



Red Sparrow

Jason Matthews

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IN THE

GRAND SPY-TALE TRADITION OF JOHN LE CARRÉ... comes this shocking thriller written with insider detail known only to a veteran CIA officer.

In present-day Russia, ruled by blue-eyed, unblinking President Vladimir Putin, Russian intelligence officer Dominika Egorova struggles to survive in the post-Soviet intelligence jungle. Ordered against her will to become a “Sparrow,” a trained seductress, Dominika is assigned to operate against Nathaniel Nash, a young CIA officer who handles the Agency’s most important Russian mole.

Spies have long relied on the “honey trap,” whereby vulnerable men and women are intimately compromised. Dominika learns these techniques of “sexpionage” in Russia’s secret “Sparrow School,” hidden outside of Moscow. As the action careens between Russia, Finland, Greece, Italy, and the United States, Dominika and Nate soon collide in a duel of wills, tradecraft, and—inevitably—forbidden passion that threatens not just their lives but those of others as well. As secret allegiances are made and broken, Dominika and Nate’s game reaches a deadly crossroads. Soon one of them begins a dangerous double existence in a life-and-death operation that consumes intelligence agencies from Moscow to Washington, DC.

Page by page, veteran CIA officer Jason Matthews’s *Red Sparrow* delights and terrifies and fascinates, all while delivering an unforgettable cast, from a sadistic Spetsnaz “mechanic” who carries out Putin’s murderous schemes to the weary CIA Station Chief who resists Washington “cake-eaters” to MARBLE, the priceless Russian mole. Packed with insider detail and written with brio, this tour-de-force novel brims with Matthews’s life experience, including his knowledge of espionage, counterintelligence, surveillance tradecraft, spy recruitment, cyber-warfare, the Russian use of “spy dust,” and covert communications. Brilliantly composed and elegantly constructed, *Red Sparrow* is a masterful spy tale lifted from the dossiers of intelligence agencies on both sides of the Atlantic. Authentic, tense, and entertaining, this novel introduces Jason Matthews as a major new American talent.

Red Sparrow Details

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From Reader Review Red Sparrow for online ebook

Orsodimondo says

MR. FLANAGAN

Sono d'accordo con il critico del NYT Charles Cumming: inserire Putin tra i personaggi di questo romanzo è un errore, in qualche modo ne mina la credibilità – come lo sono le ricette gastronomiche a chiusura di ogni capitolo, meno l'ultimo, sia perché smontano la suspense sia perché la ricetta più leggera è pari a diecimila calorie.

È vero però, proprio come scrive Charles Cumming, che questi sono errori marginali.

L'errore vero è tutto il resto, a cominciare dal considerare questo romanzo un buon libro, un notevole debutto narrativo, dal premiarlo, dal recensirlo con entusiasmo.

A me ha fatto rimpiangere Le Carré, e Ambler. Ma anche perfino Forsyth, o Follett. Il che la dice lunga sulle capacità di Jason Matthews.

Ne faranno un film e sono certo che sarà migliore del romanzo, anche se non c'è più Fincher a dirigerlo e chi ha preso il suo posto a Fincher non è paragonabile: ma il cast è buono. Rimpiango l'abbandono di Rooney Mara, attrice che prediligo, però Jennifer Lawrence non è seconda a nessuna.

Leggendo questo malloppazzo, mi sono chiesto se John Wayne l'avrebbe amato. Penso di sì: gli umori non gli sarebbero alieni, il passero sarà anche rosso (il titolo originale è Red Sparrow), ma i berretti sono sempre verdi, che più verdi non si potrebbe. USA über alles.

Il tutto è permeato da una discreta dose di maschilismo, che non guasta mai. Eppure anche James Bond interpretato da Daniel Craig è diventato più attento su questo aspetto, meno biecamente sessista.

Maschilista anche se la protagonista femminile, Dominika, è in pratica un supereroe, o meglio, una super eroina, in quanto il suo potere di vedere auree di colore intorno alle persone, e da qui interpretare l'essenza dei comportamenti altrui, anticipare le mosse di chi le sta intorno, sa tanto di dono magico.

A me sembra kryptonite, invece Matthews lo chiama sinestesia. Una conditio sine qua che a me è parsa davvero risibile, in assenza della quale la storia non sta in piedi. E comunque, alla donna tocca sempre giustificare la sua capacità, la sua bravura, in qualche modo 'alieno'.

La spia americana prende in giro quella russa ricordandole l'Afghanistan, e la spia russa invece di rispondere 'Perché, voi invece, che avete fatto in Afghanistan, dov'è che vi ha spedito Bush?', gli rinfaccia il Vietnam! Eppure il romanzo è ambientato pochi anni fa, le guerre di Bush sono recenti.

I personaggi sono in numero impressionante, come è facile prevedere dato il tipo di storia e data la mole del volume: a ciascuno è dedicato il racconto di chi sono e da dove vengono, le loro vicende personali – pagine e pagine pressoché inutili perché nulla aggiungono alla psicologia degli stessi, alla loro personalità, che rimane

confinata a una piatta bidimensionalità tendente alla monodimensionalità (la larghezza).

Le banalità, i cliché sono tanti, a cominciare da questa sintesi di Roma:

Roma era tetti ocre e marmo luccicante sotto il sole eterno.

La situazione peggiora quando arrivano gli spaghetti con la bottarga di muggine, che viene considerata più buona del caviale russo (ma hanno davvero mai sentito l'una e l'altro?), e Matthews dice che la pasta arriva traboccante *olio e intingolo*.

Chissà poi perché a Roma si firmano petizioni per salvare le botteghe storiche, chissà perché a noi ci sembra di essere invasi da pizzerie al taglio, paninoteche e negozi d'abbigliamento, e invece lo scrittore americano a Monti vede solo *panettieri e falegnami*.

Matthews sparge a piene mani, nel senso di tastiera, gemme di umorismo involontario come questa che segue:

- *La telefonata servirà anche a fare un po' di disinformazione, capisci cosa intendo?*
- *Sì, **dezinformaciya**.*
- *Esattamente.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ciq8...>

Altro momento linguistico scelto a caso:

- *Hren, cazzate!*

E uno si chiede se le lezioni d'inglese di Giacomo (di Aldo, Giovanni e) nelle vesti di Mr Flanagan siano poi così diverse.

Aggiungo perle, secondo me di grottesco involontario:

Li guardava torvi. L'orlo del vestito tremava insieme al suo corpo. "Ricomponiti. Non perdiamoci in chiacchiere".

L'editore divide i gruppi di vocali con gli accapo e la lingua italiana si agita (nella tomba?).

Ogni tanto, finalmente, Matthews si ricorda di aver lavorato nella CIA per 33 anni (sua moglie per 34) e regala i momenti migliori.

E il meglio è in certi dettagli, cui purtroppo Matthews dedica troppo poco tempo: i pedinamenti, le perlustrazioni, gli appostamenti...

Oppure nel trattamento inflitto a Diva nel sotterraneo della prigione – e non perché io sia un sadico maniaco, ma perché sono i momenti in cui Matthews dice qualcosa di non scontato, in cui viene fuori la sua esperienza e conoscenza diretta della materia - per esempio, nel caso specifico, gli armadi di legno nei quali la rinchiodano durante gli spostamenti lungo i corridoi, da una parte all'altra della prigione, se sta per passare un altro prigioniero, il tutto avvisando dell'incrocio pericoloso con dei cicalini – i prigionieri non devono mai vedersi, un modo per fiaccare ulteriormente il morale del detenuto.

Ciò nonostante, io, che se non si fosse ancora capito, sono un romantico senza speranza, sono arrivato in fondo alle 500 e passa pagine di banalità simili con voracità per sapere come sarebbe andata a finire tra l'uomo e la donna (niente nomi, evitiamo spoiler), se l'amore, o il sesso, o la ragion di stato, quale avrebbe vinto.

Adesso lo so. E passo oltre.

Ecco, a marzo esce il film in sala: Jennifer Lawrence appare perfetta nella parte. La regia è di Francis Lawrence, nel cast Joel Edgerton, Matthias "Prezzemolo" Schoenaerts e Jeremy Irons.

Bibi says

Random thoughts

So happy that I persevered to the end, considering that nothing actually happened. Not a damn thing that wasn't predictable or contrived.

CIA, FBI, Russian FSB, espionage, red sparrows-Russian secret agents who learn the fine art of seduction and sex, ubiquitous food recipes(*why?*), double agents, a lot of spy-speak, and countless acronyms.

Additionally, our protagonist- Dominika- is a synesthete (the ability to see auras depicted as colours) which to me is a very interesting concept except, sadly, Matthews never fully utilised this plot device in any meaningful manner.

That said, I reckon the movie will condense the repetitive narrative while ramping up the action sequences. My advice? Wait for the movie and skip the book

Heather Fineisen says

While I was reading this, I kept going back to my Goodreads account and looking at the reviews, perplexed, but coaxed to keep reading. I finally came to the conclusion that this is one of those books that appealed to most, but not to me. Dominika is a training to be a Red Sparrow, a Russian female seductress agent, and she also has the gift of synesthesia, or seeing colors in an aura around people that reflects their spirit, a mood ring sort of thing. Promising. Where the author lost me is the sexual content which I found ridiculous. I am not a prude, I even enjoy a titillating sex scene of many variations. Dominika masturbates with her grandmother's amber hairbrush, and then there is a recipe for Beet Soup. Dominika has a lesbian sex encounter at Sparrow School and here's a recipe for a Cuban Sandwich from the airport. Dominika has a fake orgasm worth of When Harry Met Sally and we can make crepes. (I may have some of the recipes out of sequel, but you get the idea.) Each chapter is followed by a recipe. And the women have sex like blow-up dolls. I even went back to the reviews thinking, oh, I bet women readers did not go for this, but they did. I could find no glaring trends to support my own conclusions. Just my own lonely opinion that this is ridiculous from my own female point of view. So, I say skip it and read a Ludlum or Le Carre. There you will find sex and substance.

A copy of this was provided by the publisher.

Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says

Instagram || Twitter || Facebook || Amazon || Pinterest

DNF @ 72%

When I saw the trailer for *Red Sparrow* (2018), I almost guffawed because as I watched, I could almost hear T.T.L.'s "Deep Shadow" playing in the background - it looked just like another *Hunger Games* trailer if the Capitol got a major downgrade and President Snow became Evil Russian Jeremy Irons. Still, I was intrigued because the idea of a "Memoirs of a Geisha"-esque rags-to-riches spy romance with sex, scandal, and espionage called out to my trash heart and said, "Nenia! Nenia! This book is for youuuuu!"

Because, you know, I *have* to read the book first.

Now that I've read the book, I'm no longer sure I want to watch the movie. RED SPARROW is a bad book. When women say that men can't write convincing female characters, this is the type of book that they are talking about (you know that infamous "breasted boobily" meme?). Dominika is devoid of personality. She's a beautiful ball-busting hard-ass who's good at sex and has a temper... and that's about the extent of her personality: sex, rage, snark.

Oh, and speaking of sex, this book has one of the most bizarre sex scenes I've ever read. The heroine masturbates with the handle of her hairbrush, and it's pretty gross how it's described. o_O

WARNING: SPOILERS, SPOILERS EVERYWHERE

Dominika starts off the book as a beautiful ballerina but her classmates are jealous and injure her foot on purpose. This is where the first character inconsistency rears its head because we're told that Dominika is violent, temperamental, and vengeful, and yet when she has the power to destroy the two classmates who injured her, she does *nothing*. NOTHING. She just takes it like a b*tch.

Now that her career is at an end, she basically is stuck living at home with her parents. But then her father

dies and it's just her and her mother, who have nothing, and that's when her evol uncle comes in and says, "Hey, Dominika, looking hot, hey wanna do a favor for me? Favor is spelled H-O-N-E-Y-T-R-A-P, by the way, and hey, what a good looking apartment this is... IT WOULD BE A SHAME IF SOMETHING HAPPENED TO IT." So Dominika agrees to sleep with this rich Russian tycoon, only to see him assassinated before her very eyes and be dragged back before her uncle.

Her uncle, in case you haven't figured it out by now, is a Soviet Spy-type who's in cahoots with Putin, King Evol himself. So he tells Dominika, "Hey, thanks for the favor, niece, you'll keep your mouth shut and say nothing of this to no one, right? And oh, it would be a shame if you made me mad and something happened to you and your hot bod..." So of course, Dominika agrees to be his spy, and after completing her basic training (where she is almost raped by one of her classmates and treats him to an eye-gouging with a shower spigot), he sends her to Sparrow School, or what Dominika affectionately calls "Whore School" and what I have termed Honeytrap Academy, LLC.

At Honeytrap Academy, women are turned into sex!spies by watching nightly porn videos and observing live models go at it, and then having sex with men that the Academy just so happens to have lying around while their spymasters videotape it and then the videos are played back in front of the whole class while their spymaster teachers offer up critiques. One of the girls isn't into this at all and comes to Dominika of all people for comfort, which turns out to be the pretext for an exploitative, fetishy lesbian love scene where the hairbrush once more makes an appearance (o_O). In the video trailer, I noticed that the school is co-ed. In the book they are separate and the boys go to something called Raven School and seem proud of their work, and not at all ashamed (gross).

After Dominika graduates from Honeytrap Academy she gets sent out to spy and of course all of her new coworkers do nothing but make comments about her body and ridicule her for going to "Whore School." This is LITERALLY all the interaction she has with the dudes in her book. Slut-shaming.

She ends up getting this dude named Nate to spy on who works for the Americans and is involved with a really deeply-entrenched Russian spy called MARBLE. Her creepy spymasters keep pressuring her to sleep with him (as they do with all her other targets, because that's all she's good for), but oh no, she gets kind of close to Nate and for some reason decides to out herself and defect, and then she and Nate are in love and fighting against the evol Russian spiez, dun dun dun.

That's about the time that I stopped reading.

The plot literally sounds like a bodice ripper and since I like bodice rippers you would think that I'd be all over RED SPARROW like white on rice but I couldn't get over Dominika's utter lack of agency and the way

she's objectified by every man in the book, or the fact that Nate kind of feels like a self-insert of the author (and even kind of sounds like a younger version of him based on that author photo I saw on Goodreads). Heinlein's books gave me that vibe, and I got a similar vibe with this book, and maybe that's me reading too much into it, but I didn't like it. It felt weirdly voyeuristic.

Also, these sex scenes are 80s bodice ripper bad. Check it out:

Dominika felt a sudden, excruciatingly sweet expansion, and the moonlight was rocketing around behind her eyelids, and she hoped he could keep her heaving body from blowing away like a piece of paper. She felt the hollow rush expand inside her, and then a rogue wave rose up from the deep, bigger than the others, hanging, curling, and she said, "Bozhe moj," from way back in her throat, and a white-eyed state of grace rolled through her like the wind bends a wheat field (224).

Not to make this a gender thing (I'm totally making this a gender thing) but how come bad sex scenes are ONLY called out when women do them? This is just as bad or worse as FIFTY SHADES OF GREY, and yet the dudes who are so quick to bash romance are awfully silent on this quarter. You could even argue that the hairbrush scene is almost as bad as the tampon scene, & just as phallic.

Also, two more WTF things about this book. Food plays a heavy role. Each chapter mentions some kind of food and then there's a recipe for the dish at the end of each chapter. The first time it happened, I was like, "Oh, what's this?" And then it kept happening. Every chapter, new recipe. That's something I'd expect from a cozy mystery and not a dudelit spy-thriller.

The second WTF thing about this book is that Dominika has synesthesia - music and words make colors, which helps her memory (this is actually true, because you do remember things better when they are encoded in multiple pathways with multiple associations) and at first I thought that was neat, but the author USES HER SYNESTHESIA AS A PRETEXT TO GIVE HER PSYCHIC POWERS. That's right. Dominika is a synesthete who can **read goddamn auras**. That's *right*. She sees colors around people's heads that indicate their moods. Which ties into the title, I think, because not only does Red mean communist, for her red means anger - she is a furious little sparrow.

An angry bird, if you will.

Funnily enough, I've been told that the psychic powers bit was omitted from the movie. I wonder why.

RED SPARROW is an awful, awful book. It's like someone decided to cross THE HUNGER GAMES with THE DA VINCI CODE, but also wanted to add a lot of weird sex and power games, with a dash of *The Americans* and some X-Men stuff too, because why the hell not? The beginning was interesting in a trashy read sort of way, but then the book got dull with the spy lingo and kept finding more sharks to jump over and I decided I was done. Why this is popular, I have no idea.

I leave you with this meme:

Bless you, scottbaiewulf. And fuck this book.

P.S. I started skimming pretty heavily so I apologize in advance if I got any of the finer details wrong.

1 to 1.5 stars

Darwin8u says

The next generation of spy-turned-spy novelist is here. Joining Graham Greene*, Somerset Maugham*, Ian Fleming, John le Carré*, James Church, (and maybe -- if my suspicions are correct -- Robert Littell and Olen Steinhauer too), Jason Matthews shows most interesting spy fiction is actually written by former spies/intelligence officers.

While not close to being a great espionage novel (using recipes to separate the chapters seems a little overcooked and trite), the Red Sparrow shows a lot of potential for a debut novel. When the novel gets away from acrobatic sex and ethnic food and instead sticks with spy craft, agent development, mole detection, etc., it actually holds up well.

It isn't exactly spy literature, but it is a fun and diversionary summer read that mixes a low brow Bond (sexy vixens and almost absurdly wicked villains) with more high brow Smiley (complexity of motivations and opacity of belief). This mixture could have almost sunk the novel, but Matthews nearly pulls it off.

* NOT close to their level of writing. No. No. No.

Esteban says

I very nearly despaired of finishing this book a couple of times.

In one review they compared this book to John Le Carre, I don't think so! That was the MAIN reason I picked it up and gave it a go.

So slow, so boring, so full of words that said almost nothing. Sometimes you get a book very rich in words which tells a rich story, this was not the case, it gave me the impression of the author's infatuation with his capacity to link words in sentences, then in paragraphs, pages, chapters and so on.

And the russian! Words in russian in every page, all the time, for everything, so exhausting. The heroine is introduced as being fluent in various languages, one of them english, yet she always had to resort to russian to say a specific word or phrase, so not so fluent I guess. So the author speaks russian then, and wanted to give us some ambiance, not for me you didn't.

The story is common, there is absolutely nothing to make it stand out from any other glamorous spy story, far fetched, slow, repetitive, boring, wordy.....

next!

Trudi says

Think the Cold War is over? Think again.

I'd always had somewhere in me (I mean, really, who doesn't?) an interest in Soviet history and everything Red Army, KGB, Iron Curtain, and Gulag. It's one of the greatest stories ever told after all -- the rise and fall of a mighty and murderous political and geographic monolith that aggressively absorbed many nations and languages and religions into its insatiable machinery in a quest for ultimate global supremacy. A nerve-wracking Cold War entrenchment would prove a constant counter-balancing act with the United States to see which would emerge the most super of two superpowers -- while the rest of us could do nothing but watch with bated breath to see whether one or both would destroy the world in a conflagration of nuclear annihilation. Good times.

While it seems like those old Cold War threats and anxieties are in the past, lost to the annals of history and diminished by Soviet collapse, I would venture that there remain a fair number of Russian politicians who think otherwise. Dig a little deeper into Putin's presidency and you will find a shocking (or perhaps not that shocking at all) amount of old-school Soviet corruption and megalomania.

And that's what gives *Red Sparrow* its sense of urgency and authenticity. The author doesn't really have to exaggerate or sensationalize his modern spy game between CIA operatives and Russian SVR agents. It's happening. In point of fact, it never stopped. Names might have changed, there might be a veneer of civility and legality over the top of it all to shine it up for a new century, but in a lot of important ways it's the same shit different day.

Author Jason Matthews isn't writing out of his ass either. He's been in the spy game for over three decades

and served in multiple overseas locations performing clandestine acts and participating in recruitment operations.

Reading about spy games as they are unfolding in this century is definitely thrilling, though at times because it requires so much *description* it's easy to become mired in the details. Many times while reading the action, I longed to be *watching* it instead. Spy games are extremely visual by their very nature -- so I did feel that some of the book's potency and terror was lost in the amount of dense prose required to put the reader in that place.

I couldn't help think about FX's brilliant spy drama *The Americans* and how it handles drops and communiques, late-night rides, expedient kills and ruthlessly efficient body disposal (all the more impressive since it's done using 80s technology and employing an array of epic wigs). After three superb seasons I'm truly addicted, especially to the rich *emotional* depth that simmers beneath its layers of intrigue and counterintelligence techniques.

So yeah, watching this stuff tends to be way more awesome than reading about it. The author overcomes this handicap by introducing a great cast of characters to act as our portal into the twisty, exciting narrative, giving us people to care and worry about. The stakes are high in these cat and mouse games that aren't games at all of course. One wrong move and you're dead, your body likely never to be found. I will definitely read the second book in this series, if only to tide me over until *The Americans* return in January.

Two quick nit-picky thoughts:

1) What the hell is up with all the recipes appearing at the end of every single chapter? That became a bit annoying only because I really didn't see the purpose, and some of them made me hungry, which would make me stop reading in order to run for the refrigerator.

2) Dominika is a kick-ass female lead, I really like her a lot, but I wish she didn't have those extra sensory capabilities because it felt like cheating. Couldn't she just be kick-ass, full stop, with a really well-tuned social and emotional intelligence to read people, rather than something that's almost paranormal/supernatural?

Kemper says

Maybe we Americans were just a little bit hasty when we said that we won the Cold War? 'Cause it's seeming more and more like that we were really just leading at halftime.

Modern Russia with Vladimir Putin running the show is essentially the Soviet Union with a better public relations department, and the old spy games between their Foreign Intelligence Service and the American Central Intelligence Agency are back with a vengeance. Young and ambitious CIA officer Nate Nash is the Moscow handler of a highly placed Russian code-named MARBLE. When a planned meeting goes sideways Nash manages to save his asset, but he blows his own cover so badly in the process that he's exiled to Helsinki where he sulks about the setback his career has suffered. Russian intelligence knows it has a leak and is desperate to find it so they send junior agent Dominika Egorova to see if she can pry loose the name of the mole from Nash.

Dominika was a talented ballerina as well as a true believer in the new Russia. She is also secretly a

synesthete who sees sound as colors as well as auras around people that clue her into their mental state. When her dancing career was derailed she is sucked into the spy business by her uncle who promises her position but really sees her as just a beautiful woman that he can whore out for his own purposes. Despite how her uncle uses her and the bureaucracy that thinks she only has value on her back, Dominika manages to earn a place in the intelligence service with her brains and will as she nurses hidden grudges at the way the system has treated her. After Nate and Dominika meet, a delicate dance of manipulation begins, but who is recruiting who?

I'm a big fan of FX's *The Americans* as well as currently being surrounded by a bunch of Russian consultants at the office. I'm convinced they must be secret agents running honeypot operations because there's just no way that many good looking people are a representative sample of the Russian population. (Or I'm just jealous that they're making us American office drones look like jeans wearing mole-people by comparison. Seriously, if the Cold War is really kicking off again, I'm putting my money on them.)

The point is that I was in the mood for a good spy vs. spy novel, and this one delivered. It won the 2014 Edgar Award for best first novel, and the author Jason Matthews is reportedly a former CIA officer who had over 30 years of service. The book is filled with the kind of details about spy operations that just feel authentic, but it never devolves into a Tom Clancy-style recitation of hardware and proper procedures because it's got plenty of human drama as well.

Dominika is the engine that runs the rest of the book. She's an intriguing character because of the anger and frustration she feels as someone who just wants to be permitted to do her job but is constantly used and humiliated by brutal men of limited imagination. The only false note to her is that it feels like Matthews wrote her synesthesia as giving her almost telepathic abilities when it comes to reading people. Why couldn't she just be smart and instinctive instead of using a neurological disorder as a way of making her 'special'? It's becoming an overused fictional trope these days.

Another minor nitpick is that Matthews uses a gimmick of having the characters constantly eating or preparing food and then putting the recipe for what they had at the end of a chapter. This was kind of a neat touch at first, but after a while it felt like he was really straining to find new dishes to shoehorn into the action. Also, (This spoiler does not give away the ending but does involve a major character introduced halfway through the book.) ([view spoiler](#))

Still, none of my complaints seriously hurt my enjoyment of the book which was filled with great characters playing tense spy games for high stakes.

Matthew says

A recipe for Red Sparrow

- 1 cup of Cold War
- 2 tablespoons of espionage
- 5 cubes of chopped suspense
- In a sauce pan in simmer a handful of double agents and several pinches of government secrets. After 15 minutes, slowly stir in the Cold War, espionage, and suspense.
- After it thickens, pour in to a baking dish, sprinkle traitorous crumbs over the top and bake for 1 hour.
- Serve with a side of sex and a glass of revenge.

I thought this book was fantastic! It is not an action packed spy thriller. It is more of a cat and mouse chess match. The suspense and stakes are high throughout and it kept me guessing. I don't think there was a second I wasn't on the edge of my seat.

If you love spy thrillers, cold war drama, and anything else of that ilk, this is definitely the book for you!

Paromjit says

This is the first in the Red Sparrow trilogy of which a film with Jennifer Lawrence is set to be released in 2018. Jason Matthews brings all his experience of being a spy with the CIA to bear in this well plotted espionage thriller. His descriptions of the workings of the American and Russian intelligence agencies bear all the hallmarks of the politics, paranoia, intrigue, quandries and motivations that shape the organisations. Set in the contemporary world of Putin's Russia, Matthews portrays the world of spies that suggest the Cold War may well be over, but it is business as usual, and in practice so little has changed, although Putin's PR spin is significantly slicker. Dominika Ergova is a synesthete who has had her career as a ballerina trashed, and thanks to the machinations (and exploitation) by her uncle ends up as a struggling state intelligence officer pushed into becoming a trained sparrow, a spy who seduces.

Nathanial 'Nate' Nash is a CIA operative and handler of a major Russian asset, MARBLE, when everything goes wrong. He manages to save the asset, but not himself as he ends up in Helsinki bemoaning the stalling of his career ambitions. The Russians are determined to find the mole, and use Dominika for that purpose. Dominika is seething mass of rage and resentment over the limited visions and brutality of the men who have power over her. She is more than capable of independent thinking, and is no biddable and easily controlled woman. Nate and Dominika end up having a sexual affair which seems to have little future. This is a story of sex, betrayal, deception, double dealing, and a myriad of twists as the American and Russian spy agencies, erstwhile enemies, go up against each other in their efforts to find the moles in their own sides.

Each chapter ends with a recipe. The biggest weakness of the novel is Matthews portrayal of the American and Russian sides as too black and white, with the Americans as the good guys and the Russians as evil. Otherwise, it is a great espionage read that is tense, gripping and compelling. I am really looking forward to seeing the movie! Many thanks to Simon and Schuster for an ARC.

Tim says

The first third of this trilogy has a few good plots and assorted misses. The end of this first trill is wanting....as in wanting to be better. 6 of 10 stars

Darren says

Awful Writing and No Command of Fiction Craft

I abandoned this book after 90 pages. I don't care if the plot eventually improved; the writing is terrible. For one, there is a lot of needless description. He describes plateware and names the fancy cologne a character is wearing. Who cares? Don't waste my time with the research you did on trivial nonsense. He even describes

an airport terminal as containing shops and restaurants. Really? Why waste words on describing an airport? We all know what they look like. I don't need to be told they have shops.

Second, he's using omniscient POV, which is not a good choice for a first-time author. It's a POV that requires restraint or else the reader will get whiplash from jumping around in different characters' heads. And that's exactly what the reader gets--sometimes he jumps back and forth between two characters' POVs on the same page.

There is also a lot of needless description of cuisine--probably so he can include a recipe at the end of each chapter. No one cares. Stop forcing every chapter to have a food scene.

Perhaps I've been spoiled by reading good writers and avoiding genre fiction, but if this is what passes for acceptable craft in genre fiction, then count me out of genre books.

The author needed a professional writer to collaborate with--someone who could take his plot ideas and tell the story in a compelling, economical way. I wish I could get my \$11.04 back.

Matt says

With all the hype this series has received, I thought it best to try the first novel in the trilogy, to see if it meets my expectations. Jason Matthews has not disappointed, with his knowledge of the topic and ability to transmit ideas onto the page. Nathaniel 'Nate' Nash has been working as a CIA operative to handle an important mole within the Russian Government. No one seems to know who it could be or how much information the Americans have garnered, but Russian President Putin is enraged and wants this person found. Feeling some of the heat, the CIA takes the opportunity to move Nash out of the region and resettles him in Helsinki. Meanwhile, the reader learns all about Dominika Egorova, whose past as a ballerina ended with a freak accident. Pulled into the Russian Intelligence sphere by an uncle who works as a senior official within the SVR (the KGB's modern-day cousin), Egorova is targeted for a high-stakes game to retrieve the needed information from Nash. Sent to a 'Sparrow School', Egorova is turned into a seductress, where sexpionage is the name of the game. Her skills will be useful if she can lure the mole information from Nash while focussing her attention on his weaknesses. After crafting a chance encounter within the Finnish borders, Egorova begins laying her honey trap, but Nash is not taking the bait, at least not in the way she suspects he should. Instead, Nash sees a potential to turn Egorova to the Americans and have her feed additional information to the CIA. Tensions build and Egorova makes a decision she feels will benefit her in the long-run, but sours the relationship with her SVR handlers. Forced back to Russia, Egorova is presumed 'handled' in some dank prison, while Nash returns stateside with some valuable information; there is a Russian mole within the American intelligence community that could compromise everything. The race is on to find this mole before too much can be handed over to the Russians, while also continuing to protect their own information pipeline. Egorova has reported some of her news to SVR officials and seeks another chance to finish the work she's started. With two moles and significant blowback to come, the American and Russian Intelligence communities are fighting to gain the upper hand in this post-Cold War world. Two agents, doing what they do best, may end up shaping the final outcome of this explosive game of espionage. Who is playing for whom... that's anyone's guess. Matthews shows how his past as a CIA official can help shape this gripping thriller that opens every conceivable door for the reader to push onwards. A trilogy that is sure to impress many, especially those who love a traditional novel of spy games. Highly recommended to those with the patience and interest in deep-rooted spy novels, a la John Le Carré!

With this book now a major motion picture and the final novel recently released, I have heard much about it, as it appears all over Goodreads. I thought it high time to take a look to see if it might be for me. While the beginning was a little dense, I had to remind myself that I am not one who normally reads well-crafted spy novels, which seek to forego the superficial banter and develop over time, enriching the reading experience. As I pushed onwards, I found myself drawn to both Nate Nash and Dominika Egorova, two players from different spheres whose dedication to the cause cannot be discounted. Matthews does well to create elaborate and intriguing backstories for these two—particularly Dominika’s synesthesia—as well as meshing them together in a dance that can only have significant consequences. I found myself very interested in the ‘training’ undertaken by Egorova, sure that this sort of ‘Sparrow School’ is more common than it might seem. While many readers may be familiar with the idea of a honeypot mission, Matthews pushes this out of the sweaty sheets and pillow talk, turning the entire undertaking into a slow and methodical game of chess, with two countries staring one another down, unsure how much they know of the other’s game plan. Additionally, the creation and development of the two moles keeps the reader hooked, as they watch both individuals undertake their respective positions and extract the needed information to pass along. Who will be caught and at what price? The story is fabulous and develops slowly, but never loses the momentum through a strong narrative and believable dialogue. Matthews has done well to personalise the story with insider bits that promote a story that rests on a foundation of fact (or does it?). The reader need not feel they are being spoon fed yet another America vs. Russia novel of high-stakes and back alley stabbing, but rather a methodical understanding of the world of espionage with results dependent on the risks undertaken. With the uncanny use of recipes embedded at the end of each chapter—usually related to the food mentioned in the earlier narrative—Matthews shows that he has a lighter side and can lure the reader in through their stomachs as well as minds. I cannot wait to sink my teeth into the next novel, hoping that the development is as exciting as what Matthews developed here. I can see why there was so much hype... Matthews knows his stuff and has the literary awards to show for it.

Kudos, Mr. Matthews, for a stellar debut novel. This series could really have some serious potential to win over many who have not yet developed a love for high-caliber spy novels.

Love/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

A Book for All Seasons, a different sort of Book Challenge: <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/...>

Jennifer says

"Her name was Dominika Egorova. She was a ballerina, an officer in the SVR, a Sparrow trained to bend others' minds. She loved and was loved in return."

I rarely read spy thrillers, but when I heard Jennifer Lawrence was cast for the film adaptation of *Red Sparrow*, I put it on my TBR list asap. At first, I almost didn't finish this book. Like I said, I don't typically read this genre and I didn't find myself easily engaged in the writing style. It felt very dry third-person. However, the manipulation, level of action, surprising amount of drama, food (there are recipes!!), culture, unexpected romance, and a strong heroine with a very convenient neurological gift quickly earned my interest and I was easily sold. Jennifer Lawrence will be kickass in the role of Dominika and I'm excited to see how this plays out on the screen.

My favorite quote:

"The long and short of it, Nate," said Gable later in his office, "is shut the fuck up. We have lots to do. Get to work, for Christ's sake. Stop mooning around. It's like a Jane Austen novel."

The Red Sparrow Trilogy includes the following installments as of February 2018:

#1-Red Sparrow

#2-Palace of Treason

#3-The Kremlin's Candidate

Bob Milne says

Like the coldest, most diligent of intelligence officers, I have been patiently sitting on the secrets of this book for nearly 6 months now. I was quick to accept when Simon & Schuster Canada proposed the mission - to review, and to be a part of the tour - and gave it a read almost as soon as the ARC arrived on my doorstep. It reminded me of the cold-war espionage thrillers I read growing up, and I drafted my review right away, while the source material was still fresh in my brain, safe from any sort of foreign government tampering.

It's a good thing too, since the mission ended up being delayed by a month, taking us into the end of May for the review, and the first week of June for my interrogation - I mean, friendly Q&A, of course - with the author. Check back next Tuesday for that!

With all that having been said, I can safely say that Red Sparrow is worth the wait. If you find yourself missing the cloak-and-dagger world of the Cold War - somewhere between the time when spy thrillers stopped being all about the gadgets and started being all about gritty, action-packed reboots - then this is a book you will certainly appreciate. This is a contemporary thriller, set in Putin's Russia, and it contains some clever nods to the classic spycraft elements, but it reads like it could have come direct from Gorbachev's Soviet Union. It's an intelligent, slow-moving tale (at least in the early chapters), but no less compelling for it. Jason Matthews quickly establishes the players, the stage, and the stakes, drawing us in and holding us close throughout.

Nathaniel (Nate) is a great character, a charismatic lead who manages to retain the sense of being familiar and down-to-earth, while also demonstrating a propensity for quick action and bold heroics. He's both likable and admirable, which is a difficult mix to pull off, especially in this kind of a story. At the same time, Dominika comes across as an authentic, if seductively dangerous, woman, placed in an awkward situation. A graduate of the Sparrow School of sexual espionage, she could easily have fallen into the disposable Bond-girl mold, but she not only holds her own, she proves herself worthy of sharing the lead.

What I really appreciated about the story was the amount of deceit, double-dealing, and treacherous twists that permeate the text. You're never quite sure who you can trust or what their ultimate motives are, and that's as it should be. As soon as your readers find themselves becoming familiar with the characters, and feeling secure in their presence, then you've failed the genre. Matthews deftly avoids that pitfall, making us want to believe Nate, and compelling us to want to trust in Dominika, but he never makes any promises. They're never cheap twists, and you never feel as if you've been blindsided, but it's worth remembering that red herrings are part and parcel of the genre.

While this is not an action-packed novel, screaming for a big-budget, blockbuster treatment, it contains more

than its fair share of sex, violence, and dramatic tension. The stakes are high, and the story never allows us to lose sight of that. Political diplomacy aside, we're talking about warring forces here, enemy combatants who may operate in the shadows, but who fill those shadows with torture, murder, and sexual exploitation. It's a frightening, ugly world in which to operate, full of necessary evils and uncomfortable decisions. Matthew maintains that tension right to the very last page, keeping the reader intrigued, almost to the point of paranoia.

To say much more than that would be to get into spoiler territory, and I'm far too aware of my own morality to risk crossing the wrong people. However, I will add this - the assassination in the final pages makes for a fitting end, but it also provides ample motive and opportunity for a Red Sparrow sequel. To be honest, I'd like to see Matthew simply leave it at that, since the end works so beautifully, but I wouldn't be too disappointed were he to pick up the threads for a sequel.

As a final note, while I suspect the recipes that follow each chapters are carefully crafted secret messages to Nate's bosses, I'm also reasonably sure they're not meant to poison the enemy, and are likely as tasty as they are intriguing. :)

Originally reviewed at Beauty in Ruins
