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Red Sparrow: A Novel (The Red Sparrow Trilogy Book 1)



Synopsis

In the tradition of John le Carré, the bestselling, impossible-to-put-down, espionage thriller that is "a primer in twenty-first century spying" (The New York Times Book Review), written with the insider detail that only a veteran CIA operative could know and shortlisted for an Edgar Award. State intelligence officer Dominika Egorova struggles to survive in the cast-iron bureaucracy of post-Soviet intelligence. Drafted against her will to become a "Sparrow," a trained seductress in the service, Dominika is assigned to operate against Nathaniel Nash, a first-tour CIA officer who handles the CIA's most sensitive penetration of Russian intelligence. The two young intelligence officers, trained in their respective spy schools, collide in a charged atmosphere of tradecraft, deception, and, inevitably, a forbidden spiral of carnal attraction that threatens their careers and the security of America's most valuable mole in Moscow. Seeking revenge against her soulless masters, Dominika begins a fateful double life, recruited by the CIA to ferret out a high-level traitor in Washington; hunt down a Russian illegal buried deep in the US military and, against all odds, to return to Moscow as the new-generation penetration of Putin's intelligence service. Dominika and Nathaniel's impossible love affair and twisted spy game come to a deadly conclusion in the shocking climax of this electrifying, up-to-the minute spy thriller. Taking place in today's Russia, still ruled with an iron fist by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Red Sparrow displays author Jason Matthews's insider knowledge of espionage, counter-espionage, surveillance tradecraft, recruiting spies, interrogation, and intelligence gathering. As The Washington Post hails, this is a "sublime and sophisticated debut" | a first-rate novel as noteworthy for its superior style as for its gripping depiction of a secretive world.

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Customer Reviews

I received an ARC of this book from Net Galley and the publisher in return for an honest review, which follows. I am an avid reader of thrillers and am particularly a fan of espionage thrillers. So, I figured that Red Sparrow would be "right up my alley." However, the book's slow pace during the first hundred pages kept me undecided as to whether I was liking it or not. This is because it took me awhile to get used to the fact that Red Sparrow wasn't going to be a book filled with lots of physical action -- e.g., fist fights, gun fights, killings, dramatic car chases, etc.-- that I've come to expect from books of this type. Soon after, however, I realized that Red Sparrow is an espionage thriller that is several notches above the typical book in this genre. It is filled with many fully dimensional, credible characters and location descriptions that make you feel that you are there experiencing all of the deceptions, schemes, and double crosses involving the various CIA and Russian intelligence agents and politicians --some of whom are moles for both sides. Further, it becomes quickly obvious that first-time author and former CIA operative, Jason Matthews, really knows his subject matter, as Red Sparrow is filled with an abundance of information about the inner workings within both the U.S. and Russian intelligence organizations that is not only interesting, it serves to create an atmosphere that keeps the reader shaking his/her head in wonder. As if this isn't enough to entice you to read Red Sparrow, perhaps the following facts will convince you to do so: (1) two of its main characters, CIA agent Nathaniel Nash and Russian agent Dominika Egorova, will stay in your mind long after finishing the book, and will have you looking forward to the author writing at least one more book featuring them to find out what the future holds for them; and (2) its plot is filled with enough twists and turns to keep you guessing as to what happens next, and an ending by which you will most likely be very surprised. Highly recommended to those thriller readers willing to be patient enough to finish a book that will ultimately make them consider Red Sparrow to be among the better thrillers they are likely to read this year.

I didn't think it was perfect, but I really enjoyed reading this. It was very compelling and kept my attention. Some have said it starts slow, and I guess that's somewhat true - the first 100 pages or so set up the background of Nate and Dominika - but I found it interesting. I'm surprised that some people have criticized the character development, because I thought there were some great, vivid characters, with great diversity, such as Gable, Benforth and Korchnoi. All of the Americans aren't smart and beautiful (as a matter of fact, hardly any of them are beautiful, except Nate, who seems to be nice-looking) nor are all the Russians stupid and ugly - cf., Dominika, Golov, and Korchnoi. The descriptions of cities and landscapes and food was quite evocative. I thought the plotting could have used an overhaul. The first third to one-half of the book gets the main pieces in place for a showdown in Helsinki, which takes place about halfway through the book. I thought the pieces were being assembled really well and I was anticipating a big showdown. Instead, it was a let down. The book drifted for the next 100 or so pages and then started getting the pieces in place for the final showdown. I felt it never fully recovered the momentum that it lost, although it did some. There were some detours that while interesting and well-executed, didn't have anything to do with the plot, such as the hunt for a mole in New London. Three or four chapters are devoted to this, but it turns out not to be very important or to have much impact on other actions. I felt like I was getting an inside glimpse into modern spy craft, perhaps a bit exaggerated or glamorized, but basically sound and that was enjoyable.

As you'd expect with the author's CIA background, the tradecraft aspects of Red Sparrow are excellent; one of the best I've read in a spy thriller. That is what kept me going with the story beyond some of the things I didn't like. First, the recipes. I'm not sure what the genesis of this idea might have been, but it felt very gimmicky. Not only is the recipe at the end of the chapter repetitive, but so is the requisite food scene that is shoe-horned in some cases into the story. This would have been a better idea as an appendix or left out entirely. The other aspect that bothered me was the use of foreign phrases. Is this to show off the author's language skills? I think here and there it's an okay device, but it was overused and became distracting. If you have to provide the English translation following the use of the foreign phrase, you've done it without art or too cryptically. Again, this would have probably been something better left out. I have my usual complaints about thrillers here with the sex scenes, although the actual sex depictions weren't as awkward as most. I guess I never really see what learning about the sexual peccadilloes of the characters (usually the female ones) does to advance the story. It often just seems perverse, as it did in this book a few times (the female Senator by the pool, you'll know what I mean if you read it). Despite all of those flaws, the spy story

was first-rate and really enjoyable. I hope Matthews tweaks the format for the next book and I will look forward to reading it.

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