

THRILLER

The Wayward Spy

Roger Croft

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Five Stars (out of Five)

All retired-journalist Michael Vaux wants to do is retreat to the bungalow opposite his mother's former home. For him, England has never been far away, even after a long career in the United States. However, the British Secret Service (BSS) spot a gem of an asset in Vaux once they discover the journalist's relationship with Ahmed Kadri, now a top arms buyer for Syria. It doesn't take long for the BSS to intervene, and soon Vaux is on a mission, and a multi-million dollar arms deal is about to take place.

The descriptions and details in this novel are sharp as daggers. The short, yet fully realized scenes create a brisk pace, no character quite acts the way the reader might think, and the plot is full of winding curves. The relationships at the heart of the book are constantly changing, and Vaux soon realizes that the past frames the present but does not invade it.

However, this is not a straight-shot hero plot. Once Vaux agrees to help, he disappears and the CIA gets involved, convinced that Vaux isn't what he seems. With a Middle East peace conference, scheduled in Geneva, as a backdrop, Croft richly sculpts a plot that effectively uses important historical events and relationships. Nothing is really as it seems: the dead return, political alliances shift, and truths become falsehoods except when they don't.

Croft is smart to begin the novel with Vaux's journey back to his mother's homeland. As a protagonist, he is likable: all he wants is to go home again. And yet, soon enough, he realizes that everything, from buying the bungalow, to shaking free from his responsibilities, is much more complicated than it might seem. This is why some readers may find the shifts away from Vaux's point of view jarring: Vaux is the character the reader roots for even when his motives are called into question.

If anything, Croft may be guilty of including too much description. He spends a great deal of time on Vaux's journey from the US to England, on the house he plans to buy, and on detailing every action and interaction between the characters. Though many of these descriptions are rich, they could be streamlined to keep the plot moving forward.

Croft masterfully includes contemporary geo-political intrigue into his fiction. Readers would be hard pressed to find another novelist who can so ably describe the political relationships between Syria, Russia, England, and the United States. Every character is humanized, even an arms buyer from Vaux's past. More than just a thriller or mystery, the novel is about a man who finally understands the Thomas Wolfe lament: "You can't go home again."

Lisa Bower