

Perpetual Check

F. Nelson Smith

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Clever and surprising, Perpetual Check is a thrilling novel set during the intersection between the decline of the Soviet Union and the dawn of the computer age.

Two women are trapped in the middle of a deadly spy game in F. Nelson Smith's suspenseful novel *Perpetual Check*.

Dani and her eccentric Aunt Lucy have only just arrived in London when a fellow tourist dies on their doorstep, the victim of a stabbing. With her dying breath, the woman tasks Lucy with delivering an important yet inscrutable message. Dani and Lucy's English vacation soon turns dangerous as they struggle to figure out what the message means while staying one step ahead of the unknown killer—who might just be traveling on the same tour bus as they are.

The setting—a tour bus on which the protagonists are trapped with a group of strangers, unable to tell friend from foe—is a unique atmosphere for this tale of corporate espionage set in 1985. Scenes in the quiet English countryside and at serene landmarks are an effective counterpoint to the harrowing situations that Dani and Lucy find themselves in.

The story boasts a wide array of peculiar characters. Lucy always knows more than her dotty persona would suggest, and Dani develops from a frustrated, naïve young woman into a passionate fighter. Their fellow bus passengers harbor secrets that make it impossible to tell whose side they're on. Engaging details make each character memorable and distinct. Some stereotypes are employed, though: overweight characters are irritating or incompetent, while one of the main villains is disfigured.

The writing is sharp, conveying strong emotions and hair-raising scares with equal aplomb. Conversations involve fun turns of phrase that balance out the darker tone set by the story itself. At one point, Lucy and Dani make a poor decision despite knowing better for the sole purpose of moving the story along. The rest of the book's many twists are well executed and exciting. Difficult concepts like international politics and computer programming are explained and integrated well.

Teasing out the question of who's lying, who's honest, and who's just along for the ride, Dani and Lucy are kept guessing until the very end, when everyone's allegiances are revealed in a tense and lethal finale. A brief epilogue shows which characters learned from their harrowing experience, and whether or not they were bettered by it. Only Dani's subplot, in which she comes to terms with her controlling mother, is underdeveloped; direct interactions between Dani and her mother are not shown and are described in brief, making it difficult to determine if Dani's ultimate decision is the correct one. The conclusion is nevertheless a cathartic denouement to a pulse-pounding adventure.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (October 30, 2019)

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