



## Tightrope

*Simon Mawer*

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# Tightrope

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**Tightrope** Simon Mawer

**An historical thriller that brings back Marian Sutro, ex-Special Operations agent, and traces her romantic and political exploits in post-World War II London, where the Cold War is about to reshape old loyalties**

As Allied forces close in on Berlin in spring 1945, a solitary figure emerges from the wreckage that is Germany. It is Marian Sutro, whose existence was last known to her British controllers in autumn 1943 in Paris. One of a handful of surviving agents of the Special Operations Executive, she has withstood arrest, interrogation, incarceration, and the horrors of Ravensbrück concentration camp, but at what cost? Returned to an England she barely knows and a postwar world she doesn't understand, Marian searches for something on which to ground the rest of her life. Family and friends surround her, but she is haunted by her experiences and by the guilt of knowing that her contribution to the war effort helped lead to the monstrosities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When the mysterious Major Fawley, the man who hijacked her wartime mission to Paris, emerges from the shadows to draw her into the ambiguities and uncertainties of the Cold War, she sees a way to make amends for the past and at the same time to find the identity that has never been hers.

A novel of divided loyalties and mixed motives, *Tightrope* is the complex and enigmatic story of a woman whose search for personal identity and fulfillment leads her to shocking choices.

## Tightrope Details

Date : Published June 9th 2015 by Little, Brown (first published June 4th 2015)

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Author : Simon Mawer

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Thriller, Spy Thriller, Espionage, War, World War II

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## From Reader Review Tightrope for online ebook

### Cathy says

Based on the book description, I was anticipating an enthralling Cold War spy story in the manner of John Le Carré and I certainly got that in the final third of the book. What I wasn't expecting was such a devastating portrait of the lasting impact of their experiences on those who, like Marian, performed undercover roles in the Second World War.

Our narrator is Sam, who first encounters Marian when he is a child (as a friend of his mother), later when he is an impressionable teenager and finally when he is an adult but still slightly in thrall to her. Marian's story, as presented to the reader, is part her testimony, part Sam's first-hand experience, part evidence he has gleaned from official files and part his recreation of how he imagines events may have taken place. The reader is never entirely sure which. Of course, part of Marian's undercover role involved presenting herself as someone she wasn't, living an acquired identity, never really being herself. 'That was the problem with words – they nailed the thought down, made it explicit, fixed it, crucified it on the cross of exact meaning. But life has no exact meanings, only shades of meaning, hints, versions and contradictions, a confusion of loves and hates, of motives and desires.' What is the true story?

The author convincingly portrays Marian's difficulty in adjusting to 'normal' life and overcoming the psychological, physical and emotional scars she bears as a result of her terrible experiences: arrest, interrogation, torture and, ultimately, confinement in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Marian feels a sense of dislocation from other people. 'It was just indifference, a sensation of estrangement from the ordinary matters of human contact. Conversation with anyone felt like trying to talk to people in a foreign language when you only have a fraction of the vocabulary at your disposal and half the grammar.' It is as if a yawning gulf separates her from the rest of humanity: 'And she felt something strange, the sensation of uniqueness. It wasn't a good feeling, just one of separation'.

It's not just Marian who has been changed by the war. The author gives us an evocative and comprehensive picture of the impact of the war on people, places, geopolitics, political and philosophical argument, technology and much else. Even small things, like the way people interact:

“Where are you from, then?” the barman asked.

No stranger ever asked a question like that last time she was in the city. Questions drew you into other people's stories, got you involved, got you into trouble. Now no one cared.’

Marian and her brother, Ned, are appalled by the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the prospect of the United States developing the technology still further. In particular, Marian is plagued by guilt that her actions during the war might unwittingly contribute to a repetition of the horrors she has already witnessed, but multiplied a hundredfold. This guilt propels Marian down a path of secrets, lies and betrayal that will require the use of all the skills and tradecraft she acquired in preparation for her wartime exploits. Like how to fashion a weapon out of what's to hand, how to tell if you're being followed and how to shake off your followers. It will put her in danger and make her question who, if anyone, she can trust so that carefully planning each small move, each sentence uttered, becomes critical.

‘She waited a moment, looking at him. And then she made her move. It felt like walking a tightrope, feeling the balance, knowing that a slight shift either side might be fatal. She reached her foot forward and poised to transfer her weight onto it, feeling the rope wobbling. No safety net.’

I loved Tightrope. I was completely drawn into Marian's story although the romantic in me would have liked a slightly different outcome for her and the man who becomes such an important part of her life. However, the path the author chose for her was admittedly more true to her character. I haven't read the first book in the series, *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky* (published under the title *Trapeze* in the United States), so I don't have the benefit of knowing how much of this book repeats events from the earlier one. What I do know is that Tightrope works brilliantly as a standalone read and from the very beginning I got that comforting feeling that I was in the hands of a skilled writer and accomplished storyteller.

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## **Bettie? says**

BABT

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b066vd5w>

*Description: A tale of love, betrayal and espionage as the political alliances forged during the Second World War give way to the moral uncertainties of the Cold War.*

*Marian Sutro is a highly successful British SOE operative working with the French Resistance. Then she is betrayed and imprisoned in Ravensbrück by the Nazis.*

*Returning to England a broken woman, she attempts to immerse herself in a normal life with a mundane job in London. However, the lure of the secret service and her desire to work for the greater good is never far away.*

*As the Americans test ever more deadly atomic weapons and the Russians join the frantic race to match them, Marian finds herself in demand by all sides with no moral compass to guide her.*

*She must walk an increasingly precarious tightrope between her beliefs, her profession and her desires.*

1/10: Sam visits Marian Sutro and starts recording her life in espionage

2/10: With the war in Europe finally over, Marian is contacted by her previous spy handler.

3/10: Marian goes on a date with an RAF officer and an atomic bomb is dropped for the first time.

4/10: Marian is called to Hamburg to testify against the Germans who worked in Ravensbrück.

5/10: Marian discovers a disturbing truth about Ned. Major Fawley attempts to recruit her.

6/10: Marian runs into an old friend in Paris. Her personal life is getting more complicated.

7/10: Absolom and Marian get closer but who is usinng who. And who else knows about them.

8/10: Marian feels vulnerable without Absolom then she recieves some unexpected news.

9/0: Marian encounters a man from her past with disastrous consequences.

10/10: Sam, now a young man, helps Marian put her final plan into action.

This is a good step up from Mawer's previous entries

2\* The Glass Room

3\* Mendel's Dwarf

3\* The Gospel of Judas

3.5\* Tightrope

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### **Karen says**

I was first introduced to Simon Mawer through an interview with Diane Rehm about his book *The Glass Room*, which was also nominated for The Man Booker Prize. This book has become one of my all time favorites! I picked up *Trapeze* a few years later and it sat on my TBR stack for quite some time. In October last year I went to the Boston Book Festival and Simon Mawer was there talking about his latest book *Tightrope*, which I learned was a sequel to *Trapeze*. I decided to buy this book, since his talk was so captivating. Earlier this month I decided to finally read *Trapeze*. I was blown away!

So glad I waited to read *Trapeze* because the ending was so dramatic that I right away picked up the sequel! Marian Sutro is a great character, she is so complex, I will not give away any of the plot here.

I recommend reading *Trapeze* first and have *Tightrope* ready to read! You will not be sorry. Sometimes I have to wonder how books like these two mentioned go unnoticed with little buzz and some books the get all the hype/buzz in most cases let me down.

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### **Julie Christine says**

I closed the back cover of *Tightrope*, set the book on the table beside me, and switched on the radio. NPR was just beginning a segment on Russia's quiet but steady build up of a missile defense system, and its not so quiet military intervention in Syria, its aggression in Crimea. An interview with General Frank Gorenc, commander of the U.S. Air Force in Europe and Africa, revealed the extent to which the United States is wringing its hands over Russia's beefing up of its military. "De-conflicting" is the term the General used. Is that an actual word?

***De-confliction*** (see what I did there?) is what some Cold War spies had in mind when they became double agents, trading secrets on a moral high ground. They reasoned that if enemy countries had equal access to the most terrible things science and engineering could manufacture, a balance of power would be achieved, a peace wrung out of duplicity.

It's fine not to have read *Trapeze* the prequel to *Tightrope*, but really, you should. For it is there we first meet Marian Sutro, a young—very young—French-English girl recruited as an English spy during WWII. She parachutes into France at the height of the war and, well, read the novel. It's excellent.

In *Tightrope*, we meet Marian two years after that moonlit drop into a war zone. She is still quite young in years, but in spirit she is weary, nearly broken by torture and captivity. *Tightrope* moves at a ponderous pace, mirroring Marian's burden of grief, guilt, and the surreal return to the land of the living. Threading

flashbacks and flash-forwards into the narrative, Mawer does a masterful job of adding dimensions of tension to the plot and emotional depth to his characters. There is awkwardness in the perspective interruption of a childhood admirer of Marian's, who steps in to provide background and exposition in odd and cloying segments. I'd rather have been left alone with Marian. But it does not detract significantly from the powerful, tender, graceful and aching character study of Marian Sutro.

The initial turgidity also reflects the dullness of England after the war—the excitement and urgency of the battle is over, replaced by the belt-tightening of life on rations, the chin down, bear-up of cleaning and restoring battered and bombed city streets.

Now that Marian has returned, desperately seeking anonymity, avoiding any claim of heroism, she is bereft of purpose, at times sustained, at times nearly crushed under the weight of wartime memories. She takes an innocuous job at a library, marries a solid former pilot-now-tire-salesman, and fails at settling into a normal life. Haunted by her tortures and deeds, she casts about for a reason to keep on, to look forward instead of behind.

In steps MI6 to fill the void. Marian is re-recruited as a spy. This time the enemy is behind the Iron Curtain and the crisis is one of proportions hard to grasp: total nuclear annihilation.

The cat-and-mouse plot moves forward like a slow-moving river with deadly currents hidden beneath murky waters, but what is most fascinating is the cat-and-mouse game Marian plays with her own soul. In *Trapeze* she was an ingénue. In *Tightrope* she is a cool seductress, at ease with slipping in and out of character, down side streets, into the night.

It is fascinating to read historical fiction about the infancy of the Cold War some thirty years after its limping, anti-climactic conclusion, knowing that here we are, still looking askance at Russia with Syria and the Crimea caught between the rocks and hard places of rattling sabers, Putin slapping his bare chest, and the machinations of diplomacy.

Simon Mawer reminds us that behind the engine of intrigue are human beings, motivated by and acting on entirely human impulses.

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### **Carolyn McK says**

"She waited a moment, looking at him. And then she made her move. It felt like walking a tightrope, feeling the balance, knowing that a slight shift either side might be fatal. She reached her foot forward and poised to transfer her weight onto it, feeling the rope wobbling. No safety net. 'There's just one thing,' she said."

A couple of weeks ago I borrowed both *Trapeze* and *Tightrope* from the library, only to realise that I had read the former when it first came out. I decided not to re-read but to move on to the sequel in this duo of novels about Marian Sutro, who in *Trapeze* (in other editions titled *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*) was parachuted into occupied France. I remember having mixed feelings about the first book but this one completely captured my attention and imagination.

In *Tightrope*, Marian is drawn back into the world of espionage at the beginning of the Cold War as America exploded the first H bomb. Some peace activists believed that only by allowing Russia and other nations to

have this technology would the world be kept safe - the threat of mutual destruction. I was a teenager when these issues were coming to a head and I well remember the uncertainties, prejudices and fears of that time.

This is a marvellous spy story - complex, clever and intriguing. It is also a great character study of Marian, beautiful and adventurous but profoundly damaged by her experiences of capture, torture and internment in the war.

My only reservation about the book was that in the first part, I was confused by the narrative voice which sometimes was that of Sam, who as a boy worshipped Marian, and sometimes that of an omniscient author. Only when Sam enters the story in his own right does this clumsiness resolve itself. By the end, his narrative voice worked perfectly.

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### **Eileen says**

Trapeze by Simon Mawer, was a nail biter dealing with the Resistance in occupied France. After an ending that left me reeling, I was eventually thrilled to learn that the story would continue in *Tightrope*. Once again, tensions mount, as Mawer deftly compels the reader, this time into intrigue in connection with the Cold War. He writes well. 'The moon was almost full, riding high over shards of cloud, beating the sea from pewter to silver'. Although *Tightrope* lacked the electricity of its predecessor, this was nonetheless a powerful story! I did enjoy seeing how the characters evolved from their haunted pasts behind enemy lines. Memories held powerful sway. 'She didn't want to talk about that. She had to keep hold of those memories and never let them go, because once out in the open they would be transformed by words, a string of words, into something that would never match the reality'. Fortunately, this book could stand alone, as it had been several years since I'd read *Trapeze*. I appreciated details of the edition as well – the cover, the quality of the paper, the print, and so forth – aspects which keep me reading 'real books'! Three and a half stars, rounded up.

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### **V?ra Janáková says**

Jak moc je t?žké za?lenit se do "klidného" života po vále?ných dobrodružstvích a prožitých hr?zách? Kdo nezažil, asi t?žko pochopí. A tak se Marie se svou složitou povahou s touto životní etapou vyrovnává po svém.

Dob?e napsaná kniha.

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### **Roger Brunyate says**

#### **A Superior Sequel**

I don't know that it is necessary to have read Simon Mawer's 2012 novel *Trapeze* before attempting this sequel. All the important facts will be revealed in the first few chapters, though obliquely, so that readers may wonder if they are missing something by starting in the middle. But I still don't advise the sensible approach of reading the pair in sequence. *Trapeze* was a rather ordinary book—I gave it only three stars—and may not give you much appetite for its sequel. Which would be a pity, since *Tightrope* is really quite special—five stars easily. All the same, if you do decide to start the story at the beginning, stop reading

now; while I am careful not to give away anything important in *Tightrope*, it is impossible to discuss it without giving spoilers for *Trapeze*.

(view spoiler)

What makes this sequel special is that the author takes the risk of writing a book in which nothing especially exciting happens at all, at least until the end, and most of the interest comes in the process of dealing with ordinary life. So the entire focus is on Marian, as she recovers her physical health, copes shakily with what we would now recognize as PTSD, learns how to live again and love again, and eventually take up clandestine work once more. This novel is all interior life, and infinitely the stronger for it.

Marian's shaky reentry into postwar life is paralleled by that of her country, dealing with shortages, socialism, the feeling of being sidelined on the world stage, and the fears engendered by the imbalance of power caused by America's invention of the atom and hydrogen bombs. For the first time, I began to understand why people like Klaus Fuchs, Bruno Pontecorvo, and the Rosenbergs might have given secrets to the Russians: not so that a foreign country might defeat one's own, but so that neither side would use nuclear weapons at all. Marian and her brother Ned find themselves drawn into these waters, in the new Cold War world where you had to discover the rules as you go along. Further complicated in Marian's case by the fact that her sexuality was so often part of the equation (as indeed you sort of expect with Mawer). But I will leave other readers to find all this out for themselves. They won't be disappointed.

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## Laura says

*From BBC Radio 4 - Book at Bedtime:*

*A tale of love, betrayal and espionage as the political alliances forged during the Second World War give way to the moral uncertainties of the Cold War.*

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*Returning to England a broken woman, she attempts to immerse herself in a normal life with a mundane job in London. However, the lure of the secret service and her desire to work for the greater good is never far away.*

*As the Americans test ever more deadly atomic weapons and the Russians join the frantic race to match them, Marian finds herself in demand by all sides with no moral compass to guide her.*

*She must walk an increasingly precarious tightrope between her beliefs, her profession and her desires.*

*Episode Two.*

*With the war in Europe finally over, Marian is contacted by her previous spy handler. Eleven-year-old Sam meets Marian for the first time when his family visits her parents.*

*Episode Three.*

*Marian goes on a date with an RAF officer. The atomic bomb is dropped for the first time. Marian and her*

scientist brother Ned are horrified at the implications of this act.

*Episode Four.*

*Marian is called to Hamburg to testify against the Germans who worked in Ravensbrück concentration camp. Afterwards, she meets an intriguing Russian officer and his friend.*

*Episode Five.*

*Marian discovers a disturbing truth about her brother Ned. Meanwhile, Major Fawley attempts to recruit her back into the secret service.*

*Episode Six.*

*Marian runs into an old friend in Paris. The atomic age is advancing and Marian's personal and professional life is getting increasingly complicated.*

*Episode Seven.*

*Marian and Absolon get closer - but who is using who? And who else knows about them?*

*Episode Eight.*

*Marian feels vulnerable without Absolon and unsure about who to trust. Then she receives some unexpected news.*

*Episode Nine.*

*Marian encounters a man from her past with disastrous consequences. She receives news that forces her to take action and make a plan.*

*Episode Ten.*

*Sam, now a young man, helps Marian put her final plan into action. Back to the present and she tells him what happened with the rest of her life.*

*Reader: Peter Firth*

*Abridger: Jeremy Osborne*

*Producer: Rosalynd Ward*

*A Sweet Talk Production for BBC Radio 4.*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b066vd5w>

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## **Hugh says**

This is the sequel to *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky* (also known as *Trapeze*), which was a literary thriller that told the story of Marian Sutro, a young SOE agent in Nazi-occupied France. This book continues the story, starting with her capture and survival in a German camp. The first part of the story is probably the most fully realised, dealing with her return to England and the difficulties in readjusting to the mundane reality of life at home.

She gets drawn into working as a secret agent, working for both the British and the Russians - this allows Mawer to explore the nuances of the post-war nuclear arms race, while toying with spy thriller genre writing. For me the whole thing worked surprisingly well - if anything this one is better than the first book.

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### **Kasa Cotugno says**

Cold war espionage novels are not my usual cup of tea, but I was drawn to *Tightrope* having thoroughly enjoyed *Trapeze*, its predecessor. That book described the WWII experiences of Marian Sutro who is trained as a resistance fighter and ended ambiguously. This book takes up her story and follows it during the cold war, shifting in time and point of view between present and post war Britain. It's amazing to note that Simon Mawer was born in 1948 and didn't personally experience that time, so well does he bring it to life. Marian is a complex character, well suited for the material.

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### **Dorie - Traveling Sister :) says**

I had listened to *Trapeze* on tape a few years ago and really enjoyed it. But I found this book to be too repetitious, rehashing a lot of what went on in the first book. It just didn't draw me in or make me want to continue.

Sorry to say that I abandoned this one.

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### **Susan says**

“To Live Happily, Live Hidden.”

This novel sees the return of Marian Sutro, who first appeared in, “The Girl Who Fell From the Sky.” Having survived the war, Marian returns to an England where people are more concerned with shortages and getting back to normal, than with those returning. Although Marian returns to her family, she feels distanced from them. To some she is a heroine – the recipient of medals and a source of vicarious excitement – but she prefers to retain a distance from the award ceremonies and public acclaim. The author wonderfully shows how Marian is living two different lives and torn between them; both trying to cope with her new life in a new world, but also feeling that she needs to give evidence at war crimes trials.

When the atomic bomb finally ends the war in the Pacific, Marian is shocked. Characters that appeared in the first novel also appear here – including Marian’s brother Ned and Clement Pelletier – and their research into the new weapons which herald the new age of nuclear weapons. Approached by Major Fawley, Marian has to admit that she is bored and unable to let go of her old life. As the Cold War begins, Marian finds herself both being seduced and the seducer. In this book we hear both what happened to her when she was arrested and her continued life in espionage. If you enjoyed, “The Girl Who Fell From the Sky,” then you will certainly like this. It is an atmospheric, and realistic, continuation of Marian’s story. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

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### **switterbug (Betsey) says**

The cloistered world of spies has long been a hot-seller of fiction and literature. Some authors concentrate on a twisty plot, others on the enigmatic personality of a spy. In *TIGHT ROPE*, the follow-up to *TRAPEZE*, Simon Mawer does both with equal ability. Although primarily character-driven, with the life of British spy Marian Sutro at the center, Mawer does a satisfying job of creating a taut atmosphere, and he does so with lean, precise prose and the heady atmosphere of the Cold War. He also delves into Marian's work in WW II, as he goes back and forth in time. As the book opens in the early millennium, Marian is a woman in her eighties, being interviewed by a man from her past. He wants to tie up loose ends. It's obvious that he was once enchanted by this woman, and played a small but peripheral part of her past, but there were holes, or lacunae, he wanted to fill in. This is Marian's story, and the gentleman, her scribe.

Marian was half-British, half-French, a perfect contender for parachuting into German-occupied France during WW II. She was adept at the rigors of fieldwork--killing; masking; carrying messages; and the use of explosives. At times, I felt like I was in a movie. A good movie, but nothing too original, plot-wise. Yet, it led me along because Mawer is an expert in pacing and character, and just when I think I'll predict what is ahead (and sometimes I do), I find that I am intrigued by Marian and her disquiet. Marian was sensible and pragmatic at times, but occasionally quixotic. She had multiple lovers, and an early marriage to a PR pilot. She talks about the horrifying torture she received at the hands of the Germans with as equal intensity as her ardor for particular men that she met in the course of her work. She was captured by the Germans after being betrayed by an associate. She wasn't certain who it was.

At the age of 23, when the war was over, Marian's adjustment to quotidian life became a struggle. She lived with her brother, a scientist, who she realized was in the wrong place at the wrong time, being pulled in to espionage on the fringes. Marian became a part of Cold War espionage, which pulled her in various directions at once. The lives of spies, and the masks of subterfuge, are riveting at times. Double agents, triple agents, keeping it straight, and trying not to get killed or tortured in the process, keeps the atmosphere both chilling and hot. Marian Sutro is a sympathetic character, closed off from people around her, yet with a flinty kind of passion, too, mixed with her duty she felt to protect the ones she loved.

It's difficult to give this a 5 star, however, because I've read some of the best of the best spy novels, *HARLOT'S GHOST* being the undisputed champion (by American Norman Mailer). Nothing seems to compare with the layers of the psyche (in this case, American) that created and sustained the CIA, and a more believable story, altogether. The posing, which is elementary to the fieldwork, is more convincing. It's not just "what" they did, but the core of the human character that shifts reflexively. Banville and DeLillo have also written outstanding spy novels. Mawer's is more of a mainstream crowd-pleaser, one that could find its way into cinema. And, certainly more weighty than a Bond movie.

"It felt like walking a tightrope, feeling the balance, knowing that a slight shift to either side might be fatal."

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### **Tereza Eliášová says**

P?edchozí p?íb?h Marian Sutrové se mi líbil o fous víc. Ale tohle bylo taky dobré. Dost jiné, ale ve spoust? v?cí stejné.

Více tady: <http://bit.ly/Provazochodkyne>

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