

The Dissonant Spies

John R. Downes

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A “good Nazi, bad Nazi” scenario evokes cognitive dissonance in a twist on the fast-paced action thriller.

After washing up on the New Jersey shore on a German life raft, two Nazi spies, Rebekka Bader and Lukas Schott, begin their top-secret mission to disable a B-17 test flight in Minneapolis. But when Rebekka goes rogue and murders a handful of Americans, Lukas (and the FBI) work to do anything they can to track her down.

The Dissonant Spies offers a unique perspective on the World War II spy thriller, positioning a Nazi as one of the main protagonists (the other an FBI agent). The quick-change disguises make this an edge-of-your-seat read, though with some contrived plot devices that detract from the tension.

When Lukas says, “We follow orders. We’re not politicians ... we’re soldiers,” he wraps up his character in a quick, punchy line. His behavior and his belief system—though he is, undoubtedly, a Nazi spy—make him appear at the outset to be a decently well-rounded character.

Much of the plot tension comes from wishing the Nazis will be stopped while simultaneously understanding that Lukas hasn’t killed any innocents, unlike the ruthless partner he is hoping to capture and bring to justice. However, as the story progresses, Lukas does not develop much further beyond his staid, yet sensitive, character. Luckily, a few peeks into his and Rebekka’s thoughts—revealed through short, italicized paragraphs scattered throughout the narrative—convey their motivations in ways that the omniscient narrator cannot.

Rebekka, similarly, suffers from some underdeveloped traits. Portrayed through a distanced third-person perspective (except in her thoughts written in italics) and without adequately vivid details, her brutal actions often seem heartless and uncalculated, and her snarky comments come across as rude. Yes, she is meant to be the “bad guy,” but her sociopathic tendencies leave her with few to no redeeming qualities. As a female spy in the 1940s, though, she is a wonderfully liberated woman, an intriguing character aspect that holds interest.

Author John R. Downes does not delve much further than surface character motivations, focusing instead on the simple yet thrilling plot. While the story starts off on shaky ground with a few pages of exposition describing the characters’ background and context of the plot—which would have been more engaging if revealed through actions—and some awkward dialogue when the spies assert their false identities, the author soon immerses readers in the chase.

Some plot aspects can appear a bit contrived: Rebekka’s Veronica Lake wig makes her stand out to witnesses instead of letting her blend in, and the FBI’s assumptions drawn from the evidence Rebekka leaves behind are too often dead-on and lead the FBI directly to their suspects. That the feds could identify who the killers are (a male and a female Nazi spy) almost immediately seems unrealistic. Though these devices can sometimes be distracting, they do successfully move the plot forward.

After the first thirty or so pages, *The Dissonant Spies* is gripping with its fast-paced action and noirish intrigue. If the

writing were tightened up and some vibrant descriptions of scenes included, this novel could be a fascinating twist on a much-loved genre.

AIMEE JODOIN (September 19, 2013)

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