

An Improbable Spy

David Paul Collins

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An Improbable Spy is a cryptic thriller: nothing is as it seems, and no one is who they say they are.

David Paul Collins's timely historical spy novel *An Improbable Spy* has all the elements of a classic Cold War-era tale, as the CIA goes against the KGB, but with a Middle Eastern twist.

The story begins with a chill on the streets of Moscow in 1980. KGB agent Vladimir Sudakov, who has information about Soviet machinations involving the American hostages in Iran, is about to betray his country on a metro platform, beneath the gaze of a mosaic of Lenin. In London, Jack Devlin, the owner of a struggling merchant banking business in Kuwait, is approached with a business proposition: his old friend Hugh, who's now a CIA agent, will help Devlin sneak his love interest and her sister out of Tehran in exchange for an arms trafficker's ledger.

Within this diverse cast exist characters whose lives are mini history lessons. There are Indian Gurkha soldiers, Sudanese Dinkas with their ritually scarred faces, and Omani dhow captains. Their stories are sometimes melancholy: Roosevelt Street in Tehran is recalled as having "been named in honor of the once special relationship between America and Iran." Their conversations, accents, and dialects convey varied rhythms, from the Cockney used by a hotel concierge to bazaar negotiations.

Sly humor leavens the book's life-and-death stakes. Devlin enjoys "entertaining lovelies until something came up. Sometimes it was the sun." Chapter titles contribute, too, as with "Furlong in the Belfry," while British agents have names like Algernon Trivelpiece and Pandora Quince. Evocative phrasing and imagery complement the book's local color and atmosphere, helping to define disparate settings, as with "Perfumed scents of oranges from Lebanon blended with sticky sweet aromas of figs from the deltas of Basra and lemons from the Levant."

Locations from today's news are a prominent feature; the action jumps between world capitals, including Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran, with speed. There are clandestine meetings, information drops, and double-dealing between the compromised operatives of the CIA, KGB, and Great Britain's MI6. These involve plenty of twists, especially when Israel's Mossad shows up. A motorcycle chase through the alleyways of Tehran, as Devlin makes his final attempt to escape, features well-facilitated action.

Its people, plot, and places resonant, *An Improbable Spy* is a cryptic thriller: nothing is as it seems, and no one is who they say they are.

MICHELLE NEWBY (February 3, 2020)

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