

“Intelligence” by Susan Hasler (Thomas Dunne Books. St. Martin’s Press: New York 2010)

A review by Richard Thieme

There is enough white-hot rage in this book to steam a skunk.

Take that as a compliment. Twenty-one years at the CIA in diverse capacities would generate post-traumatic stress in anyone, but not many can pen a narrative that addresses the relevant characters, issues, and complexities of that tenure. “Intelligence” pretty much does, within the constraints of agency pre-publication review.

This book is more or less true, I believe, to its ultimate purpose, which is to channel the complex, sometimes contradictory vectors of energy that warred within the author during her 21 years of service into characters with conflicting points of view, emotions, and allegiances. If there is a flaw in the book, it is that those conflicts result in a “happy ending” at odds with the headlines, if not today’s, then certainly tomorrow’s.

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free,” reads the ironic quote at the entrance to the CIA, ironic because the biblical quote refers to that transcendent truth that includes and surpasses all lesser allegiances (which the biblical narrative casts as various forms of idolatry) whereas the agency is fused with the lesser purposes of the nation state that sanctions its work and methods. (I once asked a Naval intelligence analyst about the sticky problem of “intelligence ethics,” and he said, “we have a code: don’t lie, don’t cheat, don’t steal. But it doesn’t say, Don’t kill. That’s why we exist.”)

It gets messy, once one is assimilated into the “inside circle” of an agency like the CIA where those higher imperatives are lopped off at the start from the definition of the mission. Over time the addictive drug of being an insider consumes one. Having access to inside information, knowing what others can only guess, and often guess wrong, receiving reinforcement only from one’s cohorts for the privilege of being special, exempt, and in the know, receiving permission to violate legal or ethical norms that outsiders must acknowledge from time to time ... over time, this leads to a murky mix in which the struggle to do one’s job, keep one’s job, and keep one’s soul more or less intact ... well, it all gets messy, over time.

And over time, intense bonds of collegiality and friendship and the pressures of keeping secrets and working together in the trenches bond soldiers to one another. That’s depicted vividly in this book. So inevitably tensions mount when there is a political agenda and directive to distort intelligence on behalf of a political purpose, particularly when it makes the practitioner of the craft look stupid or inept despite the facts.

Yes, that has always been true, a friend of mine at one of the agencies said. But post 9/11, it got much worse. Many of us hated what the administration did to paint us as the bad guys, when they were lying and deceiving while we were trying to do our jobs. They only

wanted results that supported a predetermined agenda, namely, to go to war in Iraq, with predictable consequences. When we warned that such a war would fan the flames of jihad worldwide, we were summarily dismissed – as characters in this book, so warning, are dismissed.

All that, I believe, is one source of the anger in this work. Oh, there's humor, yes, amusing incidents and relationships, that ameliorate the fury, but the white-hot fire burns through cracks like the flames in a pot-belly stove. So one obvious subtext of this book is to pay back those responsible for that distortion and what it did personally to those in the trenches who could not mount a podium and shout denials in response. All they could do was leak it, hint it, and when they could, put it into fictional form.

Another subtext results from the author's twenty-one years of growing frustration at the self-interested territory-and-career protecting agendas and behaviors that make a person crazy inside the agency – and inside other organizations, too, of course (an executive of a large bank told me they spend at least 60% of their time in internal politics, like a whale regulating its internal temperature so it doesn't cook from the inside out). Everyone of a certain age knows that it is the unwritten rules that say how one had better behave in an organizational culture and that one violates those rules to one's personal and professional peril. That awareness informs this book in both positive and negative ways – positive because the writer, Susan Hasler, was sufficiently motivated to disclose all this in the guise of fiction, but negative because it turns the narrative into a wish-fulfillment, a tale of how she hopes or wishes it would turn out in the actual agency, the real world. A wish fulfillment is a dream, as Freud said, and a dream does not always make for good literature. Think of the movie "Chinatown" with the alternative happy ending that wasn't used, Evelyn Mulwray killing Noah Cross, getting off free, hitching up with Jake, and the whole corrupt mess exposed and dismantled.

In the real world, it doesn't happen that way. That's why Roman Polanski's canny version won out, and why the film lasts. Layers of corrupt allegiances and practices have more than nine lives and hide better, too, than any cat.

So any sane person would become angry, dealing with all that but muzzled by secrecy agreements. Yet ... this fictional narrative of work in the "Mines" as the trenches of daily intelligence operations are called, saw the light of day fairly quickly. I know former intelligence professionals whose attempts to publish were long stalled or so censored that the remaining text made the work unpublishable. I recall Melissa Mahle, who had hoped to make a speech on rendition for an intelligence ethics conference, removing herself from the agenda because the agency had "gutted her talk" by removing 75% of it – not because the details were unknown but because her speech would affirm them. Publication in the media allowed for "no comment" or plausible deniability. Her speech would not. So it wasn't that people didn't know, but that they did not know "officially" and it is official truth that matters.

That in fact is a major theme of this book, that "official truth" and the truth that sets you free often conflict. The dream is that the half-mad intelligence agent, Maddie, will have

her day before Congress and cameras and expose the “real bad guys” and set the agency right again, that is, realign the CIA or an alternative part of it anyway with its real task, to gather intelligence and provide it in a useful form for leaders with some modicum of integrity and the desire to use it in the right way. It is ironic, of course, that it takes someone who has gone over the edge and thrown caution to the wind to speak the simple truth.

In short, the fact that this book is out, in this form, means that this is a story somebody wanted told. The distortion of intelligence, bent to political agendas in ways that cost lives and careers, distortion as both policy and practice, must enrage many senior practitioners of the craft. Some of them want us to know, that while they can not mount the podium and speak, they can allow a “fictionalized” account to make their point.

I returned to writing fiction myself when a friend at one of the agencies said, in effect, you can’t talk about the things we talk about unless you write fiction. It’s the only way you can tell the truth. The result was “Mind Games,” nineteen stories of edgy anomalies published earlier this year (www.thiemeworks.com). It is only a hunch, of course, but an informed hunch, that a similar motivation fueled the writing of this novel.

The public biography of Susan Hasler also suggests some other conflicts that generated the heat and light in this book. She was an intelligence analyst, which gives credibility to detailed scenes of inside-the-agency dynamics revealing the frustrations, political strife, and personal interactions that keep us reading. If this were only fiction, that is, rather than a wink-wink nod-nod peek inside, some of the narrative might be of less interest. The conflicts at the heart of the narrative derive at least some of their interest from the overlay our brains constantly provide, comparing and contrasting the “real” world of the past ten years with events in the book.

Hasler’s biography also states that she wrote speeches for three directors of Central Intelligence and one director of the National Recognizance Office. Having written a few speeches for others myself, always as a “ghost,” I know that this means an ability to get inside the mind of another, to see the world through their eyes like some empathetic science fiction alien taking over the apparatus of an earthling, speaking in their own words, from their perspectives. That same empathy and ability to hold multiple points of view in creative tension while managing one’s own cognitive dissonance until some integration of data takes place, that testifies to Hasler’s street cred and significant abilities as a counter terrorism and Soviet analyst as well. Her years of experience are evident.

So Hasler had to learn to manage all that, do her work, keep her job, keep her cats healthy like one of the characters, and stay reasonably sane. The ability to manage multiple personalities and perspectives and remember how to come home to one’s own (while reading details of ingenious ways others are planning to kill us) distinguishes someone who is bitterly sane from one who is over the line and as crazed as the character Maddie threatens to become. Maddie seems to be an alter-ego who carries the rage on behalf of the group that is not allowed to do their work. The affirmation of Maddie’s vision is one way for the author to remain loyal to the ultimate truth. The challenge is to find a way to

integrate Maddie's loyalty to the higher purpose of both agency and world with allegiance to the nation state and all its bad actors and detours and do justice to it all.

But as I said, the resolutions in the book are probably more wish fulfillment than fact, as much as "outsiders" can know or guess. How often the employees of the CIA stand and turn their backs en masse on a director they have learned to disrespect is a matter of conjecture. But celebrating the possibility is obviously a therapeutic path for this author who spent so many years unable to speak "outside" of what she knew and is now searching for a suitable voice that enables multiple streams of her life to come together—a fact which leads Maddie in the book but the author as well, perhaps, to conclude that leaving the agency for a dull academic life would condemn her to boredom and irrelevance, once one has been inside. Academics may pontificate at length but don't know what they don't know or even that they don't know. Life "outside" is literally unthinkable, a de facto lobotomy, except as a daydream that enables one to make it through the day. Think of Henry Hill in the movie "Goodfellas," just a schnook in the witness protection program, instead of the adrenalin junkie who loved a life of crime despite its pitfalls.

In the final dream-wish of the book, a vindicated and triumphant Maddie remains to direct an "alternative" track whose job is to take names and kick ass, which she anticipates doing with relish and glee, and to keep the agency safe for those who not only seek the truth in all of its forms but seek as well to speak truth to power and live to speak another day.

<sigh>

If only.

Another personal aside: I was once advised by a therapist to read about trauma because my interaction with those who had been tortured and those who torture others had pushed me over a line. "You're showing symptoms of secondary trauma," she said.

So is Susan Hasler, I believe, in this novel, and the book strikes me as an attempt to reconcile the multiple conflicts of which I have written and find peace. Having projected her mind and heart into the persona of three DCIs, having done years of detailed research with access to data most don't know and spent sleepless nights rehearsing the dire threats, imagining the psyches of Soviets and terrorists and putting herself in their places as much as in the directors' speeches, splicing her mind to the purposes of others, she must now take back the strings of all those marionettes and make her own soul dance to a tune congruent with her deeper commitments and the self she remains.

Her loyalties did clearly include those in the trenches, her brothers and sisters, who bonded in the face of the live fire of real threats, trying to act on behalf of the higher good that once motivated their youthful hearts. Those loyalties are tested in the context of the bitter truths of political life that veterans like Hasler know and can never unlearn. The terrorists' threats and actions, presented as the main narrative thread, are intense but less

emotionally dense than the conflicts of the professionals in the trenches. That's where Hesler lived her life, after all, and decades of interfacing with those diverse people and agendas, as abrasive as hair shirts, requires one imagines a certain amount of purging. .

The "enemy," then, is the "voice with many names" that articulates in brief the ethos of Islamic terrorists, but also intelligence professionals themselves, and bureaucrats, and political hacks. That fact has serious consequences. As career goals eclipse counter-terrorism efforts and political spin eclipses facts about a world that can never be perfectly secured, the real threats of terrorism are amplified. A la "coming in from the cold," the author tells us aside how bad it really is, how enraging to watch television "news" programs juxtapose images to create an unthinking sheeplike population that neither knows the truth nor how to find it as it is led to war and more.

The author no doubt knows the beltway joke, that the CIA we think exists is not the real CIA, but a front projected into the world to convince enemies we can not do intelligence properly. The real work of a real CIA is hidden in some bunker in the hills of Virginia.

That's the CIA with which the author chooses to identify. That's the one to which she believes she belongs.

Perhaps that's true for all of us, one way or another. Perhaps that's how we all live with ourselves.

I strongly recommend this book. It is really worth reading. The author, having left the agency after decades of work, remains in her brain inside the "real CIA," in a spin cycle that may go on for the rest of her life "outside." The rest of us can only speculate and guess, and watch as growing numbers of intelligence workers commute from suburbia, park in vast lots, then disappear into doors in the sides of hills which from the air look just like grass. All we know at the end is that they disappear into doors to which "we the people" do not for the moment have keys and they can only report their experience in veiled and sanctioned ways.