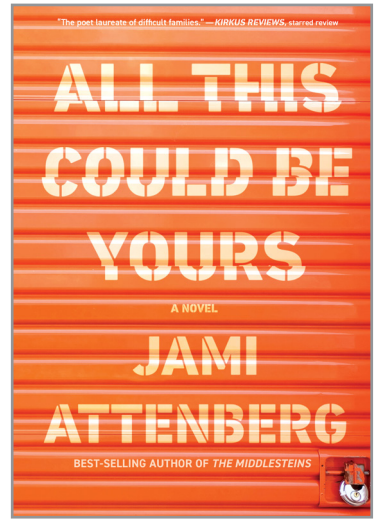
All This Could Be Yours

Author: Jami Attenberg (b. 1971)
Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (Boston). 304 pp.
Type of work: Novel
Time: Late 2010s, with flashbacks
Locales: New Orleans, Louisiana; suburban Connecticut; Los Angeles, California



Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

All This Could Be Yours *explores the dynamics of a dysfunctional family when its patriarch dies. It is author Jami Attenberg's seventh book.*

Principal characters

Victor Tuchman, a seventy-three-year-old corrupt developer who is abusive to his family

Barbra Tuchman, his wife, who turned a blind eye to his misdeeds in exchange for a life of wealth and comfort

Alex Tuchman, his daughter, a divorced lawyer who seeks the truth about his crimes

Gary Tuchman, his younger child, an assistant director who works in film and television

Twyla Tuchman, his daughter-in-law, Gary's wife, whose life is turned upside down when he and Barbra move to New Orleans

Jami Attenberg is known for her talent for writing about dysfunctional families. She first gained critical acclaim with *The Middlesteins* (2012), a novel about a family matriarch whose food addiction sets off a darkly comedic series of events. As demonstrated in *The Middlesteins*, Attenberg excels at presenting different people's perspectives on shared issues. She utilizes this skill again in *All This Could Be Yours* (2019). Much like *The Middlesteins*, *All This Could Be Yours* explores the ways that one family member's negative actions can have a ripple effect on everybody else.

All This Could Be Yours is an unconventional novel in that it is not particularly plot driven. Rather, it aims to explore the emotional terrain of its characters in the wake of a tragedy. Attenberg begins the story with the inciting incident of Victor Tuchman having a heart attack in his New Orleans condo, unbeknownst to his wife, Barbra, who is in the other room. The rest of the narrative takes place within the next twenty-four hours, save for the epilogue. It is Victor's last day alive, which Attenberg uses as a catalyst to force the rest of the Tuchmans to reckon with their complex feelings about him. The chapters are divided into different times of that day, including "Morning," "Midday," "Late Afternoon," "Evening," and "Midnight."

From the book's first line, Attenberg ensures that readers understand exactly who Victor is. She writes, "He was an angry man, and he was an ugly man." It soon comes to light that Victor's name reflects his personality as an overaggressive businessman who used violence and unethical means throughout his life to ensure that he got what he wanted. He was incapable of empathy or morals and abused everyone in his personal and professional lives. Notably, although Victor is among the most important characters in *All This Could Be Yours*, Attenberg rarely leaves readers alone with him. The only time that she presents the narrative from his perspective is in the first chapter. Throughout the rest of the book, he only exists on the fringes of other characters' memories.

Courtesy of Zack Smith Photography

Jami Attenberg is an American writer best known for her best-selling novel The Middlesteins *(2012). Her essays have appeared in major publications, such as the* New York Times Magazine *and the* Wall Street Journal. All This Could Be Yours *is her seventh book.*

Victor is initially presented as an enigma. While it is clear that all the Tuchmans have strong negative feelings about him, the reasons for them are not. Attenberg doles out the truth about who Victor was as a person slowly and carefully by jumping to different family members' perspectives in alternating third-person chapters, using their memories and feelings to provide additional pieces to the puzzle of who Victor was. The driving force within this interesting cast is Victor and Barbra's daughter, Alex. A lawyer who is still grappling with her recent divorce, Alex flies to New Orleans to confront her father one last time on his deathbed. She is the most moral of the Tuchmans as well as the most determined to learn the truth about his crimes.

Alex's brother, Gary, is perhaps the most traumatized by Victor, but Attenberg uses little of the narrative to investigate his feelings. Instead, she spends most of the novel with its female characters: Alex, Barbra, and Gary's wife, Twyla. Barbra proves to be a vessel into Victor's past, the woman who stood by as his immorality and abuse worsened. Her complicity was motivated in part by her desire to be taken care of with wealth. As a young woman, she had seen herself as a prize that Victor had won, but as time went on, she began to feel trapped and resentful. Meanwhile, Twyla provides insight into Victor's misbehaviors later in life. After Victor's life of wrongdoing finally caught up to him, he and Barbra packed up their life in Connecticut and moved to New Orleans, where Gary and Twyla lived. As a result of this move, Twyla became another victim in Victor's web of destruction. Through the completely disparate perspectives of these women, Attenberg demonstrates her talent for developing well-wrought characters.

In an interesting twist, Attenberg expands the narrative beyond its core cast of family members. Several chapters follow characters outside of the Tuchmans: individuals

who are in their orbit but only passing by. Rather than just create one-dimensional characters to provide further commentary on the Tuchmans, however, Attenberg gives them their own worlds, dilemmas, and goals. For example, she spends an early chapter following Corey, the paramedic who first attended Victor after his heart attack. Still living with his ex-wife, Corey plans on winning over his girlfriend, Sharon, so that he can ask to move in with her. Attenberg uses a later chapter to explore Sharon's life. Sharon's story line about her sneaking into her neighbor's yard to pull out weeds provides Attenberg an opportunity to depict life in the city after Hurricane Katrina and how gentrification is affecting many of the families there. Sharon is also the coroner who performs Victor's autopsy and makes sharp conclusions about the kind of person he was. In addition to Corey and Sharon, other characters that Attenberg gives narrative time to include a drugstore cashier and a stroke patient at the hospital. Ultimately, by including these tertiary characters and their experiences in the novel, Attenberg fleshes out the world of her novel and makes it feel more real.

Except for a few detours, *All This Could Be Yours* is set primarily in New Orleans and Connecticut. On the page, Connecticut comes across as cold, sterile, and often claustrophobic. Arguably, this choice reflects how the Tuchmans felt living with Victor, who essentially kept them hostage with his wealth and aggressive behavior. Meanwhile, Attenberg's depiction of New Orleans is more detailed and welcoming. Although this might also be an effort to provide insight into the characters' feelings, it is also likely due to Attenberg residing in New Orleans. Her love for the city is overwhelmingly evident; she takes great pains to capture its essence beyond its tourist appeal. As the characters move throughout the city, Attenberg includes the names of real streets, parks, restaurants, and bars. It is clear that she can see exactly where they are in her head, and thanks to her beautiful, descriptive writing, Attenberg excels at transporting her readers there.

All This Could Be Yours is an incredibly well-written, enjoyable novel. As such, it received overwhelmingly positive reviews. Most critics extolled the author's ability to create complex yet believable characters and families. In her four-star review for *USA Today*, Barbara VanDenburg wrote that Attenberg is "a masterful psychoanalyst, crafting characters whose mental and emotional journeys surprise even as they make perfect intuitive sense. She doesn't flinch from digging into life's messiness, pressing gently but resolutely into wounds to see what oozes out." Attenberg does present families almost as scientific specimens in need of careful dissection; in the process, she can reveal universal truths about human nature and relationships. Writing for the *New York Times*, Brock Clarke also commented on Attenberg's talent for character-driven storytelling, saying, "Attenberg gets so deep into the psyches of her characters that the story ends up seeming electric with ruin, and with possible resurrection."

Of course, *All This Could Be Yours* is not perfect. Occasionally, the writing feels stilted. Heller McAlpin noted this in an NPR review: "Attenberg's prose is never limp or tepid, though she occasionally over-reaches, as with a 'self-important and disapproving' moon." Although the novel's literary style may come across as too flowery at times, these occurrences are ultimately rare. Perhaps what is a bigger shortcoming is Attenberg's choice to not spend much time with the character of Gary. It eventually

becomes clear that Gary was even more affected by Victor's selfish and abusive behavior than Alex was, and yet Attenberg keeps his story line the shortest. She likely did so to focus on the costs bad men have on women, but limiting Gary's time on the page feels like a missed opportunity.

Despite its flaws, *All This Could Be Yours* is an extremely important book that reflects the time in which it was published. Through the character of Victor, Attenberg succeeds in examining the culture of toxic masculinity. At the end of the day, Victor represents the kind of men with whom American culture has been reckoning in recent years—media moguls, businessmen, and politicians whose quest for wealth and power has come at the expense of those around them. They represent everything that is wrong with late capitalism in America: how immoral, cutthroat behavior has been encouraged and even rewarded, despite its harms, because it generated profit. Where there has been much conversation around how such behavior has caused an extreme wealth gap and the oppression of women, Attenberg is among the first authors to examine its effects on a micro level. In the process, she reveals how rotten this type of masculinity truly is. Specifically, she demonstrates how the men who try to conquer the world end up hurting everyone around them—even the families they supposedly are doing it all for.

Emily Turner

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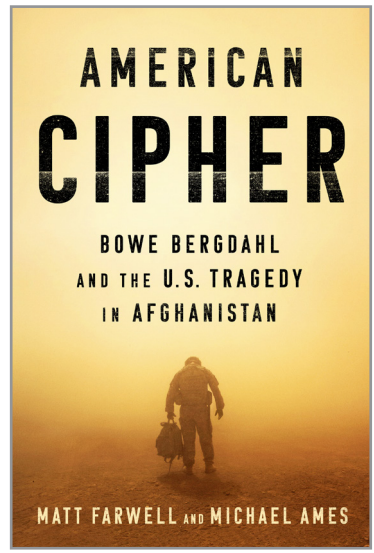
American Cipher
Bowe Bergdahl and the US Tragedy in Afghanistan

Authors: Matt Farwell and Michael Ames
Publisher: Penguin Press (New York). 400 pp.
Type of work: Biography, current affairs, history
Time: 1979–present day
Locales: Idaho, Afghanistan, Pakistan



Courtesy of Penguin Publishing Group

American Cipher *weaves the biography of Bowe Bergdahl, a US soldier whose capture by the Taliban-linked Haqqani network in 2009 and release in 2014 generated intense media coverage, with analysis of the complex military and political situation in Afghanistan.*

Principal personages

Bowe Bergdahl, a US Army soldier held captive by terrorists after deserting
Bob Bergdahl, his father
Jani, his mother
Jalaluddin Haqqani, founder of the Haqqani network that held Bergdahl captive
Kim Dellacorva, a.k.a. Kim Harrison, Bergdahl's friend, surrogate parent, and former employer
Lt. Col. Jason Amerine, leader of a US Army team tasked with rescuing Bergdahl

American Cipher: Bowe Bergdahl and the US Tragedy in Afghanistan operates on many levels: it is at once a biography and psychological examination of Bowe Bergdahl, the infamous deserter and terrorist captive, and a primer on (and critique of) US military involvement in Afghanistan. It is also a work with deep personal significance for coauthors Matt Farwell and Michael Ames. In particular, Farwell's experience as an Afghanistan War veteran both sparked his interest in the Bergdahl case and informed the book's perspective. He noted in interviews that he first heard the news that Bergdahl had gone missing on the same day in 2009 that a friend and fellow Afghanistan veteran died of a drug overdose, and he channeled his grief, depression, and anxiety into an almost obsessive attention to the story as it played out. This obsession worked to focus Farwell's mind, and he coauthored a profile of Bergdahl for *Rolling Stone* in 2012.

Bergdahl was released on May 31, 2014, in exchange for five Taliban prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The questionable circumstances of his capture and the terms of his release, negotiated under the auspices of the administration of President Barack Obama, quickly became fodder for online vitriol and inflammatory talk-show

Courtesy of Penguin Publishing Group

Matt Farwell is a freelance writer and contributor to the New York Times*,* Vanity Fair*, and* Rolling Stone*, among other publications. He is a US Army veteran.*

hosts. Bergdahl became a national figure almost overnight. He was accused of desertion, of risking the lives of his fellow soldiers, and of forcing the release of dangerous prisoners, while also becoming a symbol of an unpopular war and the American military's various miscalculations in the Afghan conflict. Farwell watched as Bergdahl, his family, his friends, and even his hometown were threatened and denounced, and felt compelled to offer a balanced look at the complex and nuanced story. He worked closely with Ames, a journalist who was also uniquely placed to tell the story, having worked for years in Bergdahl's native Idaho before covering the hostage saga for various national publications. Working with exclusive sources including Bergdahl's parents, Farwell and Ames set out to produce a definitive account of a bizarre episode in American history.

American Cipher begins with a prologue describing Bergdahl's interview with Major General Kenneth Dahl, who was leading the Army investigation into his alleged desertion in 2009. From the beginning, the authors assume that the reader already knows the general outline of the story: Bergdahl had walked away from his post, perhaps to join the Taliban, forcing a search that would cost American lives and resources. The implications of his desertion, subsequent capture by terrorists, and eventual release in a prisoner swap caused a media firestorm. For anyone who missed the initial coverage and debate over the case, it was further examined in excruciating detail by outlets such as the popular podcast *Serial* in 2015. Farwell and Ames approach the case as a fait accompli, using the fateful and nearly incomprehensible decision made by Bergdahl as an entry point into a wide-ranging investigation into Bergdahl's personal biography and the political, diplomatic, and military situation in Afghanistan. The prologue ends with Dahl's invitation to Bergdahl to tell his story, and Bergdahl responds that he will need to begin "before I joined the Army."

Farwell and Ames divide the book into five acts, each with between four and six chapters, which follow the general arc of Bergdahl's experience. The first section, "A Fantastic Plan," toggles back and forth between Bergdahl's early history—characterized by a series of odd decisions and misguided, perhaps delusional ideas formed in the crucible of a strict, somewhat isolated upbringing—and a history of US involvement in Afghanistan in the twentieth century. Indeed, the intertwining roots of Bergdahl's story stretch back well before his birth. For example, the opening chapter notes how Bowe Bergdahl's father, Bob, had his plans as an aspiring Olympic cyclist derailed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This connection, which may initially seem like a stretch, ultimately serves the narrative well. The Bergdahl family, like the United

States itself, was linked to Afghanistan in ways that had lasting consequences for all.

Bergdahl's childhood and young adult experiences are recounted in some detail. While he is recalled by his family and friends as an idealistic, hard-working young man, his obsession with military heroism and his conflicts with his family are troubling. He is helpful, handy, awkward, and a little frightening, obsessing over guns and knives in a way that seemed extreme even to ranchers and hunters. His ideals often clashed with reality, and Farwell and Ames paint a nuanced picture of an unstable but sympathetic young man in a strict but stable family. Perhaps most revealing is their detailed description of Bergdahl's breakdown after joining the Coast Guard in 2006, resulting in his discharge on medical grounds after a diagnosis of adjustment disorder and depression. When Bergdahl decided to enlist in the army after two years of increasingly erratic behavior, including self-harm and extreme risk-taking, the question that Farwell and Ames ask—and that the reader must then bring to the rest of the story—is why the US military would accept a young man so clearly unsuited to the rigors of war. The answer seems to be that they were simply desperate for soldiers. The instability and confusion Bergdahl was experiencing is in many ways mirrored in the tangled situation of the US Army itself in Afghanistan over the years.

Courtesy of Penguin Publishing Group

Michael Ames is a journalist whose work has appeared in The Atlantic, Newsweek, Slate, Harper's, *and other outlets.*

The scene is set for the unfolding tragedy that formally begins with Bergdahl's decision to walk off his post during the night of June 30, 2009. Act II, entitled "Lost," picks up with this moment, though his rationale is explained in Act I. His paranoia and hero delusion in full flower, Bergdahl decides that his unit, 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, headed by Lt. Col. Clint Baker, is corrupt and that its leaders, particularly Baker, are risking the lives of their soldiers. According to his later explanation, his desertion was part of a plan to subvert what he saw as the broken hierarchy of command. He knew leaving his post would trigger DUSTWUN, code for the all-points alert when a soldier goes missing. He would hike to the nearest large base of operations, where he would have the attention of senior officers and a chance to save his unit. He would be a legend.

Bergdahl's warped plan quickly falls apart, and the excruciating first days of his capture are described in detail, in part because they were scrutinized so closely after his release and subsequent trial. Farwell and Ames show how intercepted phone conversations, often poorly translated, were misunderstood and so seemed to indicate to some that Bergdahl had willingly joined the Taliban. In fact, he repeatedly attempted to escape, paid close attention to details of his captivity so he could later share information with his government, and suffered terribly at the hands of his captors. The

authors paint a detailed picture of his ordeal, and a striking juxtaposition begins to take place. As Bergdahl's world narrows, focusing his energy on escape or rescue, the search for him reveals widespread dysfunction at every level of the US government. Despite the readiness of Bergdahl's captors to negotiate for his release, miscommunication, crossed lines of authority, indifference, and interdepartmental finger-pointing stalled progress. Neither side in the negotiation felt that the other was operating in good faith. Figures throughout the US military and government used Bergdahl's captivity to forward their agenda, including justifying military actions in Afghanistan long after Bergdahl was known to have been moved across the border to Pakistan.

Farwell and Ames clearly expose the tensions building in the United States while Bergdahl is in captivity. Bob Bergdahl begins to realize that there is no clear plan to rescue his son, and his desperation spurs activism and radicalization. There are in fact many hard-working, well-meaning, intelligent people involved in efforts to bring the captured soldier home, but also serious obstacles to any meaningful progress. The CIA and the Pentagon are engaged in "eternal and bitter feuding," the FBI and the State Department also claim jurisdiction in the case but lack the resources to mount a rescue, and various politicians use the case to their benefit. In the end, it is only by bypassing the government's rules regarding hostage situations that Bergdahl is freed. By that point public opinion has turned so strongly against Bergdahl that many people consider the price too high—though Farwell and Ames debunk the common claim that American troops lost their lives searching fruitlessly for the deserter.

American Cipher has a clear message, one that weaves through the entire book: Bergdahl's story is a microcosm of the story of the United States involvement in Afghanistan. Both began with a plan born of a hero complex and unbalanced thinking and devolved into a far-ranging catastrophe with no clear goals or exit strategy. The costs have been astronomical. The war in Afghanistan has dragged on for decades and cost thousands of lives. Bergdahl's walk into the night ultimately made him, at least temporarily, the most hated man in America. Yet although Farwell and Ames are clearly critical of broad US military strategy, they otherwise succeed in presenting a fair, fact-based account. They show admirable balance, with sympathetic descriptions of many of the military personnel involved in the efforts to find and free Bergdahl and comfort and support his family. Once rescued, Bergdahl's treatment by the army, and by Dahl in particular, seems fair and just. Lt. Col. Jason Amerine, who took up the Bergdahl case in 2012 in a rational, comprehensive fashion, exposing many of the stumbling blocks to a successful rescue and forcing change at great personal cost, is another memorable figure.

If Bowe Bergdahl is seen as representing the war in Afghanistan in miniature, the public reaction to his capture, rescue, and trial can be seen as a reflection of the collective emotional response to the war. Farwell and Ames illuminate how people so easily channeled their anger or frustration at a seemingly unending conflict toward one deeply troubled soldier. Bergdahl's imprisonment and the aftermath of his rescue played out in the media and on the political stage. Talk shows denounced him as a traitor. Death threats emerged. From the presidential campaign trail, Donald Trump called

for his execution. *American Cipher* both examines how and why this frenzy developed and counteracts it by laying out the true complexity of the story with empathy, consideration, and grounding in facts and history.

In the end, after everything went so badly wrong, there is a ray of hope. Bergdahl ultimately got what he wanted all along: a full and frank hearing with senior army leadership. And identifying the compounding issues that led to both Bergdahl's and the nation's predicaments offers the potential that they can be corrected for future generations. *American Cipher*, which received strong critical praise, is itself an important step in this direction.

Bethany Groff Dorau, MA

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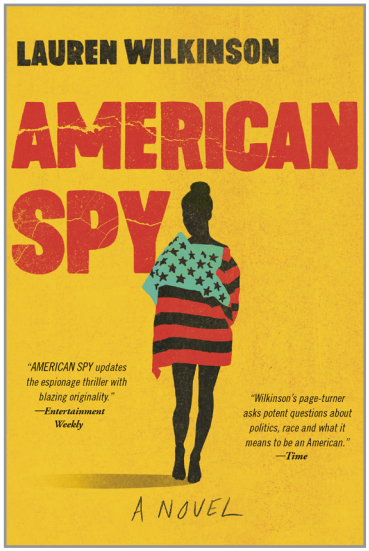
American Spy

Author: Lauren Wilkinson (b. 1984)
Publisher: Random House (New York). 304 pp.
Type of work: Novel
Time: 1962–92
Locales: Connecticut; Sainte-Anne, Martinique; New York City, New York; Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; Tamale, Ghana



Courtesy of Random House Publishing Group

A suspenseful thriller set during the Cold War, American Spy *blends fact and fiction in the story of a strong-willed FBI agent who is recruited for an undercover mission intended to subvert the government of a charismatic West African leader.*

Principal characters

Marie Madeleine Mitchell, a.k.a. Monica Williams, an intelligence officer with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
Tommy, her young son
William, her young son
Agathe, a.k.a. Mémé, her mother who lives on a farm in Martinique
Helene, her older sister
Mr. Ali, a long-tenured FBI undercover agent at the New York office
Ed Ross, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative
Daniel Slater, a CIA operative who had a romantic relationship with Helene
Thomas Sankara, an African revolutionary, president of Burkina Faso 1983–87

Lauren Wilkinson's political-espionage thriller *American Spy* opens in Connecticut in 1992. Protagonist Marie Mitchell, living with her two young sons, Tommy and William, and working as a translator, is awakened by an unknown sound within the house. She immediately unlocks a safe to retrieve her automatic weapon. Her instinct for sensing danger is proven reliable when the shadowy figure of a gun-wielding man appears in her bedroom. Marie tackles the intruder and they engage in a deadly wrestling match. When the man begins to strangle her, Marie's fingers find a dropped gun that she uses to shoot him in the head. Local police, summoned by a neighbor, question Marie about the incident. The police, satisfied it was a case of self-defense, leave and the body is removed. Marie gathers up her children, collects a few possessions and fake passports (hers bears the alias Monica Williams), and flees to Martinique. She takes refuge there with her mother, Agathe, who lives on a farm and is estranged from Marie's father, a policeman in New York.

American Spy is divided into three parts, moving unchronologically between 1962 and 1992 to explain who Marie is and how she got to this point in her life. The novel is related entirely from Marie's not entirely unbiased point of view and takes the form of a quasi-journal, weaving historical figures and events into the imagined plot. A scene from 1962, for example, shows Marie's squeamishness at the sight of blood; another scene, from 1987, involves a discussion of historical FBI misdeeds, such as the murder of activist Fred Hampton in Chicago. There are no daily entries, just a succession of well-observed scenes that, pieced together, reveal answers to many questions engendered through the attempted murder that opens the novel. The author, through Marie, seldom provides straightforward answers, preferring to allow readers to exercise their own deductive skills. Marie sketches with telling detail the influential people with whom she has come into contact. She describes their activities and her own, and supplies natural, realistic-sounding dialogue to flesh out characters. The journal is her legacy to Tommy and William, so when they are grown, they can better understand what she did and why she did it, in case something happens to her. Given her professional occupation, and her mention that the boys' father died a violent death, such an eventuality seems likely.

Much of the plot's momentum is fueled by her career in law enforcement, which also suggests a potential motivation behind the failed attack upon her. Marie—inspired by her father, a beat cop, and her older sister Helene, a military intelligence officer—joined the FBI in 1983 and remained with the agency until 1987. She served two years in Indianapolis before transferring to her hometown, New York City, where she became a member of the intelligence department. In New York, she is just one of more than 1,200 agents at the bureau's largest field office. As a woman, she is at a disadvantage in the conservative, male-oriented, misogynist environment. She is also one of the FBI's small contingent of people of color. Both her gender and race work against her in terms of being selected for choice assignments or securing promotions, though she has a staunch, dependable ally at the FBI in Mr. Ali, an African American man who offers her advice and favors.

Despite being passed up for promotions, her gender and race make Marie an asset in other ways. When new rules instituted under President Ronald Reagan allow the CIA free rein to investigate any domestic or foreign targets, CIA agent Ed Ross seeks Marie out for a special assignment. Thomas Sankara, a revolutionary who overthrew the government of Upper Volta in a coup and renamed the African country Burkina Faso ("Land of Incorruptible People"), is making a rare visit to New York. Ross wants Marie, in the guise of a United Nations tour guide, to keep Sankara under surveillance. Marie realizes she was chosen because she is black like Sankara, speaks fluent French, and is someone the Burkinabè leader would consider attractive. She senses there are other reasons for the assignment, but Ross will not disclose them, especially in front of her uninformed boss at the bureau. Marie turns down the job, despite the prospect of gaining valuable experience in the field, enhancing her reputation within the intelligence community, and pocketing tens of thousands of dollars promised as payment for her services to the CIA.

Later, as she walks home, a sinister black car follows Marie. Inside is Ross. He tells Marie he underestimated her and invites her to dinner to discuss the assignment in greater detail. At the restaurant, in order to gain Marie's trust by revealing his own vulnerability, Ross admits that he is gay; his partner, Philip, is present at the restaurant. With Philip dismissed, having served his purpose, Ross and Marie talk about the mission: the removal of Sankara from the leadership of Burkina Faso. Marie argues Sankara has done much for his nation: he is fighting disease, improving literacy, and enhancing women's rights. Ross says Sankara is also a communist, so his good works are tainted. The United States, via the CIA, wants to replace Sankara with a democratic system of government. Marie knows America has overtly and covertly meddled in foreign political affairs many times before. This project is the latest iteration of the national policy to influence the destiny of a sovereign nation for the benefit of the United States and to the detriment of the rival Soviet Union.

Courtesy of Random House Publishing Group

A 2013 Center for Emerging Writers Fellow and a participant in the MacDowell Colony and Djerassi Resident Artists program, Lauren Wilkinson has published work in publications like the New York Times*. She taught writing at Columbia University and at the Fashion Institute of Technology.* American Spy *is her debut novel.*

In this instance, the key to Sankara's downfall, Ross maintains, is to demonstrate to the people of his country that he is a hypocrite. Marie extrapolates from information given and realizes that the CIA wants her to seduce Sankara, who is married and a vocal advocate of marital fidelity. If Marie can maneuver the African leader into bed, the CIA will take compromising photographs to embarrass and discredit Sankara. To persuade her, Ross discloses that Daniel Slater, her late sister's boyfriend, recommended Marie for the job. Marie agrees to accept the assignment on the condition she can meet face-to-face with Slater, the last person to see Helene alive.

Sankara's whirlwind tour of New York accompanied by his entourage—family members, bodyguards, translator, and cronies—does not permit the time and privacy necessary to develop a romance. Sankara also suspects Marie is not who she claims to be. In any event, she fails to seduce him. As punishment for her failure, Marie is suspended for forty-five days on the excuse she violated departmental protocol in dealing with a confidential informant.

After the suspension, Ross approaches Marie again with the same assignment, to remove Sankara by the same means. However, since she missed the opportunity to complete the required job in familiar territory, she will have to perform the same task as seductress on Sankara's turf. She is already inclined to go; Sankara has grown more tyrannical, suppressing the Burkinabè media and stepping up anti-union activities. As

an added incentive for her to travel to Burkina Faso, Slater is already in-country as a CIA operations officer, ready to meet her. In Ouagadougou, the national capital, she will reside in a comfortable gated safe house and have a scooter for transportation. In parting, Ross gives her what amounts to a spy kit: an envelope containing a plane ticket, a passport in the assumed name Sankara knew her by in New York, an embassy employee identity card, maps, local currency, and a State Department guide to the country. As the novel continues, Marie realizes that both the mission and Sankara are not what she originally perceived them to be.

As a political-espionage thriller, *American Spy* is unusual for several reasons. The genre has been dominated since the early twentieth century by men, including standouts Eric Ambler, Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, Frederick Forsyth, John le Carré, and Robert Ludlum. However, a few women to date—notably Helen MacInnes, Patricia Wentworth, and Gayle Lynds—have made significant contributions to the canon. In addition, the typical spy thriller is plot driven and churns relentlessly forward toward a breathless do-or-die conclusion, so character development is often sacrificed in favor of nonstop action. While the plot of *American Spy* is convoluted enough to satisfy most thriller readers, a major thrust of the novel is the portrayal of Marie Mitchell. A strong, ambitious woman who does not completely accept American methods of political intrigue, thus does not always do as she is ordered, Marie is more fully rounded than most spy thriller heroes and heroines. By dipping often into Marie's backstory—providing evocative glimpses of the bustle of New York in contrast with the bucolic environment of Martinique—author Wilkinson has given her sympathetic protagonist a depth of character seldom found in her chosen genre.

Jack Ewing

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