Clarion Review

Thriller

Almost Armageddon
Neil Pollack
iUniverse
978-1-4697-7360-5
Four Stars (out of Five)

In *Almost Armageddon*, a sexy Soviet assassin known as Venus (for the flytrap, not the planet) patriotically and ideologically justifies her assignment to kill Mikhail Gorbachev during the final days of the Soviet Union by arguing "The spirit of Communism had to be preserved."

The reader of Neil Pollack's political thriller knows that Venus will not accomplish her mission. Without the tension of whether she will be a success or a failure, readers are left only with the less satisfying but still intriguing task of trying to puzzle out how and why she failed and who or what foiled her efforts.

Pollack does a very good job of handling the pieces of his narrative, making sure that they fit together in a believable, entertaining, and logical manner. For instance, the story's hero, Alex Bell: Bell is a Soviet-born American teacher who is recruited by the CIA to go to Moscow to help uncover the man behind the assassination plot; a man both the CIA and the KGB believe to be Bell's long-lost father.

By having Bell tell his story in a flashback, the author chooses to relieve the reader of tension once again. The reader knows that Bell will survive his ordeal, which is unfortunate. The story, as good as it is, would likely be far more exciting had Pollack let his readers wonder if the hero would triumph, let alone survive. During the course of the book, Bell is threatened, beaten, arrested, interrogated, shot, kidnapped, tortured, and drugged, yet whatever concern the reader has for Bell is dissipated by the certainty that he will live through it all.

Despite Pollack's choice of this prescient path, the novel is still a solid, enjoyable read. He gives just enough detail about Moscow, life in the former Soviet Union, the Russian people, and the Soviet system to remain credible without burying the reader in minutiae. What Pollack has included for color could be found in a Moscow guidebook or a general history of Communist Russia, but the story is not about Moscow or Communism as much as it is about

how Bell's search for his father intertwines with the assassination plot against Gorbachev.

There is a bit of mildly graphic sex in the book, and, as is common in novels of this genre, gorgeous women flirt with the hero. When Bell remarks to one of them about the severe cold weather, for example, she responds in an Ian Fleming-style manner: "Russian women have ways to keep their men from freezing."

The cast includes many stereotypical characters found in similar Cold War political thrillers, from hired thugs to bumbling CIA agents, but in Pollack's prose they all take on a little more life than is found in lesser books of this genre. The decision to remove the tension over the fate of the hero and the success of the plot aside, *Almost Armageddon* is a satisfying read.

Mark McLaughlin