



Red Icon

Paul Watkins writing as Sam Eastland

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Set during a pivotal time in Europe, this thriller is a vivid mix of political intrigue, religious fanaticism, and cold-blooded murder.

The sixth book in Sam Eastland's Inspector Pekkala crime series moves deftly back and forth between World Wars I and II. *Red Icon* contains a vivid mix of political intrigue, religious fanaticism, and cold-blooded murder.

In 1915, a small religious painting disappears from Grigori Rasputin's apartment in Petrograd, Russia. Twenty years later, two Red Army soldiers find the icon clutched in the hands of a dead clergyman in a small German village. As a younger man, Pekkala served as Tzar Nicholas II's personal investigator. His thorough search for the vanished painting, cherished by Tzarina Alexandra for its healing powers, proved fruitless. When the icon is later returned to Russia, Pekkala, now Joseph Stalin's special investigator, sets out to uncover the mystery behind its long absence. A parallel plot concerning two German brothers deepens the intrigue.

Occasional instances of subtle humor provide relief from this tale's dark uncertainties. During the 1915 investigation, Pekkala waits in a prison interrogation cell to question a priest about the icon. He observes the guard as he returns to his post: "Unaware that Pekkala was still watching from the doorway of the cell, the guard held his arms out to the side, as if gliding through the sky like an albatross, fingertips brushing past the doors."

Even the minor characters receive nuanced descriptions. When Pekkala visits the museum of the Kremlin to authenticate the recovered painting, he encounters an old friend, Semykin, a gulag survivor. "During his time at Lubyanka [prison], the sudden loss of weight had caused his skin to hang loosely on his frame, and his face had the look of a bloodhound stripped of its fur."

Writing as Sam Eastland, Paul Watkins has created an intricate plot that evolves smoothly through numerous changes of locale, characters, and time periods. Historical detail melds with equal finesse into the narrative. The book's diverse characters are realistically portrayed, their psychological motivations explored. Suspense slackens towards the end of the book as the two German brothers confront their destinies.

Red Icon offers a blend of historical and crime fiction during a pivotal time in Europe.

MARGARET CULLISON (Winter 2016)

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