
How True . . .

Arnaud de Borchgrave and Robert Moss: *The Spike*; Crown Publishers; New York.

by Philip F. Lawler

Truth is stranger than fiction; that's why fiction is more realistic, even when it's used as a polemical tool. Argue all you want about the perils of parenthood; *King Lear* makes the point more forcefully. No one who has read Orwell, or Steinbeck, can remain innocent about totalitarian states, or migrant workers. And in the chiaroscuro world of international intrigue, where even the most basic facts are tinged with fantasy, flesh-and-blood characters—imaginary or not—lend immediacy to the argument. No scholarly essay on the topic could match the impact of *The Spike*.

Not that *The Spike* is on the same level as *1984*, or *The Grapes of Wrath*; far from it. The authors follow the standard formula for best-selling thrillers: there is plenty of sex, and readers can pick up enough arcane facts and phrases to flavor cocktail-party conversations. Moreover, in this case there is the voyeuristic appeal of the *roman à clef*, and the tantalizing question of where the truth ends and the fiction begins. Messrs. de Borchgrave and Moss (or whichever one constructed the plot) add an extra fillip by making historical references to the characters upon whom fictionalized characters are obviously based. Thus, in the novel, President Jimmy Carter is succeeded by President Billy Connor of Flats, Mississippi. But usually there is no such confusion about the character's identity, so the reader is treated to detailed speculation about how, say, William Colby (possibly recognizable in the character of Crawford according to the Washington grapevine telegraph), might respond to a given set

Mr. Lawler is Managing Editor of Policy Review.

of circumstances. This, too, is a proven technique of contemporary best sellers: Woodward and Bernstein have made it famous.

The "Woodstein" comparison is doubly relevant here, because the action of *The Spike* is a battle for control of the nation's media. Dozens of different personalities, acting on different motives, supply the leaks, the biased reporting and the phony investigations that contribute to a massive KGB disinformation campaign. Here, from a polemical point of view, the plot is more important than the dénouement. With a montage of detail, the authors illustrate how a hostile power can orchestrate all the petty jealousies and ambitions indigenous to the nation's capital, which can produce a tremendously powerful result from a conglomeration of small causes. True, there are calculating, dedicated, subversive agents, and there are ideological warriors committed to the same goals. But the greatest damage is done by those who are not *knowingly* involved: the "useful idiots" whom the KGB has learned to manipulate so skillfully.

Since the real-life "useful idiots" insist that the battle between CIA and KGB is not a matter of clear-cut good v. evil, de Borchgrave and Moss steal their thunder by depicting a world in which actors on both sides play fast and loose with the Golden Rule. Sins of the flesh abound; in fact much of the book's first 100 pages is taken up with the sexual exploits of the characters. And in the course of the action each side is able to "turn" an agent largely because his lusts have compromised his position. Nonetheless it becomes increasingly clear that the sins of the CIA are the sins of isolated men, while the sins of the KGB are endemic to their system. No one expects spies (or, for that matter, journalists) to exemplify Boy Scout virtue. The crucial distinction is that one side revels in weakness,

and the KGB plans an entire international campaign, aimed at world domination, on that basis.

Sin makes good copy. *The Spike* is a legitimate thriller, ideal for a one-night reading. If the hero, Bob Hockney, is a bit too successful, and the coincidences too pat, those are the risks of using the novel as a means to treat a vast and complex subject. In the end, Hockney's credibility is established by his horrified, grudging realization that he has been used. He is not James Bond, superspy; he is a callow young man living among moral ambiguities, and he does considerable damage before realizing his mistake.

When Hockney does finally reverse himself and sets out to expose the conspiracy to which he has unwittingly contributed, he meets with "the spike"—his editors' decision to kill his story. Once again, the edge of the conspiracy is blunted. A few editors do nurture ideological biases, but by and large the editorial decision is prompted by an unspoken gentlemen's agreement that certain topics simply should not be discussed. Hockney's superiors do not want to seem overly nationalistic, let alone expose themselves to the inevitable accusations of McCarthyism. They are not malicious, but timid. So they bow to the *Weltanschauung*; the story dies, and the conspiracy continues toward its climax. Thus de Borchgrave and Moss dramatically illustrate the point that conservative critics have been making for years: today the *New York Times* is more inclined to berate the CIA than to expose the KGB.

The argument, then, is familiar. But the treatment is novel. We know how Bob Hockney thinks and feels; we share his frustration and outrage. And because we have been introduced to the other characters who populate the conspiracy, we realize the tangible implications of the crisis. So, we, the readers,

come away from *The Spike* having felt the real anger and injustice that an abstract argument can never convey. Fiction brings immediacy. As Coleridge pointed out, imagination can yield logical conclusions much faster than painstaking reason can deduce them.

Although *The Spike* is now perched near the top of the best-seller lists, few of the country's major newspapers have carried reviews of the book. Perhaps this can be explained by the same reasoning that prompted King David to send Uriah

. . . but How Inept

May we take the liberty to respectfully disagree with our reviewer? We see his point. Like so many of us, Mr. Lawler longs for a conveyance of truth—which, for decades, has been so obvious to him and to ourselves—to the largest possible number of people. He believes that literature, fiction, theater, art can best do the job, that they are able to dramatize truth in a way that makes it generally accessible and embraceable. He is correct—but only on the nonnegotiable condition that it is literature, not “literature,” art, not “art.” Truths, whatever their rightness and depth, that are expressed in the Dick Tracy style live only as long as we have them in our field of vision. It is certainly unfair to compare *The Spike* to Dick Tracy, but Mr. Lawler, in order to substantiate his unequivocal apology of the former, invoked *King Lear*, Orwell and *The Grapes of Wrath*, which seems to us also slightly off the mark. However, he quite rightly notes that no major (liberal) newspaper has reviewed *The Spike*. No surprise—those who dislike the novel's message find it all too easy to dismiss it as miserable pulp, which absolves them from dealing honestly with what the authors legitimately wanted to establish as unshakable truth.

Let's not be misunderstood: we fully and wholeheartedly agree with what Messrs. de Borchgrave and Moss have to say. It's the way they say it that we

out to the front lines; one does not like to confront reminders of one's own corruption. Thus *The Spike* is getting the spike; truth and fiction merge. The novel does reach a full and satisfying conclusion, yet the action continues outside the book. By implication we are all actors in the drama indicated by de Borchgrave and Moss. In the fictionalized version, the conspiracy is unveiled. But in real life? That question is still unanswered, and so the plot is unfinished. *The Spike* is Living Theatre. □

bewail. We believe that a grand opportunity to make a momentous statement has been wasted. Here we have two highly respected journalists, experts on the contemporary political scene, who are able to make a fateful announcement that could influence historical events, and whose minds and hearts are in the rightest possible place. Yet to influence the thinking of people by means of *one* novel, one must impress, convince, or at least attract the attention of those who feed the minds of the masses on a daily basis. One must involve them in a dispute. For literature to do such a thing it must be either inspired by an extraordinary talent or armored with impeccable seriousness. There are novels in the history of literature that have done just that. *The Possessed* weakened the reigning faith in political radicalism. So did Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* changed the English-speaking world's perception of Russia. Orwell and Silone did more to dissolve communism's sway over the post-World War II intelligentsia than tons of learned treatises and the most authentic research documents could have done. Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* is credited with doing more damage to the cohesion of the Communist Party cadres' spirit all over the world than any factual political catastrophe. Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* did more for

the social renaissance of Catholicism than the Church would like to admit.

What sorely disturbs us is that rarely in the current history of the written word have we witnessed a more stunning symbiosis of correctness of moral premise and cognitive thesis, rooted in accurately dissected political reality, with such ineptness of literary form and technique. Messrs. de Borchgrave and Moss obviously desired to tell us that we are disarming ourselves morally and mentally, thus enabling our archenemies, the Soviets, to pervert our entire apparatus of state, society and culture by some abysmally convoluted manipulations of a vital contemporary social device—information. To convey *this* to us, they chose the novel as their vehicle. But a novel, to be effective, must notice the complexity of human reality, on the side of both right and wrong. Even cheap novels must somehow reflect this complexity, at least through melodrama that suggests some semblance of the human condition. Someone once said that every intelligent person can write one passable novel; this distinguishes him or her from a novelist, who can write many. Messrs. de Borchgrave and Moss are *two* intelligent persons, and we expected from them something more than from one average, intelligent person. True, they are journalists and, as such, their forte is noticing, not interpreting and analyzing, facts. But literature has thrived on intelligent journalism since the time of Defoe, if not before. By choosing the novel as their form, the authors took upon themselves an obligation that remains largely unfulfilled. We might not expect from them Graham Greene's mastery, Somerset Maugham's sophistication or even le Carré's dreary craftsmanship, but just exercising their own prodigious knowledge and intelligence would help. Controlling the literary taste a bit would be in order. And it would probably do the job. Why did they choose to release their work in this shape? Haste? A be-