



Secrets: Swinging and Espionage Tales of the '80s

Zillary Zahn

Ronasaurus Publishing (Apr 10, 2018)

Softcover \$11.95 (320pp)

978-0-692-95624-3

Secrets is a sensational story about how swinging and espionage merged in the 1980s.

With names changed to preserve anonymity, Zillary Zahn's intriguing cultural history *Secrets* focuses on the possible role that swing parties played in the Cold War.

Zahn, a writer renowned for his stories about swinging, received an invitation to a private swing party hosted by a wealthy couple, the Hestens. What he didn't know was that the Hestens were business moguls who considered swinging a stellar networking opportunity, and who were on the lookout for an attractive couple to join their company.

The prestigious job title offered to Zahn was designed to obscure the real work behind it, which consisted of being charming, appealing, and willing to participate in international swing parties. An undercover FBI agent, Renée, became the second half of Zahn's couple, driven by her belief that the Hestens were conspiring with the Soviet Union.

Organized as a series of stories, interviews, and reports, the book builds suspense in a gradual way. Its plot twists are accomplished through the introduction of new perspectives that help to shift interpretations of events. Still, mentions of espionage take some time to appear. Prior to them, repetitive descriptions of swing parties dominate, focused on lush settings that become monotonous.

Unprofessionalism is a running thread: promotions within the Hestens' company are denied because candidates are either not attractive enough or are presumed to be uninterested in swinging. Employers have sex with their employees at the parties, with nary a mention of the potential pitfalls of such arrangements. Renée's first investigative report reignites interest, and the book builds to a rewarding conclusion thereafter.

Written in a colloquial style that is disturbed only by descriptions of then cutting edge technology, the book is enthusiastic at all times; this constant excitement has a dulling effect. Although individual accounts of the parties are presented as though they were penned by each player in question, all were reconstructed by Zahn using notes. Many voices sound similar, despite the fact that they represent very different people. Similarly, the style doesn't always fit its format: Renée's reports, although their circumstances are formal and professional, read more like entries from a private journal.

Portions of the book are redundant or unnecessary. This extends to the book's first personal account, which comes from Barbara, a character who disappears from the narrative soon after and whose story delays the story proper. Contradictions arise, too: Renée first thinks that Zahn fancies himself in love with Mrs. Hesten, changes her opinion within paragraphs, and returns to her first opinion pages later, though the ensuing events don't justify this back and forth.

Secrets is the sensationalized story of how swinging and espionage merged in the 1980s.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (June 15, 2021)

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