



Spies in Postwar Spain

Winter in Madrid. By C. J. Sanson. New York: Viking, 2008. 530 pp. \$25.95.

By Charles Oberndorf

I think it's safe to say there are few, if any, completely successful novels about the Spanish Civil War. The nature of the war is enormous, and the fine novels that do exist, such as Javier Cercas' *Soldiers of Salamis*, focus on one incident or one aspect of the war. On the other hand, the fetid compost heap of the postwar period seems to have caused the flowering of much good fiction, whether they be masterpieces such as Camilo José Cela's *The Hive* and Juan Marsé's *The Fallen* or entertainments such as Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind* and the recently released *Winter in Madrid*.

It's 1940, and Harry Brett, shell-shocked by the Battle of Dunkirk, is recruited by MI-5. During his years at a prestigious boarding school, Harry had befriended Sandy Forsyth. Forsyth is now in Madrid conducting some kind of shady dealings involving key players in the Spanish government. British Intelligence is working to make sure that Franco doesn't become a full-fledged ally of the Germans, and they want Harry to contact Forsyth, renew their friendship, and find out what he's up to.

While in boarding school, Harry had also befriended Forsyth's polar opposite, Bernie Piper, a working-class scholarship boy and an ardent communist. Bernie had joined the

International Brigades and disappeared during the Battle of Jarama. His girlfriend, Red Cross nurse Barbara Clare, asked Harry to come to Spain in 1938 to try to find out what had happened to Bernie.

Now, in 1940, a despondent Barbara has left the Red Cross and is Forsyth's girlfriend. While Harry is trying to uncover Forsyth's business plans, Barbara is contacted by a desperately impoverished man. His brother works as a guard at an isolated prison camp for Republican soldiers. The brother has seen Bernie Piper. For the right amount of money, he will help him escape.

These plot lines all converge, though at times I found myself wishing for a little more John Le Carré complexity or moral ambiguity. The novel's first quarter does an expert job of using dramatic flashbacks to establish character and place, and the last

quarter moves along at great speed.

The middle suffers a bit for several reasons. First, the novel is a romance as well as a mystery and espionage thriller, and the romance scenes just don't work well. Second, the number of flashbacks seem to multiply. Third, Sanson works too hard to make sure we get the point of his history lesson: the western democracies should have

supported the Republic. Good people comprised the Republic. (We meet a number of those good people suffering under fascism.) Sure, there were communists, and for the most part, they were the bad apples of left-wing Spain, but not the heart and soul of the Republic. Bernie Piper, for most of the novel, seems to be the only communist who hasn't had his soul twisted to make him capable of Stalinist treachery.

The best scenes in the novel are set in the Republican prison camp. The tensions and conflicts amid grueling conditions bring out the best and the worst of the characters, so we get complex portraits of a young priest, a devoted Republican, and a conflicted prison guard.

C.J. Sanson, who is known in Britain for a series of mysteries set in Tudor England, has a great sense of place and an ability to dramatize key moments in history. If you want to give someone a sense of why the Spanish Civil War was such an important event in its day, this novel can do

Subscribe to *The Volunteer*
www.alba-valb.org

the trick. It's not a perfect novel, politically or aesthetically, but it works well as an entertainment and as a fictional window on the dark, sad landscape that was postwar Spain. ■

Charles Oberndorf is a novelist, book reviewer, and English teacher. He is at work on a biographical novel about Abraham Lincoln vet Abe Osheroff.