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**The novel ‘American Spy’ breaks down barriers. It’s also a terrific read.**

Review by Maureen Corrigan

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In 1995, mystery writer Paula L. Woods brought out a groundbreaking anthology of black suspense fiction called “Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes.” It was a clever title, but truth to tell, there were many more private eyes featured in the collection than spies or spooks. Indeed, only one novel that Woods mentioned fit squarely within the classic espionage tradition: “The Spook Who Sat by the Door,” by Sam Greenlee, which was published in 1969 and made into a movie, now a cult classic, in 1973. Greenlee was one of the first black officers to serve in the U.S. Information Agency, and his novel features an African American CIA agent who uses his agency training to foment a black guerrilla movement in the United States.

(Random House)

All these years later, the espionage genre remains one of the least diverse branches of suspense fiction. That’s ironic, because so many great African American narratives have been about “passing,” and living watchfully undercover. Lauren Wilkinson’s new novel, “American Spy,” is extraordinary in a lot of ways — most obviously because it places a female African American intelligence officer, Marie Mitchell, at the center of a Cold War tale of political espionage. But also striking is the novel’s deeper recognition that, to some extent, rudimentary tradecraft is something all of her African American characters have learned as an everyday survival skill. As Marie’s father wryly tells her on the day of her graduation from the FBI training academy at Quantico, “I’ve been a spy in this country for as long as I can remember.”

“American Spy” jumps around in time and place, from the early 1960s to the early 1990s; from Queens to Martinique to Burkina Faso. At the heart of the story is Marie’s (initially calculated) romantic encounter, while working as a contractor for the CIA, with the actual historical figure Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary young president of Burkina Faso who is known as “Africa’s Che Guevara.” Of necessity, Wilkinson has to supply a lot of political context here, which sometimes weighs down the suspense narrative. (Surely, this has to be one of the very few English-language novels — spy or otherwise — about the political history of Burkina Faso.) But Wilkinson begins with a tense opening that assures readers that “American Spy” will try its best to deliver action along with edification.

The scene is late at night at Marie’s house in rural Connecticut. She tells us that she was up late working on a translation, while her twin 4-year-old sons (by Sankara, who was assassinated in 1987) are sound asleep in their room with the door closed. All is quiet, until Marie hears a floorboard creak in the hall and springs into action:

“I unlocked the safe beneath my desk, grabbed my old service automatic, and crept toward my bedroom doorway, stealthy until I was brought to grief by a Lego Duplo that stung the sole of my foot. I hobbled the rest of the way to the door and crouched behind it.”

Author Lauren Wilkinson (Niqui Carter)

James Bond never had to withstand the very special agony that Legos inflict, but Marie is made of stoic maternal stuff. She proceeds to shoot and kill the assassin who shortly enters her bedroom. Afterward, Marie digs out some false passports she’s kept at the ready (she doesn’t want to stick around to answer police questions) and whisks her sons off to their grandmother’s home in Martinique. There, she sits down to write a long letter to them about her life and their heritage, “just in case I’m not around to tell you.” That retrospective missive becomes this novel.

While Marie’s assignment in Burkina Faso is filled with intrigue, seduction and double and triple crosses, the most absorbing parts of her story lie closer to home. Marie flashes back to her middle-class childhood in Queens and to her time in the 1980s as a special agent (and the only woman of color) in the New York field office:

“A sense of self-importance permeated the culture. So did machismo and knee-jerk conservatism. To get by, I told my colleagues that I didn’t care about politics, which felt like a ridiculous thing to claim. . . . Very few of those men understood having no choice about whether they were political or not: Unlike me, they weren’t people who’d had their existence politicized on their behalf.”

Ultimately, Marie becomes so disenchanted with the insular culture of the bureau, she accepts that assignment from the CIA, which requires her to romantically entrap the married Sankara and, thus, undermine his Marxist rule over Burkina Faso. The fact that Marie takes on the assignment — despite her personal and political admiration for Sankara — speaks to the hard realities of her situation in the world. Marie is very much on her own. Her first loyalty must be to herself and, later, to her sons; she can’t afford the luxury of too many scruples.

“American Spy” is a morally nuanced and atmospheric political thriller. The climax of the novel is set in Burkina Faso, which means “Land of Incorruptible People,” but as Marie’s adventures attest, no one and nothing is ever quite that pure.

**Maureen Corrigan,**who teaches literature at Georgetown University, is the book critic for the NPR program “Fresh Air.”

By Lauren Wilkinson

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