

By Other Means

Joel Sacks

FriesenPress (Mar 7, 2017)

Softcover \$14.99 (228pp)

978-1-4602-9645-5

In this dynamic tale that is energized by dry humor and wit, no one can be trusted and nothing is ever what it seems.

Joel Sacks's political thriller *By Other Means* follows a fierce young woman into a dangerous realm of espionage.

The story begins when Elke Braumann, a gifted teenager with unlimited potential, witnesses a horrific tragedy. This causes her childhood to come to an abrupt halt and gives her life a new direction.

Elke becomes a Mossad agent in Tel Aviv, working for her best friend's father. Her adeptness at learning languages makes her a cultural chameleon. She is able to pull off aliases effortlessly and with authenticity, thus landing her a job with the BND, the German foreign intelligence agency, as an undercover spy.

Upon completing her first mission she gets put on an assignment translating Chinese documents, which seems tedious until she uncovers some disconcerting information. Her investigation sends her to America, where she discovers the one thing she wasn't searching for and never expected to find.

Amid the complex plot, the narrative remains very much Elke's story. The book seamlessly navigates more than a decade of her life. Elke develops a thick skin as she transitions from an adolescent girl into a hardened, experienced intelligence officer.

Her deadpan persona is difficult to interpret. A dichotomy exists between how others perceive her and who she really is: "It was a face that could have landed her the part of a Scandinavian angel in a movie, with soft features topped by that short crop of platinum hair. She had the countenance of an innocent child, not a foreign spy."

Other central characters, such as Elke's boss and confidante, Marta Kempf, have many distinctive traits. Marta is introduced as a shrewd agent of Germany's Federal Intelligence Service and quickly becomes a mentor to Elke. Jacob Himmelfarb is another character who, like Elke, is searching for answers.

Sacks's writing is smart and polished. The novel reads like a screenplay and consists primarily of dialogue. The text is intertwined with historical facts that incorporate well into the story line. Lighter situations add a layer of fun to the narrative and break up some of the drier stretches. For instance, when Wolfie, a sixteen-year-old hacker, is offered the choice to work for the BND to avoid jail, hijinks ensue; he gets put in Elke's custody and ends up living with her and her roommate.

Opportunities to build momentum aren't always taken advantage of. Action scenes feel rushed and are not fully fleshed out. At times, settings are insufficiently visually described.

By Other Means imparts a dynamic tale in which no one can be trusted and nothing is ever what it seems. Dry humor and wit energize the story in an engaging and compelling way.

BRITTNEY DECKER (June 6, 2017)

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