

Uncle Anton's Atomic Bomb

Ian Woollen

Coffeetown Press (Sep 1, 2014)

Softcover \$18.95 (406pp)

978-1-60381-231-3

A typical American family with Cold War secrets brings Chekhovian intrigue to this literary thriller.

Uncle Anton's Atomic Bomb is a book hard to describe, and that's part of what makes it so interesting. Ian Woollen's novel tells the story of an American couple and their children as their relatively ordinary life in Indianapolis reflects the major news events of post-World War II America, particularly in terms of the Cold War. This is a unique and memorable work of literary fiction whose author understands both family and political dynamics and blends them well in a thoroughly readable narrative.

The story's dual protagonists, Mary Stark and Ward Wangert, are childhood friends who reconnect after college, marry after a short courtship, and later raise three sons. The book's title refers to a story Mary and Ward write together over the years at bedtime, and to Anton Chekhov's famous axiom about a gun that appears in the first act of a story. In this case, it also applies to a bombshell secret Mary and Ward have had to keep. When she took a job in Russia for the State Department as a young woman, Mary became pregnant by a prominent CIA cold warrior called "He Who Must Remain Classified" throughout the book. Ward marries her to help her out, then returns to his hometown to run his family's public-relations firm.

The family's life in Indianapolis is a mix of comfortable old-money leisure and potentially crippling secrets, from annual vacations in Maine and posh boarding schools for the boys to a mysterious Russian neighbor and the boys' romantic entanglements. At times comic and at times deeply sad, the story tracks the lives of the Wangerts as He Who Must Remain Classified also tracks them, monitoring his former lover and biological son. The presence of his surveillance and the obvious mole infiltrating the family's circle cleverly provides the Wangerts' story with another Cold War parallel, the feeling that everything normal on the surface can be undone at any moment.

What makes *Uncle Anton's Atomic Bomb* work is the way it balances the family's normalcy and the heightened circumstances. That includes the three sons' diverging paths as each finds a partner, sees his relationship with their parents change, and becomes a generational archetype while remaining a memorable character. This is a unique work, and one that remains interesting all the way through the reveal of its Chekhovian secrets.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Winter 2015)

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