

The Agency: The Norwood Nanny Chronicles, Book One

Monica McGurk

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The Agency is an imaginative espionage novel in which a group of undercover agents work with the British government to defuse an international situation.

In Monica McGurk's spy novel *The Agency*, a group of outlier nanny trainees become undercover operatives, charged with foiling a plot against the Turkish government.

In this first series entry, Bree, an American orphan, is accepted, for reasons that she doesn't understand, into the prestigious Norwood Academy. Located in Bath, Norwood has, hitherto, only accepted British students, but it is the preeminent training ground for nannies to the elite: diplomats, presidents, and royalty. At Norwood, Bree is teamed with the other misfits, including the son of an impoverished noble who's the very first "manny" to be admitted into its venerable halls.

Against its charming Victorian backdrop with notes of Ancient Roman details, Norwood's curriculum is grueling and exacting. Bree and her fellow first-year students struggle to maintain the grades they need to be admitted to the certificate program, which will guarantee them jobs in homes in the rarest of echelons. When she and her cohort pass the tests and are invited to the inner sanctum, they are informed that the school is a front for a spy training program, placing "nannies" in jobs that allow them to gather information and perform missions for the British Empire and global democracy.

This outlandish premise rests on the rationale that nannies are among those often invisible staff members who are privy to intimate interactions and private conversations. The novel is convincing in showing that Bree and the rest have unique opportunities to spy. Placed in powerful families in Turkey, Bree and her cohorts hope to be able to provide inside information about international incidents.

While the novel is slow moving at first, with a bevy of pages devoted to exposition and details about characters' relationships, it speeds up to cover exciting developments, like an emergency evacuation during which Bree has to smuggle the four young children of a Turkish soldier-turned-rebel out of Istanbul to ensure their safety. This harrowing escape is captured in vibrant, disturbing terms. The tension builds further as violence is introduced into the tale, as well as suspicions about a betrayal by one of Bree's cohort. The result is a compelling entry into the series.

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RANDI HACKER (January 11, 2022)

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