



A Drop of Chinese Blood

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Now Church—a former Western intelligence officer who pulls back the curtain on the hidden world of North Korea in a way that no one else can—comes roaring back with a new novel introducing Inspector O's nephew, Major Bing, the long-suffering chief of the Chinese Ministry of State Security operations on the border with North Korea.

The last place Bing expected to find the stunningly beautiful Madame Fang—a woman Headquarters wants closely watched—was on his front doorstep. Then, as suddenly as she shows up, Madame Fang mysteriously disappears across the river into North Korea, leaving in her wake both consternation and a highly sensitive assignment for Bing to bring back from the North a long missing Chinese security official. Concerned for his nephew's safety, O reluctantly helps him navigate an increasingly complex and deadly maze, one that leads down the twisted byways of O's homeland. In the tradition of Philip Kerr's Berlin Noir trilogy, and the Inspector Arkady Renko novels, *A Drop of Chinese Blood* presents an unfamiliar world, a perplexing universe where the rules are an enigma to the reader and even, sometimes, to Inspector O. Once again, James Church has crafted a story with beautifully spare prose and layered descriptions of a country and a people he knows by heart.

A Drop of Chinese Blood Details

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Ludditus says

I must be masochistic: it's already clear that from the entire Inspector O series, only the first three novels are decent enough and reasonably fulfilling the expectations I had based on the lies given by the publisher, who promised detective stories in the enigmatic world of North Korea; I already accepted that the so-called "conspiracies and cover-ups" are actually "spy stuff" (and quite ridiculous at that), but there's only a limited level of ludicrousness I can put up with.

This fifth novel is written from the perspective of Inspector O's nephew, which means we're in China—that is, unless we're not. The international aspect of the entire series is quite irritating, if you ask me.

You should remember that in the previous novel, Inspector O was 68 years old, and he was "reawaken" after some five years... on a mountaintop. Now we're sometime later, so "Uncle O" must be in his 70s. All we know about this is ambiguous: "He'd left North Korea in a hurry, under threat, but he still missed home." And: "According to my uncle, he left the North because he could not stay. That's all he would say, but our sources had uncovered a little more. Three or four years ago, his former employer was put under investigation, reorganized, and purged as a result of apparently well-founded suspicions that its leadership was taking money (and possibly orders) from a foreign intelligence service. My uncle, who had retreated to a rural mountaintop to live after retirement, received a timely message from an anonymous friend—the best kind, he maintained—that his file was in the next batch to be examined, and that people with old scores to settle with him would likely use the opportunity to do exactly that." Bollocks.

As to the nephew... "Quite by accident, I'd first met Uncle O at the gravesite, a year after my father's death. My uncle hadn't known of my existence, and in the shock of meeting me, he made an effort to avoid criticizing my father."

Getting to the point, this stupid story might have seemed acceptable, were it not for Part III, which really goes beyond ridiculous. As I mentioned in the reviews of the previous novels in the series, the spy stories are not my forte, and the Inspector O series is far from being a police procedural, but everything is absurd! Or, to use quotes from the book, "It was convoluted, with a lot of dark corners and loose ends." Also, "A lot of loose threads, and I was too tired to pull on them."

As to the plausibility of the human characters, not of the political-cum-spy story, I find it unrealistic that Major Bing, the nephew, should be unable to pay the bills for a modest dwelling from his salary alone: "As my uncle read his book on red sparrow trees, I was totaling the week's new harvest of household bills, matching them against our income. ... We would soon be without money. ... We would not just be low on funds; we would be completely without. We couldn't keep up the current, widening gap between income and expenses. We were, in the language of the street, peeling our last potato." If this was meant to justify why everyone else was corrupt, it's a pathetic attempt.

Speaking of corruption, let's quote from Uncle O: "Corruption is like carbon; life on earth couldn't exist without it. It might even be more widespread than we think." One more time: "What do you suppose all that talk you heard about corruption across the border actually meant? Do you imagine your headquarters really cares about corruption? Since when do Chinese care about corruption?" From his nephew this time: "Arresting a mayor or a city party secretary is all right, but a provincial governor? A vice premier? Not something you want to try."

Uncle O still holds his obsession with trees, wood chips and whatnot, but now we're also annoyed by a

confusing story regarding “the Blue Sparrow case.” In the end, the useless intricacy of the plot disappoints.

Major Bing himself is not credible enough. The way he deals with his deputy, Li Bo-ting, is not entirely plausible. He acts and thinks as a younger version of his uncle—which means he’s righteous and he’s pissing everyone off. I wonder how they managed to stay alive, Major Bing and Inspector O...

I still believe James Church (whatever his real name is) also had assignments in Romania, because here too he couldn’t resist inserting a mention to it: “The last time, about thirty years ago in Romania, I saw him slumped in a chair in the Hotel Union with a bullet in his neck. Didn’t fill me with remorse. I thought he was dead.”

One more disappointment, one more novel that doesn’t actually deal with North Korea. Fuck me sideways if I can tell why I’m going to read the sixth and last novel in the series. Maybe, as I said, I’m really having masochistic tendencies...

David Smith says

Very well written, but no chance for the reader to anticipate where the plot was going, or prospective solutions to the mystery. I thought there was way too much back and forth between Major Bing and Inspector O, and found their ceaseless banter somewhat tedious. Some setting narrative might have been good too. Yanji and Ulan Bator are large vital cities, not under-developed towns, which is the impression given. But, that's just me. The perspectives on Chinese/Korean/Mongolian political relationships was very interesting.

Zeb Kantrowitz says

Having read Church’s four prior books starring Inspector O of North Korea’s Ministry of State Security, I was ready for an ‘odd’ story. What I wasn’t ready for was a Moliere farce translated from French to German by Kafka, and then into English by Jasper Fforde. His last two books have been Zen style mysteries that remind me of the works of Janwillem van de Wetering. Keeping all this in mind, I endeavored to understand this novel. Well, I didn’t.

The whole book danders around a fake South Korean seal, that is to be used to conclude phony contracts with the Mongolians for rare earths and other minerals. The Chinese don’t want the Mongolians exporting rare earths and the North Koreans just want to screw with the South Koreans. Even with a scorecard it’s hard to tell who the players are or are supposed to be. There are double and triple agents, and people with more than one identity, and everyone has their own agenda.

Once again there are a lot of insights into how these governments (China and the Koreas) deal with each other on a daily basis. Everyone is trying to subvert everyone else’s agents and Police, while the intelligence agencies of these three governments play games without rules or endings. All in all, very confusing, but somehow entertaining.

Zeb Kantrowitz

Karen says

In this Inspector O volume, the fifth, we have a new narrator - Major Bing, O's nephew, who is part Korean but also has at least 'a drop of Chinese blood.' The story is the usual crazy confetti of characters with unclear affiliation executing political machination across the borders of both Koreas, Russia, and China, and encountering skulduggery of all kinds. But it is the relationship between Bing and O that stars here: the nephew, an employee of Chinese State Security and himself no slouch as a detective, constantly challenging and being challenged by his irritating, laconic, engrossed-in-his-wood-chips but always-knowing-more-than-he-tells uncle. Great fun, terrific writing.

Xander says

The intriguing Inspector O now resides in a Jilin border town with his nephew Bing, an officer with China's Ministry of State Security. Bing and O chase a mystery ranging from northeastern China, the grasslands of Mongolia and 'across the river' in North Korea. The not always obvious plot is drawn out through a sometimes lengthy narrative of conjecture dialogue.

I'm not sure I would have enjoyed this as much without the context of the previous O books. But while the previous O books served as an entertaining pseudo-introduction to a mysterious land, North Korea, part of the fun here was following O in a region I know fairly well. As such, this book may be a treat for other China watchers, particularly those with an interest in the NE region.

Monica says

Inspector O has left the People's Republic of Korea and is living just across the border, in the Chinese backwater town Yanji City. His nephew Bing is the Chief of the Chinese Ministry of State Security for the area. The atmosphere is equal parts Kafka and Alice in Wonderland and the job brings Bing a new opportunity to fail, or to displease his masters in Beijing (whoever they are) several times a day.

Bing and O, who is concentrating on his woodworking, have an uneasy truce, a prickly working relationship that improves (a little) with each new crisis that they encounter.

I really find the geopolitics and the physical setting of these books quite wonderful - and am continually reminded and delighted that noir and irony are only one letter apart.

Rich Saskal says

The Inspector O series, which could well have neatly ended at the end of four books, continues, with something of a twist. The narrator is O's nephew, a functionary in the Chinese state security apparatus, who shares his home near the Korean border with O.

There are so many twists and turns that it became a bit hard to swallow -- and the setting, outside North

Korea, isn't as interesting as the world portrayed in the first Inspector O books.

I'd say worth it for those who enjoyed the earlier books in the series, definitely not the place to jump in.

Mal Warwick says

Get this: the principal characters are named Bing, Ding, Jang, Wu, Hu, and O. Perhaps Chinese speakers can keep all these names straight, but I sure couldn't. Of course, I might have found it easier if the plot were comprehensible. It was anything but. Even after reading through to the last page (for reasons that escape me now), I didn't really understand what had happened. A Drop of Chinese Blood is that confusing.

A murder mystery for Inspector O to solve

In the fifth (and to date the last) novel in the Inspector O series, James Church introduces Inspector O's nephew, Major Bing, the long-suffering chief of the Chinese Ministry of State Security operations on the border with North Korea. Uncle O himself plays a subordinate role. As we learned in the previous four novels, O was a highly unconventional policeman. He was often out of favor with key members of the North Korean regime. O survived for many years only because his grandfather had been a hero of the revolution. In the end, though, even that wasn't enough. He was forced to flee to China, where he now lives with his nephew.

Koreans, Chinese, and Mongolians

So far as I can tell, the story in A Drop of Chinese Blood revolves around a plot by the Chinese government to outmaneuver the South Koreans in obtaining coal and iron ore from Mongolia. Police officers and intelligence officials from all three countries get involved somehow. So does "the most beautiful woman in the world," a beauty queen who has ties to the underworld. There are a great many crooks on the scene as well. The action unfolds in a small town in northeast China near the North Korean border, in and around Ulan Bator, Mongolia, and, briefly, in North Korea as well. What happens in all these places, much less why, is a mystery.

Barbara Cryer says

spent most of my reading time thinking "what?". this book is very perplexing, not my cup of tea.

Tuck says

this is my fifth james church mystery/north korean operative book, and unfortunately probably last. while the other four taking place in north korea had a forboding sense of darkness and dispair in the land of "don't ask", this takes place in china, albeit right across the border from tumen, and revolves around inspetor O's nephew, and yes there is a mystery, and yes there is a twist or 5, but the light-hearted, ah shucks capitalism of red chinese, while probably well rendered, left me cold. no sense of humor you say? perhaps. but also no time for plotless books.

Tricia Toney says

These books just keep getting better and better. Church really emphasizes the paranoia and insularity necessary to survive in North Korea and Communist China.

adcash says

I have read all of the books in this series. This time we're following a new main character, the nephew of Inspector O who was the focus of the previous books in the series. & I find that I really enjoyed this book more than the others because of the new narrative. I still found myself feeling slow and lost with some of the twists but I've learned that's just the style of these books & I just keep going with it. Looking forward to more books with Inspector O from the nephew's perspective.

Becky says

James Church continues with his spy/murder mystery adventures of Inspector O by adding his nephew as an officer in the Chinese police department. This story is set in a small town in China near the North Korean border and the characters travel into Mongolia at one point in the story. I think I continue reading to learn more about this part of the world. I also enjoyed the new character and the dialogue between him and Inspector O.

Chris says

Bizarre and bewildering as usual. Unlike most mysteries in which you know what the mystery is, such is not the case in the Inspector O mysteries. The reader reads on just hoping to fathom what is happening and as usual even when there is an explanation at the end it's still inexplicable. You are never sure what exactly happened. There are always loose ends. This one starts off with O living in exile in China on the NK border. He resides with his nephew who is Chinese and works for State Security. People come to visit. Stuff starts to happen. Church mixes spies with organized crime and you never know what the objective is. O and Bing, the nephew, are set off on a wild good chase to Mongolia to do God knows what. At the end there is a meeting of the suspects much like in the movie Clue and you're left wondering who some of these people are. Confusing, perplexing, but stimulating nevertheless.

Katharine says

I have enjoyed all of "James Church"s books about Inspector O and this one did not disappoint. The slightly cryptic style suits the inscrutability of the North Korean subject, and the trek to Mongolia was also of interest. The border between North Korea and China sounds like a place like no other, which is born out by its description in "Escape from Camp 14", which is must reading for anyone who likes Inspector O.
