

BOOK REVIEWS

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Dan's Book Review: *The Spies of Warsaw*

By Jim Marquardt

Alan Furst of Sag Harbor (and Paris, says the book jacket) has built an international reputation as a master of the historical spy novel. His latest, *The Spies of Warsaw*, will only enhance that position. As you immerse yourself in the diplomatic and espionage world of Warsaw and Paris in the late 1930s, you smile with pleasure at the deft characterizations, clever turns of phrase, the quiet understatement that is reminiscent of Graham Greene's "entertainments." So much only hinted at, but so much expressed. Furst creates the melancholy, inevitable atmosphere of those perilous days on the brink of war, the Stalinist purges, the Spanish civil war, the doomed German army officers opposed to Hitler.

Colonel Jean-Francois Mercier de Boutillon comes from a long line of career soldiers, was wounded and decorated in the first world war and now is military attaché to the French embassy in Warsaw. He's a player in this petri dish of spying where embassy parties and dinners are fertile ground for snooping. Mercier is disenchanted by the politics and pettiness of his superior officers and their stubborn refusal to change plans in the face of conflicting intelligence, but always the faithful soldier, he forges on.

Mercier lost his wife a few years earlier and occasionally seeks female comfort, encouraged by his irrepressible cousin Albertine who lives in the worn, family apartment

in Paris. The book is wonderfully sensual in parts. Furst doesn't hit us over the head with heavy breathing details, the details he does give are restrained but erotic.

Americans have been conditioned by movies and airport novels to expect boffo finishes, maybe a shoot 'em up, at least a couple of vengeful deaths. In the sure hands of the author we get instead a subdued, ironic ending that prompts the only reaction a careful reader can have -- yes, that's how it must be. You can only admire Furst's control and courage. Our hero is disappointed, but he will go on, at least he has Paris and the beautiful Anna, and his honor as a soldier and human being.

Before involving Mercier in a major espionage operation, Furst takes us through several other adventures. The novel opens on Edvard Uhl, a German businessman from Breslau, who works for a subcontractor to the Rheinmetal firm in Dusseldorf. He regularly manages trips to Warsaw for assignments with "Countess Sczelenska" who is actually Hana Muser, a Polish agent. Abetted by Mercier, the Countess easily persuades Uhl to turn over information about German tank armor. Uhl foolishly gets himself suspected by the SS and Mercier is called on to spirit him to Paris. Voss, an SS officer, is castigated by his superior for letting Uhl get away and vows revenge on Mercier, a threat that adds to the suspense.

While this is going on Mercier and his sergeant/driver make a night foray over the Silesian border into Germany where they find evidence that the Wermacht is planning an attack. To learn more, Mercier and a few other agents sneak into the region near Schramburg where the Panzers are holding maneuvers.

At an embassy dinner for representatives from Renault, Mercier meets the beautiful Anna Szarbeck, a lawyer with the League of Nations, and begins an affair with

her, hesitant at first, then blossoming into a great love. We suspected Anna would somehow be revealed as part of the spy world but, happily, we guessed wrong. The description of their overnight interlude on a train to Belgrade should sell lots of rail tickets to couples hoping to liven up their love life.

From endless embassy parties, Mercier is acquainted with Viktor and Malka Rozen, Russian émigrés, who are endangered by the Stalinist purge and ask Mercier for help. He manages to elude the NKVD and extract information from them in exchange for safe passage to the West. All of these adventures lead up to a major operation which begins with a cocktail party chat with Dr. Lapp, ostensibly a German drug company executive, but actually a sympathizer with the Black Front, a secret organization of anti-Nazi German officers. Contacts move dangerously from Lapp to several others deep in Germany and finally to theft of draft plans for the invasion of France. The tense operation is fraught with danger and we exhale with relief when Mercier succeeds.

That success would seem to be an espionage triumph that might thwart the coming German blitzkrieg, but as we said earlier, it leads instead to a denouement that is both cynical and, given what eventuated, believable. *The Spies of Warsaw* is only 266 pages long, but so rich with neatly drawn characters and twists of plot that you don't feel at all shortchanged, perhaps only world weary like our hero, Colonel Jean-Francois Mercier de Boutillon.

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