

“Undetermined Persona”

*My Life in CIA: A Chronicle of 1973*

Harry Mathews

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by Jeff Burse

On the back of *My Life in CIA* appear two words, “autobiographical novel”, which have caused reviewers to sweat over what is true, what is false, what is blurred, and what is going on in the latest novel from Harry Mathews. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Daniel Soar, after summarizing what he thinks Mathews life was like in Paris in 1973, says: “This might have been Harry Mathews’s story. But it isn’t. It’s his story as I’ve chosen to tell it; or more depressingly, as I am able to tell it.” He finishes his review thus: “And maybe I’m right about Harry Mathews; maybe he was never in the CIA.” The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, James Murphy, concludes: “It is not clear whether *My Life in CIA*... is autobiographical, fictional or a mixture of the two.” Mark Ford, reviewing two other books by Mathews—*The Human Country* and *The Case of the persevering Maltese*—for the *LRB* in 2003, stated Mathews’ Oulipian exercises “force writer and reader into unfamiliar realms, and make us acknowledge language as an ongoing continuum rather than a stable set of agreed truths.” In the case of his latest novel, Mathews asks us to substitute what may be known about him and read, instead, the story of Harry Mathews, amateur spook.

That Harry Mathews could be taken for an operative apparently seems believable to many. In the book he’s living in Paris as a writer (on no visible income—certainly little from his published books, and inheritances are unseen and unprovable), who had visited Indochina in the company of an embassy friend in the 1960s (enough to get his name on French intelligence files), and who had participated in the actions of May 1968. It aggravates Mathews to be taken for a spy employed by an agency he despises, particularly in 1973 in France, with upheavals in Chile and Watergate on the front pages of newspapers. Unable to convince people he’s just a writer, Mathews acts on the suggestion of two Chilean friends and takes up the life everyone already believes he’s leading to capitalise on whatever may come his way through this new role. Inventiveness is aligned with a form of passivity, and his new career takes off, with innocuous beginnings—delivering letters to empty cars, scrawling cryptic notes on walls—which take a serious and eventually dangerous turn. For cover, Mathews sets up a tourism business, and gives a hilarious lecture to dyslexic travellers, the subtext of which arouses suspicions among certain people. He admits there’s some drabness in this false existence: “Even if I liked playing spy, mid-winter in Paris is a forlorn season.” Yet retaining a social life isn’t difficult for someone with little to occupy him, and as with all good spies, and spy stories, Mathews injects the exceptional into the routine: “The next morning I was on my way out to see the Ad Reinhardt show at the Grand Palais when the [Communist Party] cell secretary called: my inter-cell meeting was scheduled for 6 p.m. on Monday.”

Assignations, a plane crash, people falling into and out of his life, and an increasing claustrophobia as different agencies and movements become interested in what Mathews is up to, start to crowd around him. Matters get increasingly uncomfortable, yet he is never aware, until very late, of the seriousness of the situation. What began in urban Paris ends in a pastoral setting, with Mathews far away from Nureyev in *Swan Lake*, but very close to a long final walk in the woods.

It's tempting to view *My Life in CIA* as a frolic of Mathews' own, to regard the material as just a jape, but that would do this work a disservice. While the novel contains no existential angst—a movement far removed from Oulipo, of which Mathews is the only US member—there is suffering in it. No information is given after Mathews finally meets his female saviour, and one wonders what happens next. Yes, there's always a woman. In this novel there are several, and they often provide a base note of lust which Mathews treats in an offhand manner. Early in the novel there is a revealing passage that addresses this topic, and much more:

“January, 1973 was a good time to start a new life. I was on my own for the first time ever. The two children I'd looked after since my marriage broke up were gone—my daughter in 1969, my son in 1972—and now Maxine, who'd been with me for twelve years, decided she'd had enough and went back to New York. Two of my closest friends were oceans away, John Ashbery in America and Fred Warner in Japan. Georges Perec, who'd become a mainstay of my life in Paris, was so busy making his first movie that I only saw him rarely.”

His writing has almost dried up, and while there are women, they're seen only occasionally. In such a social and psychological vacuum the 'idea' of pretending to be a spy “had plenty of space to grow in... The new game certainly seemed more promising than moping at home in front of my mirror wondering how fast I was losing my hair.” This seemingly banal, offhand justification—the undermined sense of self, the emptiness of a man's life without a woman, a father's life without his children, a writer without a novel underway or on the verge of being published—contains a richness which, because he's a craftsman, Mathews displays lightly. He quietly indicates the source of his alter ego's eagerness to create the fiction of being an agent—the loneliness and despair of a man denied, if only temporarily, his vocation, his family, his friends, all sources of comfort, as well as his actual identity.

These things seem to have passed by many reviewers, who have focussed on the comedy in *My Life in CIA* and on the question of whether this is a novel or autobiography. To that last point, recently Nigel Fabb argued that since literary texts “are often fictions,” literary form is “a kind of fiction.” It's mostly conditioning and reflex that classify *Jane Eyre* as a novel, but which prevents us from doing the same for *My Life in CIA*. Such a response is dictatorial, and does little to encourage new writers to, as Ben Marcus put it, “dream that new arrangements are possible, new styles, new concoctions of language that might set off a series of delicious mental explosions.”

Henry Miller wrote the following of his own works: “If I lie now and then it is mainly in the interest of truth.” *My Life in CIA* is an amusing, thrilling novel which also opens up Harry Mathews to deep exploration, particularly of the truths that he may be telling which are mainly in the interest of fiction.

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