Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

My CIA: Memories of a Secret Career
Christopher David Costanzo
CreateSpace
978-1-4904-9843-0
Four Stars (out of Five)

Fresh, sharp, and funny, Costanzo comes in from the cold to reveal a CIA far more interesting than any Hollywood fiction.

My CIA is an unexpectedly fresh and interesting take on a system obscured as much by Hollywood representations as by its own secrecy. Focusing on the author's career in the CIA's overseas clandestine service, the book covers the recruitment of secret agents, the management of CIA operations, and, above all, a bureaucratic structure more like a giant company than a government organization.

Christopher David Costanzo's rise through the ranks is presented chronologically. From his humble beginnings as the son of a foreign-service worker to his ascendancy as chief of a succession of overseas CIA stations, the book is peppered with stories of fake IDs, revolutionary groups, and adventurous tales. Costanzo's friction with authority ironically gives him an edge that not only boosts his career within the CIA, but makes *My CIA* a compelling underdog success story.

Though not saturated with derring-do, the book offers a rare peek into one of the world's most opaque organizations. Fans of spy novels will enjoy how Costanzo debunks misconceptions about clandestine work and dispenses real insider information. On one hand, the author engagingly describes how to evade surveillance; on the other, his opinion of spy gadgetry is so poor that he actually recommends against its use.

Costanzo is unilaterally the star of this show. He is a colorful, likable character whose resourcefulness is winning. Peripheral characters are only lightly detailed, probably to protect the identities of Costanzo's former coworkers. Though this makes sense in context, it tends to leave characters flat.

What refreshes is Costanzo's tacit assumption of another set of unnameable characters: young CIA employees reading this book. Costanzo openly engages the audience, dispensing advice when discussing the navigation of a complicated corporate infrastructure. Aside from being a good history of the organization's management, *My CIA* is a fine career guide for any young person doing interesting work in a frustrating system.

Playful pseudonyms, fascinating anecdotes, and revealing intricacies of internal CIA matters will also appeal to armchair diplomats and fans of international affairs. Though he abstains from specifics, readers familiar with world history will enjoy guessing where and when Costanzo's exploits actually occurred. Stylistically, *My CIA* is fresh, sharp, and funny. A quick read, it benefits from Costanzo's glib frankness and opinionated honesty.

Anyone who has ever wondered about the world's most mysterious spy service will find *My CIA* the best kind of exposé. Without destroying its mystique, this book humanizes the CIA. James Bond fans, rejoice: the real thing is even better.

Anna Call