

The Flying Dragon

Len Lamensdorf

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Starting off with a cliffhanger to get the reader's attention can be a great way to open a book. This book does so in the prologue, opening in November, 1962, with two French teenagers aloft over Washington, D.C. in a restored World War II Dauntless, a villain after them in a restored Messerschmitt. Once the danger is established, the book flashes back to nearly a year before.

Although the strategy is a good one, somehow it doesn't quite ignite the book's opening. In the first chapter, Willi and Louise are about to come to Washington to work as interns for President and Mrs. Kennedy, after vanquishing the villains they encountered in the first two volumes of the Will To Conquer series. Their work in the previous two books saved no less a personage than President Charles de Gaulle. This time they are about to take off in a Boeing 707 (both teens fly, so there is a lot of information about planes) for the United States, but find to their astonishment that the plane is being hijacked. Confederates of Tony Bersault, their evil nemesis in the previous books, hijack not only the plane but also a nuclear warhead, which they intend to detonate to prevent the separation of Algeria from France.

However improbably, Willi saves the day and lands the hijacked plane, figuring out how to avoid detonating the warhead as he does so. The two eventually reach Washington, where they begin college classes, help Jackie Kennedy redecorate the White House, and-oh, yes-search for Willi's real father. Meanwhile, the Cuban Missile Crisis is brewing-and Tony Bersault is involved.

Lamensdorf has devoted a lot of attention to the history, politics, and culture that he's woven into this novel. There are maps of Washington and Europe, drawings of the White House and numerous aircraft, and verbal tours of Washington's main attractions. The action is plentiful and the characters are interesting (although the villains tend to be pretty one-dimensional). The narrative flows smoothly and the story is logically plotted.

However, the book lacks fire and that *je ne sais quoi* that is so abundant in the Harry Potter series. Young people will be interested, but they may find the detail tedious and the history ponderous. They will, however, appreciate the roles that Willi and Louise play in resolving a civil rights crisis in Georgia during a hurricane, and its aftermath, during which they discover a missile launcher and end up pursuing the missile itself nearly all the way to Cuba.

And after all that, they still have to meet up with the Messerschmitt... .

MARLENE SATTER (November / December 2003)

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