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Will Byrnes says

Shshshshsh. Don't tell anyone. It is 1939. In the strategic Greek port city of Salonika, rumblings of war can be heard as Nazi Germany gains allies by threat and force. People wonder only *when* the invasion will come. Costa Zinnis is the head of a special political branch of the police, charged with discretely managing the problems of the connected and keeping his finger on the pulse of the town. And there is plenty going on. Spies abound. A mysterious German accepts an envelope in a dark alley. Zinnis and his second pursue and the game is afoot.

Zinnis is the core here, and a solid one. The character is both tough and appealing in the classic spy noir style, but is a bit shorter in the damaged department that that formula suggests. He loves his mother, younger brother and dog, Melissa, who is a very welcome element. There are many fine supporting players here. A wealthy German Jewish woman needs help smuggling Jews out of Germany. Zinnis' lady friend, a Brit, owns and runs a dance school, and hangs with the Salonika movers and shakers. But is she more than she appears? His rabbi in the police is a wonderful creation, an 80-something with solid connections and a clear view ahead. A suspicious British "travel writer" makes the rounds, as do an assortment of folks from the Greek and Hungarian criminal classes. Zinnis teams up with a foreign policeman to try to affect the course of political change. It is all very hush-hush, and all very much fun to read.

Of course no spy story would be complete without a femme fatale, and *Spies of the Balkans* does not disappoint, although I found that element one of the weaker ones. The attraction may have fit in with the love-at-first-sight expectations one has of such tales, but it seemed forced to me, at least on his end.

The payload here is a look at what life was like in late 1930s Greece while waiting for the other shoe to drop. Mussolini, threatening to invade, is eager to keep up with his mustached German buddy, groups within nations vie for political advantage, nations look to serve their own interests at the cost of their neighbors, preparations are made for resistance. The war years are like the Bible in that the tales are eternal. Furst has written eleven novels in his "Night Soldiers" series about (mostly) Eastern Europe during World War II. *Spies of the Balkans* is the latest.

While reading *Spies of the Balkans* one cannot help but visualize the events in glorious black and white, so well does Furst capture the right feel for the genre. In the same way one wonders what Rick and Louis might get up to after Lazlo and Ilsa take flight, *Spies of the Balkans* leaves one wanting more. This is a fast, fun and engaging read. The secret is out.

Linda says

I've read all of Alan Furst's WWII spy novels and have been entranced by almost all of them. This one is, therefore, a big disappointment. Furst's best books have vivid setting descriptions that create not only the place and times but also the atmosphere and tension of the events. *Balkans* has so little of this that it could be taking place on an empty sound stage. The best books have a complex characters, people who have been pulled into resistance action by the WWII events that enter their everyday lives but are not action heroes or experts. They are flawed, frightened, and struggling to survive, but compelled to take some action. *Balkans* main character, Costas Zannis, is flat and uninteresting. Usually in Furst's novels, the plot is intricate and told in great detail. This plot is simple and just when the reader expects a detailed description of a

dangerous event, Furst skips it and reports the character safely back at his apartment.

All in all, the book seems like an outline, not a fully developed novel. Hopefully, Furst will take more care with his next WWII novel and return to the level of his best work.

Steve says

One of the weakest efforts in Furst's otherwise quite engaging series of those unfortunate enough to have their had lives thrown about by the political, military, social and economic chaos that was the Nazi maelstrom of the 1930s and 1940s. For the first time in the series, Furst's new main character is a Greek, a policeman from Salonika. The time period is the later months of 1940 and the first half of 1941, and the overwhelming issue is if - and when that question gets its inevitable answer, then when the Nazis will turn their land grabbing to Hungary, Yugoslavia and ultimately, Greece.

As always, the main character- Constantine (Costa) Zannis - has several affairs of the heart throughout the book, although all of these are, despite his wishes, seemingly fleeting ones. The English ballet teacher Roxanne is called away when her true identity is revealed; then a former lover, a sultry, sensuous Greek re-enters his life. Yet it is Demetria, the unloved wife of a multi-millionaire shipping magnate (can Onassis have been far from Furst's mind in his creation?) with whom Costs falls most deeply in love - a feeling which is as strongly requited as it is brief and tenuous in its potential duration.

Indeed, the two days Costa and his new love spend together just as the Germans are about to invade is, in microcosm, the entire thematic arc of the novel. They do not talk about the future, choosing instead to concentrate on the blissful moments they have together eating (eggplant, yogurt, feta and half a dozen other delicacies), decorating their hotel room with flowers, taking a ride on a ferris wheel at an amusement park and, of course, making love. When Costa is about to comment on a newspaper headline presaging dire events, Demetria touches his lips, not wanting to break their undeclared vow of silence on the 'world out there'.

It is this waiting for the inevitable with a bittersweet mixture of apprehension and joy at the small things of one's present life that makes for most of the novel's feelings. Costa does do what he can to help those threatened by the Nazi onslaught, particularly in expediting a passage for Jewish refugees from Berlin to Turkey through Hungary. The success of this pipeline draws the attention of the British secret service, who insist/demand/force Costa to go to Paris to help a downed airman/scientist get out of Nazi occupied territory. This, of course, brings about the obligatory visit to the Brasserie Heinigger, and the examination of the bullet hole made there in *Night Soldiers*, the first volume of the series - a plot element in each and every novel in the series.

However, especially in this book, the entire incident seems a tack-on irrelevancy. Costa's real job as a policemen, with his colleagues Saltiel and Vangelis and his ever-efficient secretary, is his real life. It appears that he is merely helping out Emmi Krebs - the instigator at the Berlin end of his pipeline because, as he often observes, 'one must do what one can'. Unlike the boat captain in a previous novel who really wanted to do something to hurt the Nazis, Costa appears more as a chess piece being moved around on a board by other individuals and circumstances.

As always, Furst's details are amazingly specific and engaging. Costa smokes Papastratos 1 brand cigarettes - the top of the line. He cuddles with Roxanne smoking hashish in a private room with a narghileh at the Balthazar Club, listening to a bouzouki band from the taverna next door. The klephts, sharpshooting anti-Turk resistance fighters from the hills, can be known by the plumes in their hats. The headache treatment medicine Panadon can be dissolved and used as a form of invisible ink to get messages past

censors checking one's mail.

As always, Furst's minor characters flesh out his scenes with extraordinary color. The second rate thief Behar, the British travel writer (yea, sure...) Escovil, the bullying Yugoslav policemen Vladek, Costa's uncle Acosta in Paris, the *Hauptsturmfuhrer* Hauser who tracks down Krebs in Berlin, the Turkish liaison Ahmet Celebi and his intelligence officer Madame Urglu, Elias, the skirt-chasing poet, Sani Pal, the Hungarian expatriot with underworld connections in Budapest, S. Kolb - who reappears at the very end in yet another novel of this series, and even Costa's mentally challenged brother Ari: even if they only appear for a few pages, provide a richness of background which makes the overall lack of a driving motivation (other than personal survival, if not of oneself, then of those most dear to one) so apparent in this book. It is a case of having so many trees one forgets that there should have been a forest.

One must pay special note of Melissa, Costa's dog. Her omniscient skills of detection and foreknowledge are truly amazing. She realizes what is being done with her as Costa prepares for his family's departure from Salonika and takes matters into her own hands (or paws). Earlier, Costa had observed that dogs are considered special spirits in Greece: faithful friends and fearless guardians.

Such specific, small, rich and overwhelmingly attractive detail makes a reading of Furst always a pleasure. However, this is, a good, not a great, book - he is capable of so much better.

Bill says

I loved this book and couldn't put it down. I bought it by chance, saw the cover, it looked interesting, read the synopsis; it sounded like a story I might like. I was right; it was great! A historical spy novel set in Greece 1940 as Greece and the Balkans prepare for the Nazi invasion. The main character is Costa Zannis, a police official who by accident almost becomes involved in working an escape route from Berlin to Salonika. He is heroic in a normal way, his friends as well. The story is so matter of fact but at the same time very exciting. Extremely well-written, it will draw you in, make you wait impatiently to see what happens next. I will definitely be reading more Alan Furst.

Kerry says

Even though it's full of detail and well-researched, this historical fiction is still fast-paced. It's even better if you have some knowledge of history, and it's interesting to focus on such a region during the time the book takes place.

Unfortunately, as is all too common, the portrayal of women is to be questioned. Demetria, "the goddess," is Costa's "prize," and he has to do absolutely zero to have her fall in love with him. Just by existing he gets the most beautiful woman he's ever seen! Never mind that he concerns himself almost not at all with the fact that she's being abused by her husband--all he can think about is getting her into bed. And wow, she fellates like a pro, too, not like all those other women, who were really half-hearted about it.

Would have liked more descriptions of food: "spiced whipped feta"? "Calamari stuffed with cheese"? Fantastic!

Despite the problematic male-female relationships, will read more from this author.

Ian Mapp says

Oh dear. Chosen because it was on the TV Book Club and had some good reviews in the year. This is truly terrible.

How can anyone make WW2 boring?

Costas Zannis is a policeman in Salonika, Greece in 1941. There is a map at the start of the book. That's always a good place to start. The work of fiction neatly explains the Balkans part in WW2 and the history of the countries in the area - Yugoslavia, Turkey and so on. This is vaguely interesting.

What fails is the story. Remember this is a work of fiction and the promise is espionage and adventure. What we have is dullness and in my opinion very bad fiction writing.

The book is only 279 pages long and it just jumps from story to story and location to location, incorporating amongst other things - a German spy who arrives by boat and dies. Move on to his ballet teaching girlfriend who at the first time of trouble, runs back to the UK. Makes a change from running back to mother. Then a downed British airman who needs rescuing from Paris.

There is no connection (apart from Zannis, who frankly my dear, you don't give a damn about) to these events. The location and encroaching stomp of the Nazi jackboot reach to an almost exciting end to the book but even that falls on its arse.

I don't think I will be dipping into the Furst oeuvre again.

Jim says

No, these are not the Eric Ambler Balkans, though both series of books are set around the same time, and both involve spying. Spies of the Balkans is another of Alan Furst's looks at the inevitable start of World War Two.

In this book, the hero is Constantine Zannis, a highly placed police officer in the Greek city of Salonika. He sees the storm clouds of war gather and make their way south to the Northern border of Greece. Early in the book, he finds one way of depriving the Nazis of their prey: "arresting" Jews, taking them back to Salonika, and forwarding them on to Turkey and other places. He even smuggles a fallen British pilot from Paris to Greece via Bulgaria.

I am amazed that Furst can produce such a coherent and atmospheric series of spy thrillers with all different characters and countries. The advantage, of course, is that one does not need to start with the first novel in the series and follow the main character's development across multiple books. No, indeed, one can start anywhere.

But above all, one should start. These are great books for summer reading.

Gerry says

A reasonable start quickly degenerates into drivel with the storyline jumping around with seemingly no real focus. The main character Costa Zannis would be better working in Costa Coffee for all the interest he generates in his role as a handler of Salonika's political cases.

I am afraid it was so bad that, try as I might, I had no option to abandon it almost halfway through; how I got that far I am not sure but even that has taken me a couple of months because I couldn't always face trying to make much sense of it all.

It obviously suits some people because the Daily Mail wrote of it, 'As delicately crafted as John le Carre at the height of his George Smiley years, It is a delight ... quite superb.' Unfortunately not for me ... well, it takes all kinds of readers to enjoy, or otherwise, a book!

Anna says

"...one wasn't sure what came next. So, don't trust the telephone. Or the newspapers. Or the radio. Or tomorrow."

? Alan Furst, Spies of the Balkans

The opening scenes are straight out of film noir: dark and rainy night, mysterious stranger, rendezvous in a lonely alley.

Costa Zannis is a beleaguered police officer who keeps noticing strangers ending up in Salonika as the war ramps up in Eastern Europe and threatening the Balkans and Greece. Some are simple refugees, others are clearly Jews trying to escape Nazi Germany, still others are more perplexing -- a British travel writer trekking across Greece. After he gets drawn into helping two children escape into still neutral Turkey, Costa decides to help streamline the escape route through the Balkans through his police contacts and some other more untraditional ones. In the meantime, the Italians cross into Greece, Costa is recalled into the army and discovers that his British lover is ...

Quickpaced, the story keeps moving between adventure, political intrigue, family relationships, police business all in the shadow of the coming conflict.

Great stuff!

Vasilis Kalandaridis says

Πρ?τη επαφ? με τον Hurst και σ?γουρα ?χι η τελευτα?α.Υπεροχη αναπαρ?σταση της Σαλον?κης λ?γο πριν την Κατοχ?.Ενας ?ρωας σοβαρ?ς,ερωτ?λος,αγαπ?ει τα σκυλι?,μια χαρ? δηλαδ?.Το στορι θα το ?λεγα κατασκοπευτικ?,η γραφ? μου ?φτιαξε ε?κολα πολλ?ς εικ?νες στο μυαλ?.Συντομα θα διαβ?σω και το δευτερο βιβλιο του στα ελληνικ?,το Αποστολ? στο Παρ?σι.Αυτ?.

Kerry says

First Furst book I've read and definitely enjoyed it and will seek out more. Am not a spy novel loving reader

but this followed one character throughout and I found him most human and like able. Expanded my knowledge about WWII in Greece. Easy fast read and from what I see, one of Alan Furst's lesser known

warren Cassell says

This was not the finest Furst espionage thriller I have read. However, the good stuff first...pun unintended.

All of his novels take place in Europe during the '30's and '40's, leading up to the beginning of the Second World War. I lived through this historical era which not only intrigues me, but its European setting is of particular interest. Furst's newest takes place in a lesser known geography where the ethnic tensions, eons old territorial disputes and nationalistic rivalries are always in play. Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Hungary and Romania are the minor, but important characters who provide the prelude for the larger European conflict involving Italy, German, Great Britain and eventually the Soviet Union and the United States. Spies of the Balkans is at its best when establishing the atmosphere and mood of the various players in their run-up to their willing for some, and not so eager for others' participation in the twentieth century's worst conflagration.

Unfortunately, establishing an authentic setting can't carry the entire book. There is practically no plot--- rather simply, a series of events related to getting Jews out of Berlin and into neutral countries. The protagonist is a Greek police official with a humanitarian conscience who uses all of his considerable military, diplomatic and international law enforcement contacts to thwart Nazi genocidal goals. His efforts are successful, but his successes and the setting are the only things to cheer about in Spies of the Balkans.

Kathy says

Another find at the Newberry Library Book Fair, lucky me. I will put this on the shelf to read again when locked in by winter. It was a different kind of spy book and my first with a Greek on center stage, making it all the more interesting. At times I felt the details were sparse and somewhat slim, but that equates to a book I will enjoy reading again. I did feel as though Zannis was the Accidental Spy if ever there was one - no family or educational connections leading him to what he did for a living beyond being in the right places at the right time. A different kind of spy.

Lyn Elliott says

I've come across Alan First through Goodreads friends, so thank you to those who recommended his thrillers. In Spies of the Balkans, the Greek detective Zannis has been transferred from regular to special duties requiring political sensitivity and a talent for fixing things behind the scenes. As the threat of invasion from, first Italy, then Germany, looms over all the Balkan states, Zannis uses his skills and position to help German Jews travel to safety through territory where occupation is imminent.

Furst skilfully builds the tension that comes with news of the German advances, and the shifts of power within the Balkan countries as their governments either fall in line or fall.

The main characters were interestingly drawn. Few of the refugees had any real character, and the details of

their escapes were sketched in but both worked well enough for the book to be an enjoyable light read in cold winter weather.

Merilee says

A fun thriller about the early days of WWII in Salonika. We listened to it in the car. Aside from some cheesy love/sex scenes I'd highly recommend it.

Darwin8u says

"And, with much of Europe occupied by Nazi Germany, and Mussolini's armies in Albania, on the Greek frontier, one wasn't sure what came next. So, don't trust the telephone. Or the newspapers. Or the radio. Or tomorrow."

? Alan Furst, Spies of the Balkans

(***/2) I ~~loved~~ enjoyed 'Spies of the Balkans' (Night Soldiers #11). It wasn't Furst's best in the series, but it was a sweet Kataifi of a novel. Emotionally it fed me. Furst highlights the little things people do with just a nudge here and a twist there to make a dark world just a bit better. 'Spies of the Balkans' focuses on the sacrifices people made during fascism's push into Southern Europe. The novel's center of gravity is Costa Zannis, a senior police official in Salonika, who sometimes finds his talents needed by both the Jews seeking to escape Germany and British spy networks. It is a novel that drips with the hidden goodness of those amazing men and women who refused to let dark circumstances dictate their character.

For reference, I've included below the 14 books of the Night Soldiers series along with my star rating:

1. Night Soldiers (1988) - 4 stars
 2. Dark Star (1991) - 5 stars
 3. The Polish Officer (1995) - 4 stars
 4. The World at Night (1996) - 3 stars
 5. Red Gold (1999) - 3 stars
 6. Kingdom of Shadows (2000) - 3 stars
 7. Blood of Victory (2003) - 4 stars
 8. Dark Voyage (2004) - 4 stars
 9. The Foreign Correspondent (2006) - 3 stars
 10. The Spies of Warsaw (2008) - 4 stars
 - 11. Spies of the Balkans (2010) - 3 stars**
 12. Mission to Paris (2012) - 3 stars
 13. Midnight in Europe (2013) - 3 stars
 14. A Hero of France (2016) - 3 stars
-

Lawyer says

Furst has a talent for capturing the lesser known regions touched by World War II. Spies of the Balkans is no

exception. We meet Zannis, a Greek detective who is assigned the most delicate tasks by the Commissioner of Police, a shadowy figure named Vangelis. Greece is at war with Italy and winning. It is only a matter of time before Hitler will not allow the Axis powers to be weak in any manner by going to the aid of Mussolini's troops. Meanwhile, Zannis will become involved in assisting the escape of Jews from Germany by establishing a Balkan escape route, recruiting law enforcement officers from Balkan nations. Zannis will be recruited by the English for missions as far away as France. The pace is fast. The story is complex. The characters are captivating. I recommend this one strongly.

Michael says

Furst set a very high standard for himself early in his career. He clearly owns the period from 1933-45 in Europe and is a very fine writer of historical fiction filled with intrigue and likeable characters. Over the last few years, however, he has slipped into a formulaic pattern that takes few risks and delivers few surprises. I'm not concerned with those formulaic elements that function as trademarks (protagonists who never die, Table 14 in the Brasserie Heininger in Paris with its mirror marked by a bullet hole, characters who reappear in different novels). It's more of an impression that he's started writing by the numbers -- filling in the blanks on a template because it works (at least in that it sells books). I still read everything he writes, because a mediocre Furst novel is better than the best efforts of 90% of best-selling novelists. I just want him to challenge himself a little more, to get out of his comfort zone and take some real risks as a novelist. The novelist who wrote [The Polish Officer](#), [Dark Star](#), [Red Gold](#), and [The World at Night](#) is still in there somewhere, despite such mediocrities as [The Foreign Correspondent](#). When I read Furst, I want to listen for the footsteps on the stair, to hold my breath while waiting for the knock on the door, to look anxiously over my shoulder at the black sedan crawling down a dark street -- I want to feel fear and to care passionately about what happens to people I feel I know. I want more than boilerplate scenarios translated from one European city to another. I don't want Furst to become another Bernard Cornwell, who keeps on churning out the prose after the creativity has died. One of the problems with success is that it encourages an inclination to repeat what works and a fear of failure that stifles creativity. In the meantime, I'll keep buying the books Furst writes in the hope that the fire has not gone out for good. The latest novel is better than a number of more recent ones, but it shows a few worrying trends, including talking down to the reader. I submit that anyone who needs the following explanation in the text shouldn't be reading a novel set in World War II: ". . . the Geheime Staatspolizei.' An official title, the secret state police, simply one more government organization. But in Germany it was common usage to abbreviate this title, which came out 'Gestapo.'" I'd like to think this was the idiotic idea of an inexperienced editor. If so, one would think Random House could do better. Roald Dahl was one of the last pilots to fly in defense of Greece during the German invasion. His account of that experience could give Furst a few pointers about how to write a nail-biting, palm-sweating story about Greece as the Nazi night descended.

Steve says

This was my second foray into Furst's historical detective/action/thriller not-really series, and I enjoyed it (although not as much as the first). Here, most of the action takes place in WWII Greece (but that's not fair to the scope of the storyline, which is far broader). The history is light, the sense of time and place is rich (and that I enjoy), but - for whatever reason - I felt that (unlike is the first book of his I read) I was less intrigued with the protagonist (who seemed like "just another detective" to me, and, alas, he tried to do too much in this (nonetheless slim) installment. Too many characters, too many "missions," too many romances, too many trips, too many crises (large and small). Nonetheless, my guess is I'll give him another try (at some point).

Nigel says

Reading Alan Furst's Night Soldiers series is a bit like reading Patrick O'Brian. Furst's first (heh) was Night Soldiers, a massive epic of war and espionage, probably the best novel about spies in the Second World War you're likely to read. But in many ways it set the parameters for his subsequent works, while Red Gold set the template. None of the other books have been as epic - except inasmuch as anything touched by the Second World War is touched by the epic - tighter, briefer, sharper, more focused. Few of them go past 1941 or '42 in timeframe. At first this can seem disappointing and the books begin to seem samey and repetitive. But, like O'Brian, they are only samey and repetitive in terms of theme and format. The broad strokes of the War are, to us, predetermined. Within those strokes wind the lives of the men and women in the secret, murky world of espionage. Describing these lives is what Furst excels at, and he has perfected that style and format. If Night Soldiers was his Epic, these are his sonnets.

Our setting is Salonika, 1940. Our slightly shabby, vaguely disreputable, incurably romantic hero is Consta Zannis, a police officer responsible for peacefully resolving knotty political difficulties. He becomes involved in a secret route for Jews and dissidents fleeing Berlin. Time, of course, is running out, and the question is how long the route can be kept open, and whether it can survive the attentions of the British Secret Service.

Drenched in atmosphere, heroism and romanticism, with doom coming down on all sides and the shady, shadowy world of criminals and spies and secret lovers intermingling, this is thrilling, tragic, marvelous stuff. A kind of escapism, sure, but of such elegance and subtlety and the sense of intelligent people making small gestures in the face of unstoppable evil, it always leaves you wanting more.
