



The Confession

Olen Steinhauer

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Eastern Europe, 1956: Comrade Inspector Ferenc Kolyeszár, who is a proletariat writer in addition to his job as a state militia homicide detective, is a man on the brink. Estranged from his wife, whom he believes is cheating on him with one of his colleagues, and frustrated by writer's block, Ferenc's attention is focused on his job. But his job is growing increasingly political, something that makes him profoundly uncomfortable.

When Ferenc is asked to look into the disappearance of a party member's wife and learns some unsavory facts about their lives, the absurdity of his position as an employee of the state is suddenly exposed. At the same time, he and his fellow militia officers are pressed into service policing a popular demonstration in the capital, one that Ferenc might rather be participating in. These two situations, coupled with an investigation into the murder of a painter that leads them to a man recently released from the camps, brings Ferenc closer to danger than ever before—from himself, from his superiors, from the capital's shadowy criminal element.

The Confession is a fantastic follow-up to Olen Steinhauer's brilliant debut, *The Bridge of Sighs*, and it guarantees to advance this talented writer on his way to being one of the premiere thriller writers of a generation.

The Confession Details

Date : Published April 1st 2005 by Minotaur Books (first published November 1st 2003)

ISBN : 9780312338152

Author : Olen Steinhauer

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Thriller, Mystery Thriller, Spy Thriller, Espionage

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Sheri says

Another police homicide/spy thriller by Steinhauer involving some of the same characters as his prior novel, The Bridge of Sighs. I liked this better than The Bridge Of Sighs because it was more complex in its plot and the characters were better drawn. The Confession is set in Romania during the 1950s just before and during the days when the Russian tanks rolled into Hungary to repress the increasing dissent there that Hungary's own government seemed unwilling to put down with violence. The spectre of similar repression in Romania is a constant undercurrent of this novel. I liked both The Bridge of Sighs and The Confession well enough to put Steinhauer's next novel, 36 Yalta Boulevard, into my queue.

David says

The second book in a five-book series by Olen Steinhauer, The Confession is an interesting move by the author. Most series stay with the same point-of-view character (or characters, if there is more than one), so I was expecting The Confession to continue with Emil Brod, the hero of Bridge of Sighs. But Steinhauer not only departs from that tradition, but also changes the narrative voice; where Bridge of Sighs was a third-person narrative, The Confession is told in first-person, from the point of view of Ferenc Kolyeszár -- a character barely mentioned in the previous novel.

The Confession begins eight years after Bridge of Sighs. Kolyeszár's marriage to his beautiful wife is in trouble, and he suspects her of infidelity. Distracted from his work as a homicide investigator for the People's Militia, he brushes off his partner's suggestion that an apparent suicide is something more sinister. Then another body turns up, and Kolyeszár finds himself splitting his time between murder, corrupt politicians, and his crumbling marriage.

While still a good book with a few twists and turns, The Confession nevertheless isn't quite as good as Bridge of Sighs, and pales in comparison to Steinhauer's newer books in the Milo Weaver series (The Tourist, Nearest Exit, and An American Spy). I'm still eager to read the next book in the series, 36 Yalta Boulevard, which leaps another ten years and seems to focus on a new character. And even if this novel isn't quite as good as the author's other books, it's still better than most novels on the shelves these days.

Carl says

A weak 4 stars.

The second in a series set in the Homicide Unit of the Militia in the capital of a nameless Eastern European country after the second World War. The first, Bridge of Sighs, was set in the more immediate aftermath, and it was the dark, brooding atmosphere, the sense of hopes being dashed, that made it rise above a simple police procedural. That, and of course the ever present knowledge that Big Brother is watching you, and you can't know whom you can trust.

That book was narrated by a Emil, a new academy graduate, while one of his partners, Ferenc was mostly a quiet presence in the office, hunkered over his typewriter. In this book, Emil has only a supporting role,

while Ferenc narrates. The plot was a bit complex, and the way the various elements came together was too contrived for me. But again, what makes the book so intriguing is how it captures the atmosphere of the place and time, and what it does to the people. The time is '56, the people have had to accept the dominance of State Security and their puppet-masters in Moscow. But with Stalin gone, and neighboring Hungary trying to revolt, there is a sense of possible freedom in the air, but everyone must still tread carefully, or else. Ferenc has trouble doing so, in part because of his personal demons and situations. He is not an especially likeable character, and there are some scenes that might bother the squeamish. Some are sexual, some describe the brutal conditions of political prisoners. So read it as much for the historical atmosphere as for the plot.

Jim says

I have now read the first three books in Olen Steinhauer's Yalta Boulevard Sequence, albeit out of sequence. Having discovered him by reading his more recent "The Cairo Affair" I will continue to hang around his take on Eastern Europe. This particular book seems even darker than the rest... but captures what it must have been like to try to survive as the Soviets dominated the Balkan states. I remember the Hungarian uprising of 1956 which was referenced in "The Confession". Indeed, we had refugees who got out of Hungary and found themselves in my hometown of Mulvane, Kansas. I'll take a break from the Sequence (There are two more) but will return.

Mal Warwick says

An Historical Thriller with an Insider's View of Communism in Eastern Europe

1956: Nikita Khruschev's Secret Speech denouncing Stalin's crimes; the Hungarian uprising and unrest in Poland it triggered; the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt following Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal; Sputnik's launch. It was a watershed year, somewhat comparable to 1968 more than a decade later. In *The Confession*, we view the world of 1956 through the eyes and the troubled mind of Ferenc Kolyeszar, a policeman in a fictional Eastern European country somehow nestled among Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania.

However, Kolyeszar is a novelist as well as a policeman, having published a well-received novel about his experiences as a soldier resisting the German occupation at the outset of World War II. Now 37 years old, he is writing *The Confession* to chronicle his shattering experiences at home and at work against the backdrop of fateful world events.

Kolyeszar's story involves the unraveling of his marriage to Magda, the disappearance of a senior official's young wife; the sometimes rocky relationships among Kolyeszar and Stefan, Emil, Leonek, and Brano, his fellow police officers in the District; Stefan's reopened investigation into the murder of his partner immediately after the War; and the visit to the District of a KGB Colonel from Moscow named Kaminski. These parallel story lines weave in and out of one another, converging in a climactic end-game that brings a just conclusion to *The Confession*. Along the way we become immersed in the endless strain as Communist rule solidifies in Eastern Europe with mounting ferocity. This is an engrossing and skillfully written story.

Olen Steinhauer's *The Confession* is the second in a cycle of five novels set a decade apart from one another

about the men of the District. Its predecessor, *The Bridge of Sighs*, was written from the perspective of Kolyeszár's colleague Emil Brod and took place in 1948-49. The subsequent three novels carry the story forward to the fall of Communism in 1989. To my mind, judging from what I've read so far, this five-book cycle is as insightful a history of Eastern Europe under Communism as any history of the period.

(From www.malwarwickonbooks.com)

Darwin8u says

An interesting variant of the police procedural, political thriller.

Haden says

This is Steinhauer's third book I have read, and it is my favorite so far. Though it took me a while to adapt to the different character perspective and time period...Ferenc ends up being a great 'human' character. Coupled with all of the side plots that fit in to the story line with little effort, this book delivered. I was lured into a rather complex plot by the end that I didn't want to put down until it was finished! Meanwhile, the historical perspective on the political turmoil of this period in a country that was falling under the grips of the Soviet influence proved fascinating and induced its own stress to the reader!

Trine says

The mystery which began in *The Bridge of Sighs* is chillingly unravelled in this second book in a series of five, taking place in a so far unnamed Eastern European country. Coincidentally, each individual season used as a literary device to separate the different parts of the book also coincides with what is happening in the lives of some of the main characters, thus creating a symbolic way of interpreting the actions and consequences thereof in the narrative structure of this ingenious mystery and haunting evocation of the former Eastern-bloc Europe. Great and very thought-provoking read!

Charles says

"The Confession" is a very strong book - strong writing, strong characters, strong plot, strong resolution. Much better than the first book in the series, not that "Bridge of Sighs" is bad in any way. Ferenc is now one of my favorite characters, not that he's especially admirable or heroic or perfect in any way. He's just very three-dimensional, very real, very sympathetic despite his mistakes and flaws. His relationship with Magda is the most compelling aspect of the book. Indeed, his relationships are the true focus of the novel - the mystery is ancillary. I'm very much looking forward to the next book in the series.

Sharon Pribble says

This writer is mighty fine, but his books need to be read in the sequence in which they were written . There are two series, the Milo Weaver series and the Yalta Boulevard Quintet (also know as the Rutheia Quintet), of which this is book no. 2 and I read it last. Not reading it in proper order led to confusion and difficulty parsing the story. His story lines in this series is vague in a fascinating way, even if you have all the characters and their history before you. This is deliberate - the characters didn't understand what was happening either.

That said, I love Steinhauer's work. "All the Old Knives" his most recent book, is a stand alone book and mighty entertaining. I consider "An American Spy" which is part of the Milo Weaver series, one of the very best books I have read. It is brilliant.

Guy says

My local library branch has two titles by this author. I've just read them both. They are part of a series of police procedurals set in a fictional east bloc country in the post-war period. This one takes place in 1956. I don't read books in one sitting any longer but if I finish one in less than a week that means they are pretty good. They keep my interest and keep me coming back every day for more. I would strongly recommend this author to anyone who likes this sort of thing.

Lois Gould says

I usually love Steinhauer for what I learn about the cold war and the people and lives of Eastern Europe - but skip this one! The story wanders around in darkness of spirit and politics and takes forever to develop.

Jane Walker says

Disappointing in that I couldn't connect with the central character at all.

Denise says

A nameless country in Eastern Europe, 1956: The sequel to Steinhauer's debut The Bridge of Sighs comes in form of a first person narrative by writer and state militia homicide detective Ferenc Kolyeszar. His confession covers the (much to his dismay) ever more political nature of his job, his marriage falling apart, the disappearance of a party member's wife, his investigation of a brutal murder that soon turns into a series, and the truth behind the death of a fellow militia detective ten years ago.

Steinhauer is not afraid to send his stories and characters down some deep and occasionally rather disturbing paths. Coupled with the oppressive, bleak atmosphere of the setting and the taut suspense that remains a constant throughout the book, this author's second novel proves to be just as intriguing and captivating a read as his first.

Thomas says

I'd give the first book in this series (set in a fictional Soviet satellite country) 5 stars. This one I gave four mainly because I didn't like this character quite as much (he's a very saturnine writer type, but he doesn't make many writerly observations and is a tad too navel-gazing for my tastes). But it's still a great story, great setting, and well done. I've bought the third and look forward to all five.

June Ahern says

Slate grey, flat black, dull brown with hopeless and fear are the elements of Olen Steinhauer's "The Confession" about an Eastern Europe country in the mid 1950's ruled by Communist Russia. Comrade Inspector Ferenc Kolyeszar does his job half-heatedly with the same attitude he has about his failing marriage. Emotionally distant since his return from the war Ferenc's drinking is worsening. A few years back his book brought him positive recognition. His attempt a follow it up story is met with a solid writer's block even though he gathers and connects with a small group of artists, poets and writers to rally his creativity. It appears his attendance is for more for the drinking and a respite from the ills of life and dealing with his marriage problems.

If not for a particular murder that to but Ferenc's partner and long time boyhood friend, Stefan the story could be a dull, sad tale of miserable people. It is not. It is a live with mystery and intrigue. In the story the dominate Russian militia officers spread a dreaded fear where comrades turn against comrades, all afraid they will be one day called to go in for questioning their loyalty to Russia ending in god-awful work camps. The story has many twists and turns as Kolyeszar awakens to his sense of justice for four murder victims. In the mix he loses a lot, but the drive to finally perform his job as a homicide detective becomes a force to be reckoned with after a death of an important person in his life. Even his fall into a strange sexual affair, sometimes for me too graphic, had reason. It reveals how one can fall from grace to the hellish state of debauchery. The saving grace and insight into his once lighter and loving self is his fourteen year-old daughter, Agnes.

The characters are often seem as dull and miserable as the energy of the times and days of Russia's stern rule, but somewhere in a glimmer of hope they rally to create believable characters of reason and purpose, to try to life with some sense of bravery. Unfortunately, there are heavy consequences.

For us old enough to remember the era of Russia invading Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungry, and the Berlin wall - to crush the life out those citizens - this book is a historical reminder of the horrible days of crushing life out of such places as Poland and Hungry. For those who are younger it's an eye opener into the truths about Communism and life for those who disagree. This was a story where I wanted to see justice for the too many victims; a book I hurried back to read more. Steinhauer's first thriller, 'The Bridge of Sighs' was a favorite read for me and when I saw he had another novel, I gladly got it. It did not disappoint. I look forward to another novel by this fine author.

Robert Intrago says

I decided to read this book due to the fact I had read a couple of his earlier books. The previous books dealt with the same set of investigators in a fictitious communist country. Through 3/4s of the book I was willing to give it two stars. It meandered through the private life of the main character and conditions in a behind the Iron Curtain fictional country in the era of the Hungarian Revolution. It finally picked up in the last 1/4 and elevated the book to an average mystery. The writer has great knowledge of condition during the cold war and his use of a large cast of characters in imitation of Russian writers. For those of you that are interested in books to movies, the rights to his newest book, *The Tourist*, have been bought by George Clooney. I do not think I will be reading any more of this series.

William says

Steinhauer is always a good read, with more depth than many police procedurals. This is not quite his best -- the plot gets complicated, and the characters can be hard to identify with. But I guess the book reflects the bleakness of life in Eastern Europe in the decades after WWII. It's fun to see all the same characters in each of his books, with a different one tending to be the central figure each time around. Ferenc, though, is more dour and less engaging, somehow that Emil Brod in one book and Brano Sen in another. 3.5 stars.

SlowRain says

Set in 1956 in a fictional, Eastern European country which the author describes as "the intersection of Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Romania", three cases--an open-and-closed suicide, a missing woman, and a decade-old murder of a colleague--come together and force Inspector Ferenc Kolyeszár to examine his own character, and all in the midst of uprisings and Communist crackdowns.

Building on the success of his remarkable debut, *The Bridge of Sighs*, Olen Steinhauer gives us the second installment in his "Yalta Boulevard Sequence", this time featuring a different investigator from the same militia office: the battle-scarred, one-time author Ferenc Kolyeszár. What follows is truly a confession, for Ferenc is a plagued man. Stuck in a bad marriage, ravaged by his experiences in World War II, embarrassed by his lackluster writing career, and forced to cynically go out into the streets every day to investigate hopeless cases in a repressive Communist regime: there's little for him to be satisfied about in his life.

In his second outing, Steinhauer adds a great deal of character to this novel. There are numerous events which detail Ferenc's life and his personality. There's a melancholic element and a sense of fatalism. Even a bit of darkness and brutality. He's a human who's been suppressed a little too long. Even the secondary characters are quite remarkable, perhaps more so for their ambiguity as is the case of Brano Sev.

The plot is all intricately tied together, so I won't give it away for fear of spoilers. There is some misdirection, some danger, and a fair bit of suspense. It isn't a fast-paced, run-for-your-life, shoot-'em-up. Rather, it is a methodical revelation of the clues and their impact on the people associated with the story. And it's all set in a backdrop of social unrest, which accounts for a great deal of the atmosphere and mood. At no point did I feel bored with the story or wonder why certain things were included.

Some of the themes and topics Steinhauer discusses are literature, writing, art, suppression of the people,

marriage, repression, alienation, propaganda, guilt, and more. Even though it's set a long time ago in place that never existed, it is very relevant for us today, especially observing things like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street.

If I were to pick some weaknesses, it would be that some of the interaction between Ferenc and his wife didn't always seem natural, and the plot required too much explaining rather than being easy to understand just by how it unfolded. I felt the novel teetered between 3 and 4 stars at various points throughout, but the conclusion was so strong that I settled on 4.

This is part two in a five-book series. It isn't entirely necessary to read *The Bridge of Sighs* first, but it adds so much to the poignancy that I think it's worth it. If you're a fan of John le Carré, Martin Cruz Smith, Alan Furst, or Philip Kerr, then I'd say give Steinhauer a try.

Kevin Gallan says

Very well written.
