930), *Scandal in the Chancery* (1931), *The Corpse on the White House Lawn* (1932), *Death in the Senate* (1933), *Slow Death at Geneva* (1934), and *The Brain Trust Murder* (1935). For more on Carter's role in war-time intelligence, see Christof Mauch, *The Shadow War Against Hitler: The Covert Operations of America's Wartime Secret Intelligence Service*, Jeremiah Riemer (trans.), Columbia University Press, 2005 pp. 48-51.

^{xv} The Charlie Chan mysteries were a series of six novels by Earl Derr Biggers, published between 1925 and 1932. They were taken to the silver screen no less than 29 times between 1926 and 1941, the date of the action in *No Game for Amateurs*.

^{xvi} *The Thin Man* (1934, Runtime: 91 min), *After the Thin Man* (1936, Runtime: 112 min), *Another Thin Man* (1939, Runtime: 103 min), *Shadow of the Thin Man* (1941, Runtime: 97 min), *The Thin Man Goes Home* (1944, Runtime: 100 min), *Song of the Thin Man* (1947, Runtime: 86 min) all starred William Powell as Nick Charles and Myrna Loy as Nora Charles.