

Half a Sheep is Better Than None

A great deal of the pleasure of reading “Project Halfsheep: or How the Agency’s Alien Got High” by Susan Hasler comes from reading the novel on several levels.

One level is the story of an alien from the planet Utorb who crash lands on earth and falls into the hands of the American military and the CIA shortly after World War 2.

A second level is a view through a window of irony into the culture of the CIA in its green and cowboy days, when fear of Communists was at its highest and justified doing almost anything on behalf of the “free world.” That “anything” included experiments with unwitting and unsuspecting subjects, often administering drugs to the unwary, as the CIA did for example in houses of prostitution in San Francisco and New York, so the effects could be observed. Humor and the alien’s unique point of view ameliorates to a degree the more horrific effects of those experiments. Like looking at the head of Medusa in a mirror, reality is made bearable.

A third level is the braiding of several themes which suggest some of the author’s biography, giving us a template of how a CIA veteran of many years of hand-to-hand combat with genuine enemies of the nation, the culture of the agency, men who were contemptuous and abusive of women, and the politics of careerism and expediency – how she managed to manage all that. The author’s humanity, values, and commitments, which must have evolved through years at the agency, permeate those threads and, I suggest, culminate in the choices made by the alien.

The frustration that comes with that hand-to-hand combat takes a toll. If consequences are unacknowledged, a person can wind up bent, but when the emotions are felt and “owned,” they can be channeled into narratives like this one, translated into literary artfulness, that is, that serves a higher purpose, and translated as well into an enjoyable story that masquerades as a science fiction/”spy novel” but is so much more. As one of the characters in the books says, it was not worth it to read popular spy novels because they are “so silly.” The author ought to know.

This book is not silly. It is deadly serious but the portraits of military and intelligence professionals, composites one guesses of the middle-of-the-bell curve careerists the author met along the way, constitute a dark farce, a bittersweet comedy, although sometimes it is just plain awful, as we grasp what things were and are done, with deadly consequences.

Any person over thirty can make a case for succumbing to the inhumanity into which they are assimilated by their corporate structure over time as they learn the unwritten but essential rules of the culture and disobey them to their detriment—whatever the culture, governmental, corporate, religious, academic, non-profit – they all require it to a degree.

But perhaps the sixteen extant intelligence structures ask even more of a person because reinforcement is from within, while brickbats are thrown – often by those mired in

invincible ignorance – from the outside. That’s one reason the willingness of the director to “go to the mattresses” to defend a team that can not speak for itself is so important. That dynamic makes compliance with the ethos of the agencies even more compelling. It also makes internal conflicts inevitable. The emotions shelved during a long career do not go away, and in “Project Halfsheep” as in Hasler’s “Intelligence,” the residual fury glows through the narrative like white fire through the chinks of a stove.

When one works “inside” – when one works for the CIA – what one can say “outside” and how one can say it is highly constrained. Even fiction is forbidden as an outlet if classified information, however disguised, is revealed. The lead character in “Three Days of the Condor,” a CIA operative, read fiction, after all, to learn what was real. That narrows the choices for a person unused to being quiet (e.g. Susan Hasler, these novels constituting the proof of my assertion), and who choose as a path to sanity the alchemy of fiction. Literary works are more than biography or therapy – such a reductionist approach leaves out the essence and value of the work – but it’s impossible to read Project Halfsheep without picking up on the themes as biographically significant. Those themes are woven into a skein which refuses to sacrifice the “white hot rage” as I called it in a review of “Intelligence” which is transformed into a dramatic narrative that transcends whatever motives triggered the author’s literary career.

In addition, one way to bypass that taboo on revealing classified information is to wait until the details are long past and/or no longer classified (duh), when it is safe to tell the story. Then the story can be used to speak to current issues without naming them, a standard method of political satire. This story, set in the 1940s and 1950s, is about the errors made, once upon a time, in pursuit of techniques of brainwashing and the value of using hallucinogens on unsuspecting subjects. Details of those projects were leaked into the public domain only because financial documents were overlooked when the Director ordered all documents related to them destroyed. So history piggybacks on fiction for those unwilling to research historical details.

But Project Halfsheep does more than that. The story is dramatic because it comes to life through characters with mixed motives some of whom change as they engage with the alien over time. A capacity for growing empathy is conveyed by the female psychiatrist Lee, culminating in claiming her own biographical details as source materials for her personality and career. But some of the people to whom the alien is delivered change little or not all. They treat the alien as a creature, a thing, with no “humanity” (so to speak). The progressive revelation of the Halfsheep’s humanity, enabling the reader to participate vicariously in the transformation of the hapless prisoner from cultural and biological anomaly to a friend who acts on behalf of another at a critical moment, culminates in an epiphany: one feels at the end more sympathetic, more empathetic, to the Halfsheep (read the book to see why and how the alien gains its various names, which are pretty funny) than to most of the humans, whose treatment of the “other,” symbolized by the alien, is dehumanizing of both. The “other” is not just the captive creature, however, whose otherness is obvious as a benchmark but women above all who are abused by men, “enemies” dehumanized so they can be tortured, “direct reports” who in a hierarchical military culture are treated as less than human by superiors – just about

every relationship in the book is characterized by abuse and over time the abused discover ways to set boundaries (often at significant cost to themselves) and the abusers respond in various ways to the autonomy, initiative and boldness of people who are mad as hell and just won't take it any more.

All that is in "Project Halfsheep." So while there are laugh-out-loud moments of dark farce, the narrative as a whole is sobering. It invites the reader to apply the details of the bygone period in which the narrative takes place to current events: the use of torture in the war against terror (I don't mean water boarding, I mean torture, the kind that results in what interrogators call an "oops death"), persistent inequities in military cultures and the intelligence "community," and the demonization of others to justify savage treatment when they won't do as they are told.

So yes, laughs punctuate the tension, but the book as a whole isn't funny. It's a vehicle for a serious rendition of behaviors and issues that obviously are more than academic to the author. After a lifetime in the "mines" of the CIA, these issues clearly matter to her more than a little.

Hasler obviously has the skills of an analyst – separating signals from noise, connecting dots, synthesizing and articulating a narrative that is not projected or imposed on the data but emerges from the data points themselves. Years in "the mines" have also honed the skill of arguing her position against inevitable pushback from well-meaning colleagues, careerists with other agendas, men who just don't like women in positions of responsibility, and politicians who distort and abuse the end product of analysis for their own purposes. That experience strengthens and stiffens one's backbone, because one learns that nothing but forthrightness works – not deference, or laughing and touching a man's arm coquettishly, or silence that signifies assent – nothing. This shows up above all in the psychiatrist Lee, but maybe the reader can glimpse a little of the author in her role as analyst in the HBO documentary, "In Search of Bin Laden," which illuminates the context of some of her counter-intelligence work after 9/11.

In addition, over a long career, Hasler had the intelligence, imagination and empathy to write speeches for three CIA directors. That requires a grasp of the real essence of the other, personality as well as positions, and that goes beyond left-brain analysis. (I once had a "cottage industry" writing speeches for someone a lot less significant than agency directors and know that it takes getting inside the skin of another and articulating their positions in their own voice.) That is what Hasler tries and mostly accomplishes with her delineation of the culture of Utorb and the Halfsheep. I say "mostly" because the fabric weakens from time to time, the construction is sometimes cerebral rather than imaginative, it is thought, that is, then written, translated from ideas rather than spoken in the native tongue of the culture and species and embodied in images and dramatic events.

That imperfect accomplishment suggests something demanded by real counter-intelligence – the understanding of humans from another culture, another thought world, and getting inside them, working them from the inside out. That task is always imperfectly achieved, however native we go. So if that's a flaw in the book, it is because

the reach – to another planetary culture entirely, to a personal history that is genuinely “other” – is so far, as the author attempts to intertwine the story of the alien with the stories of all the other “others” in the book.

The psychiatrist Lee is assigned to observe a male protagonist, Lloyd, who was traumatized by torture, making him a hybrid of a manly-type man and a damaged and abused human i.e. a “womanly” man in terms of the metaphors of the book (“I’d rather be on the side of the human spirit,” he says, identifying the ethos that ultimately competes with abuse). Lloyd’s sister Trudie understands the alien straightaway, in part because her own primary relationship has taught her empathy beyond the norm. Trudie has to learn a strategy to liberate herself from the derision and contempt of a man whose cruelty would be cartoonish if it wasn’t on the front pages (or web sites) every day.

So yes, abusive relationships characterize most relationships in the book, one way or another, whether it is a superior berating and demeaning a direct report, men contemptuous of women, or the treatment of an alien subjected to horrendous experiments in order to learn what Communists (we thought) were doing to brainwash Americans. That latter thread treats our early attempts to do that – Projects Bluebird, Artichoke (thinly disguised here as “Asparagus”), MK Ultra and more. Those experiments, we know now, were ironic, in that the Communists had no secret method of brainwashing, but used brutal techniques synchronous with their military and political cultures. The effort to duplicate their techniques was also ironic in two other ways – (1) it parallels the CIA’s appointment of itself as an ad hoc “ministry of culture” to covertly create and sustain books, magazines, movies, art expositions, media of every kind, to show the superiority of a free and open society, but (ironically) executed covertly and secretly, and (2) the creation of severe training regimens to accustom Americans to torture, using methods that were not used by anyone else, but which became our methods to interrogate prisoners in the war on terror when their inventor was charged with that interrogation.

The recitation of the details of the use of powerful drugs on unsuspecting subjects—the CIA, after all, brought us LSD - is safe because so much time has passed, so there is no worry about accountability for those actions. Verisimilitude is enhanced by the casual mention of, for example, Frank Olson (called “Fred Ogden” in the book) who died as a result of a long plunge from a high window after he was fed LSD. That story can be referenced because we know about it now, and accountability is moot, since we know that attempts by the family to sue the government for damages have never availed. In fact, they never do.

One particularly humorous account that resonates with “what everybody knows” is a story of the “Roswell event,” here depicted as a red herring created from whole cloth as an act of misdirection (“look over here while we really recover an alien there”). The method if not the particular event is absolutely solid and common practice in operations of cover and deception. In the context of the story, it is one big funny “dot” which cannot be connected to other dots, a linkage UFOlogists seek, without success. The anecdote

also suggests the real extent of what organizations with prodigious resources can do to create illusions and misdirection.

Reviewing “Intelligence,” I noted that anger at political expediency both inside and outside the agency was ever present, and I have to return to that fact. Lee is angry too, made so by continuous marginalization, and so is Trudie, but the Halfsheep’s angry response is mitigated by different cultural and biological structures. As the alien comes to understand both the intermittent light of the human spirit, interspersed with prolonged periods of torment, the reader grows in the realization that we and the alien do have a common shared “humanity.” “Humanity” in that sense transcends species and forms of intelligent life.

I can only infer that Hasler sustained her own “humanity” in a somewhat similar way. Her 23 years at CIA resulted in a strong no-nonsense woman who learned the value of telling it like it is (and the futility of holding anything back), a woman who had to balance the higher motives of a career in intelligence with the facts of life on the ground (or underground in “the mines”) – who had to learn how to be a woman in a culture that did not treat women well (see e.g. “CIA Disciplines 15 Officers in Harassment Cases” an AP story on June 10 2014). She had to achieve that balance and still do excellent work. So she must have had at least two personas – she was at once the “other” who had to learn to be effective without sacrificing her own humanity in the process AND she was an analyst and speechwriter who had to understand deeply the “others” in her culture (men, for example, with all that assumption of privilege brought) and terrorists bent on doing horrific things to “us, our family and friends,” which defines the identity of who must be protected. It is difficult NOT to dehumanize terrorists in light of what they execute and plan. The high stakes of failure to prevent attacks can make one willing to do whatever is necessary to achieve those ends. No one who has not been in that particular trench can understand what that responsibility and knowledge generates in a human being. So it must have been a balancing act, and a psychological and spiritual challenge, to get inside the skin of the “enemy” and see the world through their eyes, which meant at the same time assimilating a deep knowledge of their humanity, the humanity of the “other,” which creates sympathy that must be transcended to stay on task. The allegiance to country, tribe, and clan, to the agency, to the task at hand had to be balanced against allegiance to humanity itself, to the “side of the human spirit,” and to the overarching commonality of the best and the worst in humans in this world and others.

Did I mention that the journey down these rabbit holes is enjoyable for the reader? The book is often delightful to read, however mitigated by serious issues. The reader steps back from a seemingly sci-fi work to reflect on how this is not just sci-fi after all, or if it is, it is sci-fi as metaphor for current challenges to the human spirit. Science fiction is, after all, how left brain societies dream of their futures.

It is not in the foreground of most people’s thoughts, that the challenge of confronting aliens not from south of the border but from other planetary civilizations and negotiating a common understanding in light of our obvious inferiority to more advanced cultures – that’s real, and that will be a primary challenge in this century. The encounter with the

other – other kinds of humans, other kinds of intelligent feeling beings – must engage us, like it or not, and a good way to start to do that, if you haven't already, is by reading this book. The themes are not trivial. Hasler does as well as one can, describing a culture that is not ours and the kinds of beings it might produce over a long and different history. She does so on behalf of all the beings who ally with the human spirit and the more-than-human spirit. By the end of the book, our understanding of the alien has become by proxy a journey toward a sense of kinship with the whole web of sentient life spun throughout the galaxies, and it reveals by contrast just how plain dumb we often are about that most of the time.

So the book is a journey from hierarchical structures of domination and control to learning how to live in networks and webs, in which presence and participation at nodes are the sources of our real power. That power is intrinsic to our humanity and is inviolable, and the only thing enemies of the human spirit can do is convince us we don't have it, so we won't use it. Lloyd, Lee, Trudie, and the Halfsheep all transcend the people and systemic dynamics that assault their shared humanity to learn how to exercise that power with courage, dignity, and when the chips are down, genuine heroism.