



Cause for Alarm

Eric Ambler

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Nicky Marlow needs a job. He's engaged to be married and the employment market is pretty slim in Britain in 1937. So when his fiancé points out the Spartacus Machine Tool notice, he jumps at the chance. After all, he speaks Italian and he figures he'll be able to endure Milan for a year, long enough to save some money. Soon after he arrives, however, he learns the sinister truth of his predecessor's death and finds himself courted by two agents with dangerously different agendas. In the process, Marlow realizes it's not so simple to just do the job he's paid to do in fascist Italy on the eve of a world war.

Cause for Alarm Details

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From Reader Review Cause for Alarm for online ebook

Orsodimondo says

UN MAESTRO DEL THRILLER

Era davvero da tanto che non leggevo un romanzo di Eric Ambler.

A suo tempo mi deliziò con *Epitaffio per una spia*, *Topkapi-La luce del giorno*, *La maschera di Dimitrios*, il cui film aveva la carta geografica a tutto schermo attraversata dalla locomotiva (molto prima dell'aeroplanino di Indiana Jones) – e quell'altro film, sul furto al Topkapi, con Melina Mercouri e Peter Ustinov, Maximilian Schell e l'Akim Tamiroff che ha partecipato a diversi splendidi film di Orson Welles (chiaro, i film di Orson Welles sono tutti splendidi)

***La maschera di Dimitrios* di Jean Negulesco, 1944. Qui l'indimenticabile Peter Lorre, che partecipò a così tanti film fondamentali – solo per citarne qualcuno: M, il mostro di Düsseldorf, Casablanca, L'uomo che sapeva troppo, Il mistero del falco, Arsenico e vecchi merletti, Il giro del mondo in 80 giorni, la serie di Mr Moto...**

I libri di Ambler e la sua scrittura sono pregni di cinema, ogni pagina ne gronda.

Non solo per i film che ne sono stati tratti, ma per quel mondo, quell'immaginario che ha contribuito a costruire, con le strade di selciato bagnate immerse nella notte, illuminate da una luce improvvisa di fari, e ombre distorte e grottesche che si allungano per terra e sui muri finché si accartocciano al passaggio dell'auto scura che porta il pericolo – con le sue storie di gente comune che finisce avviluppata in macchinazioni internazionali e in giochi di spie, tra frontiere attraversate in tutti i modi, Balcani e Turchia...

Maximillion Schell e Peter Ustinov a Istanbul in *Topkapi* di Jules Dassin, 1964, tratto da “The Light of Day”.

Non stupisce che Graham Greene lo definisse *senza dubbio il miglior scrittore di thriller*, e per John Le Carré fosse *la fonte dalla quale tutti noi attingiamo*.

Neppure che Hitchcock lo ammirasse e ne fosse influenzato.

Così come Orson Welles.

***Hotel >Reserve* del 1944 tratto da “Epitaffio per una spia”. Nella foto un giovane James Mason.**

Qui colpisce la descrizione dell'Italia fascista, violenta e repressiva, corrotta e marcia sin da allora, l'OVRA e i suoi metodi.

E la descrizione dei rapporti Italia–Germania all'insegna della reciproca sfiducia di fondo, un'intesa nata per non durare, l'asse Roma-Berlino pronto a spezzarsi.

Colpisce come Ambler sia tagliente nel ritratto dei connazionali.

Colpisce la scelta dei nomi, così evocativi: il protagonista si chiama Nicholas Marlow, e Philip Marlowe apparirà per la prima volta l'anno dopo, nel 1939 – e Zaleshoff, sua sorella Tamara, il generale Vagas, che si imbelletta il viso, e si fa servire dal suo cameriere vestito come ai tempi di Casanova...

Un ritorno a casa di un amico fidato.

"The Way Ahead" di Carol Reed con David Niven, 1944.

Kimmo Sinivuori says

"My dear Mr. Marlow, you already are a spy."

Eric Ambler's Cause for Alarm is one of the best suspense novels I have read. It tells the story of an Englishman Nick Marlow who gets involved in a high stake game of espionage in Fascist Italy just before the Second World War. Marlow is an engineer who is made redundant from a London factory and due to the great depression finds it impossible to land a new job in England. Out of desperation he accepts a job as a Milan based sales representative of a British company that makes machinery for the manufacture of grenades.

Ambler writes in a classic hardboiled style that is very appealing to me. His sentences are short and they move the story forward like a steamroller. The style and especially the dialogue remind me of the great hardboiled masters Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Maybe the only major difference to Chandler and Hammett is that Ambler is a bit more serious writer. That must be because he was British and his subject matter was the lead up to the Second World War. The situation in Europe at that time was a bit more serious than it was in California. It would be interesting to know whether Chandler had read Ambler and this book in particular as he named his hero Marlowe.

The first two thirds of the book build up the suspense as Marlow gets tangled in the web of deception and corruption of German and Soviet spies and the Fascist Italian secret police. The atmosphere of the moist and foggy winter months of Milan is beautifully captured. However, it is the escape from Milan through the North Eastern Italy to safety in Yugoslavia, after the Italian authorities discover the plot that Marlow is mixed in, which forms the best part of the book. The escape is told in such a gripping way that one's own heart races along with the protagonist and it is difficult to keep one from skipping the pages just to find out how it will all end. It ends well of course but there are some really hair-raising moments on the way to safety which make this a gripping suspense story.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

What fascinated me most about this was it's publication date of 1938. The Axis of Germany and Italy had recently been established - the villain of this piece was one German in particular, and also the general fascist movement in Italy. The protagonist is an ordinary Englishman, an engineer. Not surprisingly, characterization is not the primary draw, though not just awful either. The prose is perhaps not quite literary quality, but more than acceptable. The plot and its development good.

This is one of Ambler's earlier pieces. Ambler was an early writer in the spy/thriller genre and influenced the now better known Graham Greene and John Le Carre. While I read thrillers infrequently, Eric Ambler is one I hope to turn to again.

Ian says

Enjoyable espionage story of a young Engineer in need of a job who takes a posting to Milan in the shoes of someone whose death was suspicious, and finds himself out of his depth in a world of corruption and intrigue as the European powers jockey for position in the run up to World War II. May suffer from a lack of violence and gunfire for modern tastes, but the tension is maintained efficiently - being stuck between Fascism and Communism - and Ambler is notable as the bridge that connects the gung-ho patriotism of John Buchan to the world weary Cold War tradecraft of John LeCarre.

Nicholas Vaughan says

I really enjoyed reading this story. Ambler is becoming a favourite of mine. This was the second novel of his after the Mask of Dimitrios. What next?

Keith Currie says

Set in Italy in 1938, Nicky Marlow is a young engineer selling British shell making machinery to the Italians. Fascist and Nazi secret services take an interest in his activities, as well as a Soviet spy, Zaleshoff.

This is another terrific adventure story from Eric Ambler, as the hapless but honest Marlow finds himself (in common with most of Ambler's heroes) deep over his head in a murky world of intrigue, betrayal and murder.

Bevan says

Eric Ambler was a great writer of spy thrillers, and a great writer, period. His books are well-written, humane, intelligent, and subtle.

Eadie says

This was an excellent spy novel with interesting characters and plot. Eric Ambler is a talented writer and his words just flow off the page into what I found to be a real page-turner. The novel has a classic 'noir' feeling and is very entertaining. If you like spy novels, then I am sure you would enjoy this one.

John says

Setting was good - pre-WWII - but thought the plot was a bit too straightforward - kept waiting for a twist but everything was as it was presented. Engineer loses his job in England. Obtains another job as a representative of an armaments company in Milan where he takes over from the previous person who was murdered for being involved in the same espionage he'll become involved with.

Procyon Lotor says

Particolare e plausibile spy-story ambientata a Milano sul finire degli anni '30 con triplogiochisti e autorit? corrotte.. Situazione classica ambleriana dove un Signor Simplicio, nonostante l'acutissima fidanzata che da lontano - senza troppi elementi a far confusione - capisce tutto assai meglio di lui che c'? in mezzo, finisce incastrato in uno schema. Notevole la ricostruzione degli ambienti e metodi dell'OVRA ed in genere del cot? fassista. Ambler aveva evidentemente fonti serie a disposizione. Incredibile come un inglese (e non tra gli impiegati del Foreign Office) avesse gi? allora inquadrato correttamente i rapporti di vicinanza ideale mista a repulsione e terrore tra Italia e Reich. Di quella complessit? se ne parla diffusamente in Italia da non pi? di vent'anni e solo per i veramente interessati. Peccato per il finale fatto di rincorsa e col terrore di non riuscire a chiudere il cerchio.

Arukiyomi says

"...while the central character is as realistic as you or me, the storyline is still completely implausible, which is after all what readers of spy novels want."

Dear me, this hasn't aged well at all, and I couldn't wait to get to the end of this one. According to Wikipedia, Ambler is known for his thrillers. I can't say I was thrilled at any stage while reading this lame account of a particularly pathetic British engineer who ends up the victim of espionage agents in pre-WW2 Fascist Italy.

Apart from wanting to punch the "hero" in the face on virtually every page, the storyline is utterly predictable with the only twists being ones where the plot gets lost in some kind of bog while you wait for anything remotely thrilling to happen. The somewhat ironically named Marlow - ironic because he's the complete opposite of Chandler's Philip Marlowe - spends the whole time acting like a paranoid tourist with the backbone of C3PO. Quite how Zalashoff, the Russian agent who effectively saves him, manages to resist putting a bullet through his head is beyond me.

What Ambler's done here is what others, such as Buchan, failed to do: create a thriller with a hero who lacks any of the heroic characteristics that were obligatory for thrillers in Ambler's pre-WW2 era. Now, while this may have been a bold move and undoubtedly influenced the realism embodied in titans such as George Smiley, the fact that the genre was suffering from malaise at the time meant that Ambler got away with it. But while the central character is as realistic as you or me, the storyline is still completely implausible, which is after all what readers of spy novels want.

So, as with many writers who influenced those who have become household names, you're probably better off reading those they influenced and learning about their legacy from their Wikipedia posts. I won't be adding any more Amblers to my TBR list anytime soon.

Corey says

I love Ambler. Reading him is like living in a great Hitchcock film for a few days. To my way of thinking, for spy novels, Ambler and Charles McCarry are better than LeCarre.

Here's a great passage from Cause for Alarm:

“The gods, like most other practical jokers, have a habit of repeating themselves too often. Man has, so to speak, learned to expect the pail of water on his head. He may try to sidestep, but when, as always, he gets wet, he is more concerned about his new hat than the ironies of fate. He has lost the faculty of wonder. The tortured shriek of high tragedy has degenerated into a petulant grunt. But there is still one minor booby-trap in the repertoire which, I suspect, never fails to provoke a belly-laugh on Olympus. I, at any rate, succumb to it with regularity. The kernel of the jest is an illusion; the illusion that the simple emotional sterility, the partial mental paralysis that comes with the light of the morning, is really sanity.”

--From Cause for Alarm

Jeff says

Three and half stars rounded down.

Eric Ambler was one of the granddaddies of the spy novel. Both Graham Greene (no slouch in this department) and Alfred Hitchcock sing his praises on the cover of this edition. His **Journey Into Fear** is one of the best books I've read in this genre. So how was this one?

This book was written in 1938 and Ambler wears his leftist leanings quite comfortably on his sleeve. Two of the major characters are thinly disguised Soviet agents and the whole Commie solidarity thing even gets the protagonists out of a tight spot. Of course, in 1939, Stalin gave the international solidarity movement a swift kick in the nuts when he signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler and then proceeded to carve up Poland with the Nazis and invaded Finland. So, to say its politics are dated would be a gross overstatement.

The espionage stuff is pretty well done. An English engineer gets sent to Milan to work in a weapons machine design office. He ends up being run through the paces by the aforementioned Soviet agents, a Nazi agent who fancies make-up, and the Italian OVRA, Mussolini's secret police. As with a majority of these books, the crap hits the fan and he's forced to flee the country. This is where the book kicks into high gear, as our hero desperately tries to dodge the Fascist black shirted government thugs. Ambler ably ramps up the tension as their methods of escape are taken away one by one.

Between working for NASA and Chippendales I took a European vacation, riding the rails from country to country. When the Eurorail train entered Germany, it stopped, the door at the opposite end of the car, opened and two black suited, leather booted, armed German police made a beeline straight to me, ignoring everyone else. Nearly wetting myself, I let them examine my passport. Okay, I wasn't a master criminal on the lam, but that was scary for all of two minutes. Whew!

Davidg says

Probably 4.5 stars but I will have to round it down, as it isn't a five star read.

Some other reviews compare it unfavourably with Le Carre and refer to Ambler's leftist tendencies. I can't quite agree with these as you have to remember that this book was published in 1938. It is the equivalent of a spy story set amongst the Brexit negotiations or within the power plays of Trump's USA, Putin's Russia and Xi's China with North Korea the focus of their plotting.

Ambler is warning his readership against the scheming of the Nazi's and the Facists as represented by the scheming Vargas and the untrustworthy Bellenetti. And of course he was right. The probable Soviet spy Zaleshoff, is given a much easier ride but his motives are always questioned. No doubt Ambler was later horrified by the Nazi-Soviet pact but he was also correct in that it was the USSR that led to the downfall of Nazism, paying a terrible price to do so.

But at the heart is Marlow, the engineer caught up in politics and danger when all he wants to do is sell his company's machines. Of course, you might think of Chandler's creation, but I think there are more likely references to Christopher (a spy in Tudor times) and the narrator of Heart of Darkness, another story of an innocent faced with evil he cannot comprehend. Up to this point, the nearest to the spy story would have been Richard Hannay, ex military and more than capable of handling any situation or any foreigner. Ambler put ordinary people into extraordinary situations, helping set up the genre that Le Carre would make his own 25 years later.

And it is still a pretty good read 80 years later. It certainly feels a lot more contemporary than that.

Kim says

"Cause for Alarm" is a novel by Eric Ambler first published in 1938. Set in Italy in the same year, the book is one of Ambler's classic spy thrillers. For a person who isn't a big fan of spy thrillers classic or otherwise I sure end up reading a lot of them. This one I enjoyed. I looked up Eric Ambler and found that he was a British author of spy novels who used the pseudonym Eliot Reed for books co-written with Charles Rodda. I wonder why he did that and I also wonder why Charles Rodda didn't get any credit. Maybe he did I'll have to go look him up too---I have just spent ten minutes looking for Charles Rodda and have found nothing so far (poor guy) so I decided to return to the book and the man who wrote this book and I'll continue my search later.

I thought it was interesting that Ambler's parents were entertainers who ran a puppet show. It isn't very often I find an author that was born into a puppet show, I wonder if that was a fun childhood. Ambler helped with the show when young but eventually studied engineering, wrote plays and was a copywriter at an advertising agency. In the 1930's One of the things I read about Ambler was that he was *"a staunch anti-Fascist and regarded the Soviet Union as the only real counterweight to fascist aggression – which was why some of his early books include Soviet agents depicted positively and as sympathetic characters. "Cause for Alarm" didn't seem to have any positive and sympathetic Soviet characters running around in it so I guess it came after he changed his mind about the Soviet Union. That change was caused by the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 although come to think of it, that was a year later than the book was written. Another mystery for me to figure out. Now that I have all kinds of interesting things to look up - I do seem to get off track at times - I will try to get my mind back to the book.*

Ok, let's see if I get this right. On the very first page we have a mysterious man (of course) standing in the shadow of a doorway stamping his numb feet on the damp stones. It's cold and this is one of those people who don't like the cold so he stands there thinking awful things while he waits. After thinking of how cold and damp it is, with fogs rolling in from the ricefields, fog rolling in that also brings in the smoke from the factories, he starts wishing that they would have just let his kill this "Englishman" easily and quickly.

"A knife under the ribs, a slight twist of the wrist to let the air inside the wound, and it was done. No fuss, no trouble, practically no noise."

He stands in the doorway and when a stray pedestrian comes along he shrinks back into the shadows, but of

the policemen he takes no notice, the police deliberately avoid looking his way. *"That was one advantage in working for Them. You didn't have to worry about the police. You were safe."* A second mystery, who are They? Finally a man comes out of the office building across the street, stops to "light a cigarette" - remember that - and steps into the street where he is promptly run over twice by the same car. So the mystery guy in the doorway has just killed the mystery guy in the office building and now the Prologue is over and we move on to the first chapter. I wonder why prologue is pronounced nothing like it is spelled, like bologna - I always have to do the Oscar Mayer song in my head to spell bologna. Anyway, on to the story.

The first paragraph says this:

"One thing is certain. I would not even have considered the job if I had not been desperate."

Hmm....now that I see that it doesn't seem like "One thing is certain" is an entire sentence, but I'm not an English teacher. Anyway, our main character, a production engineer named Nicholas Marlow has just lost his job *"owing to circumstances beyond the control of the Board"* - business is slow and labour is too expensive so near London, so the book says anyway. What makes it worse, other than starving to death without a job is that Nick has just proposed to Claire - I can't remember her last name at the moment, but she is a surgeon which is good for the stopping the starving to death possibility. After over two months of looking for another job, he responds to an advertisement by an English engineering company, the *"Spartacus Machine Tool Company"*. He is offered the post of the firm's representative in Italy. The company's main sales are of the "Spartacus Type S2 automatic" which according to the book is:

"a high-speed automatic machine for shell production."

Making these things and selling them to Italy doesn't seem like the most brilliant thing for a company from England to do, but Nick needs a job so he takes it. He is told that the man who had the job before him was killed while walking home on a foggy night - he was hit by an automobile and the driver didn't even stop, a "very sad affair".

Once he gets there he runs into all kinds of interesting people. There is the American man he meets in the building where he works who wants him to spy on another man who is Russian but may be German, for that matter the American may be Russian. There is an English man spying on the Italians and Italians spying on the Germans and Germans spying on the Italians, even though the countries are friendly they still spy on each other. Oh, and there are the Fascist Italian secret police, they follow everybody. In this book if you aren't spying on someone you certainly are getting spied on, perhaps you're doing both. It was very entertaining and I enjoyed it.

Now on to the two things that stood out to me. Remember I told you to keep "light a cigarette" in mind. Here are some quotes:

"He felt in his jacket pocket, lit a cigarette, rebuttoned his overcoat and started to walk in the opposite direction."

"I offered him a cigarette. We went on talking."

"I put the paper down, finished my tea and felt in my pocket for a match to light my cigarette."

"I went for a short walk, smoked a couple of cigarettes, sat down and replied to both letters."

"I yawned and wondered whether to turn the bath on right away or smoke a final cigarette."

"He got out a bottle of cognac, half-filled two wine glasses with it and pushed a box of cigarettes towards me."

Ok, I'll stop with the cigarettes, I just thought that these people couldn't move without having a cigarette and I'm not sure how they breathed actual air with them. Then there is this:

"He got out a bottle of cognac...."

"He found a table near one of the heating stoves and ordered a caffe latte and a Strega. The spirit he drank at a gulp."

"Her father gave me a whiskey and soda....."

"He sniffed at his cognac and I saw his lips twist into an expression of wry distaste."

"A glass of champagne? "Thank you."

"Brandy Mr. Marlow? "Thank you."

"Whisky?" "I got a bottle in specially."

"You'd better take the brandy."

Ok, once again I'll stop. Whenever anyone had a conversation with a spy or a possible spy they had a drink (and a cigarette), the same thing to relax, the same thing to stop relaxing and get to work. I was a little puzzled as to why everyone was so worried about what everyone else was doing or what government they may be working for, with all the smoking and drinking they should soon all die of one disease or another anyway. Either that or get run over. I liked the book go ahead and read it.

Andrew says

The story in this novel falls in to halves. In part one we meet Nick Marlow, a young engineer ,who in 1937 has lost his job and having just become engaged he takes a job in Milan for a company that manufactures shells in a very volatile Italy. In the prologue we has seen market's predecessor murdered by suspicious baddies. In Milan Marlow is drawn into a political situation where forces seek to undermine the Rome-Berlin axis and Marlow becomes the innocent fall guy.

The second half is an exciting escape story as he and the mysterious Zaleshoff try to escape to Yugoslavia, with a well plotted tale that had me at times at the edge of my seat.

I felt the book was on a level with the best of modern thrillers but the aspect I most enjoyed was the picture of intrigue and politics as the second world war approaches. An Increasingly militant fascist Italy and a suspicious Germany cause everyone to look over their shoulders as the secret police use casual violence as a tool of control. A really interesting period piece and clearly a forerunner and influence on future writers. I will definitely be exploring Eric Ambler's other books.

Roger Pettit says

I love reading espionage fiction. One of my favourite writers of the form is Eric Ambler, whose novels started to appear in the 1930s. His work has an air of realism about it that seems to me to be missing from the more gung-ho stories of his predecessors such as Sapper, John Buchan and Dornford Yates. In fact, Ambler started a trend for engaging, historically and politically aware, credible spy fiction that has since given us such wonderful writers as John Le Carre, Len Deighton, Charles McCarry, Charles Cumming, Edward Wilson and (perhaps Ambler's closest modern equivalent) Alan Furst.

'Cause for Alarm' may not be its author's best book (of those I've read 'The Mask of Dimitrios' is perhaps his most effective thriller). But it's nevertheless a reasonably good read that, for the most part, bears many of Ambler's trademark qualities: a fascinating plot; a page-turning readability; excellent characterisation; and a strong sense of time and place. 'Cause for Alarm' is a novel that you are likely to want to gobble up as quickly as possible because it hooks you from the outset. Its only disappointing feature is the rather weak dénouement (of which more later).

It would be unfair to reveal too much of the plot. In brief, the story features a young unemployed Brit, Nicky Marlow, who takes a job at an overseas arm of a British armaments producer, in Italy, in the late 1930s. While in Milan, he becomes inadvertently embroiled in the underhand activities of pro and anti Fascist activists. So, as in several of Ambler's other stories, the basic premise is that of an ordinary guy who finds himself caught up in extraordinary events that test his survival instinct.

What I particularly like about 'Cause for Alarm' is its political astuteness. The relationship between Germany and Italy - the Rome-Berlin axis that was formed in the latter half of the 1930s - provides a backdrop to the plot and there is a tangible sense of the looming war that would shatter Europe just a few years later. The central character, Nicky Marlow, is one that most readers will warm to. He's a plucky, naive and slightly vulnerable young man who almost immediately finds himself involved in a series of events that are quite beyond his control. There's a smattering of offbeat humour too. One of the more sinister characters in the story is described as having an effeminate voice and a penchant for wearing rouge on his cheeks!

Unfortunately, the novel has one major flaw: its conclusion. The last third of the book, in which Marlow attempts to evade Italian police and secret service officials who are trying to arrest him, is unbelievably silly and quite out of keeping with everything that precedes it. I was simply not convinced by it. And it disrupts the balance and ethos of the story. What had been a quietly effective, thoughtful and intriguing spy yarn morphs into some sort of formulaic Hollywood film script for a closing chase scene. At one point when on the run, while having a drink with his accomplice in a cafe, Marlow even gets to hear a radio newsflash about himself and the fact that he is wanted for questioning by the authorities! He also takes refuge with a slightly unhinged mathematics professor who is obsessed with the issue of perpetual motion. All very silly! It's a great shame that what had up until then been a riveting read loses its way in the final 100 or so pages.

Eric Ambler had a knack of writing in a way that makes you turn the pages avidly, eager to know what happens next. There are many modern writers who need to learn that particular skill. Ambler's stories satisfy the yearning we all have for a good story, well told. The ill-judged ending apart, 'Cause for Alarm' exemplifies its author's finely-honed storytelling skills. Despite the poor dénouement, I liked it. 6/10.

Pirate says

Preface sets you up for another classic Ambler and highlights what a remarkable character he was himself. An anecdote re him and John Huston in war-time Italy in 1943 when an already half-destroyed bridge is being shelled and their jeep gets stuck on it. "Really lieutenant, this is most precarious," Ambler laconically remarked to the driver as recounted by Huston. The bon vivant Irish-American -- who along with other great directors from Hollywood like George Stevens and John Ford took time out to film on the frontlines at some risk to themselves -- went on to observe of Ambler: "Eric Ambler was one of the coolest men I've seen under fire. Insouciant. I'd look around when things started jumping and heaving under an artillery barrage, and Eric would be flicking dust off his boot." Another reason why I prefer Ambler to Greene. Back to the book in question whilst the hero is again an accidental one like most of the authors this is one of his more serious efforts ie there is less farcical moments and outright humour. However, it is a remarkably prescient book given it was written in the 1930's and set in Mussolini's Italy in the manner in which it treats the Axis relationship and certain sensitivities surrounding it. Great characters, especially the mysterious American

Zaleshoff and his sister and a sinister Yugoslav 'diplomat' General Vagas and his equally grim wife. The ambience is wonderfully described from the dank fog of Milan to a riveting man hunt which I will not reveal any more about for fear of ruining your entertainment. Top class from the insouciant one!

K.D. Absolutely says

Cause for Alarm has all the ingredients of a typical WWII British espionage novel. Think John le Carre, Ken Follett, Frederick Forsyth, Jeffrey Archer, etc. There are plenty of those British writers who specialize on spy novels during that time in Europe and I could have easily given this at least a 3-star rating. Not only because I like spy novels but also because they are about World War II in Europe. I am a sucker for anything about Hitler, Fascism, Nazi, etc.

But I am giving this only a 2-star because I was expecting this to be better than the usual ones. Why? This novel has been among the books included in the 1001 Books from 2006, 2008 up to 2010 and so when I picked this up, I thought that I would be blown away. I was not. Maybe there is an editor in the Boxall's selection committee who read this in 1938 and liked it so much and that he now insists that this should not be dropped from the list. This is the same reason why one of my friends here in Goodreads still insists that Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is an excellent novel. The reason is that it was his the very first novel that he read from cover to cover when he was in high school. Now that he is a voracious reader, he will always give the credit to that Coelho book even if in reality, the novel is nothing but mediocre. At least for me, my first novel in high school was Nabokov's *Lolita* and there is nothing mediocre about it.

Is there anything different from this novel compared to let's say Le Carre's opus, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* or Ken Follett's *Eye of the Needle*? Nothing. These two books are even superior than this. The reason for that is Le Carre in *Spy* portrayed the protagonist as vulnerable and with weaknesses like a normal human being which is different from the usual James Bond who is confident, virile, smart and all-knowing. On the other hand, Follett in his most famous spy novel *Eye* is noteworthy because he incorporated treachery within a family living in a small isolated island with WWII as a backdrop and not being in the midst of the region's power political struggle.

Here in *Cause for Alarm*, the story revolves around **Nick Marlow** (yes, similar to the surname of that guy who ranked the human needs) who loses his job in London because of global recession. The timing sucks because a day prior to his layoff, he proposed to his fiancée. Without a job, he postponed the wedding and his job has brought him to Italy to work in a company that manufactures and supplies materials for ammunition. As you know, Italy was an ally of Germany during the war and it is against France, England and Russia. So, for an Englishman in Italy during that time is already not right in the first place and yet Marlow (because of his needs?) goes there to work. All for the name of love, I guess.

Also, unlike the novels of Le Carre and Follett, the plot of the book is thinner and the climax seems not to have reached its peak at the end. It is almost like a monotone song. The scene in the train while Nick and his American friend **Zaleshoff** (who I thought should have been given an American name like Smith or Brown so it would not be confusing) are fleeing Italy on their way to Yugoslavian border is supposed to be the climax but I did not feel scared for them. There was no gripping edge-of-your-seat scene not typical of your other favorite spy novels. The angle of the separated lovers trying to prepare for the wedding could have been used to its advantage in terms of thickening the plot a bit by let's say having the main office of the company in London abduct the girlfriend in order for Taylor to surrender and turn himself to the Italian police. You see, if your target audience is composed of the hardcore spy-novel readers/lovers, you can concoct anything as long as it is engaging and plausible and you will make this type of readers happy.

Although the book is readable and uses straight, guy-friendly "no-frills" narration, the plot is just so typical and there is nothing extraordinary about it.

My *cause for alarm* is if this book is retained in the 1001 list when Boxall releases its new edition this year, 2012.

John says

Machine engineer Nicky Marlow finds himself out of a job and, in a time of recession, can't find another . . . until the Spartacus company hires him to take over their Milan office following the tragic hit-and-run death of their previous manager there. Before the rather naive Nicky properly knows what's going on, he's up to his ears in international skulduggery, with his life very much at risk . . .

As soon as I started reading this I recognized it, and recalled thoroughly enjoying it; I must have read it many years ago, because I never knew what was coming next but found each scene familiar as I lived through it again. After I'd finished the novel, delighted to have made the acquaintance, I realized how very simple the plot actually is: you could probably tell the whole tale quite adequately on one side of a sheet of paper. It's part of Ambler's great mastery that, even so, he kept me entirely engrossed throughout. The sense that everything is just about to come crashing down around Europe's ears is very strong (in this the book's prophetic; it appeared in 1938), as is the depiction, through the often infuriating figure of Nicky, of English complacency in the face of the storm that was building.

Much recommended.

Although originally published in the UK in 1938, this came out in the US in 1939 and thus just squeaks in as a candidate for Rich Westwood's 1939 Challenge on his *Past Offences* site.

My other contribution to the Challenge is a piece on the 1939 Powell & Pressburger movie *The Spy in Black* at my *Noirish* site.
