damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
In this literary lecture, presented in Ottawa at a 2006 conference on intelligence sponsored by the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS), spy novelist Charles McCarry ruminates on his profession as a writer. He reflects back on how his work has been influenced by his first career as an officer in the Central Intelligence Agency during the 1950s. After leaving the CIA, he wrote about his experiences in the world of espionage (sans anything classified) while operating in deep cover and engaging in covert action in, as he recalls, ‘some of the world’s most godforsaken places’. The key to good spy fiction, in McCarry’s view, is to write ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’.

INTRODUCTION

When Wesley Wark issued his kind invitation to deliver the literary lecture at this conference and at the same time offered me the freedom to choose my own topic, he made an offer that no novelist with an ounce of ego could possibly refuse. The topic I have chosen is ‘Intelligence in Fiction’. As time permits, I hope to explore the challenge of treating a hidden and much misunderstood world as a subject for fiction, transforming it into a form of what, for lack of a better term, I will call believable truth.

Let me begin with a true story whose believability you may find somewhat problematic. I have an acquaintance in Pakistan who is a famous amateur medium. As a sort of parlor trick for the amusement of her friends – and this woman travels in the highest circles of Pakistani society – she communicates with the spirit world. Her technique is matter-of-fact. She scribbles the alphabet on a sheet of foolscap or a paper bag and uses a bottle cap or a coin – anything that slides on paper – to make a crude Ouija board. The deceased spell out their messages and my friend replies to them aloud, in a normal tone of voice, as if speaking to a living person. This sounds somewhat hokey, I know, but having eavesdropped on these conversations across the bridge of
the great unknown, I can attest that it is sometimes difficult not to imagine
that you are actually chatting with people in the next world.

One evening in 1988, while her husband was dozing in his chair, our
medium decided to hold an impromptu séance. Her first visitor was her friend
Zia ul Haq, the late president of Pakistan. General Zia had been killed just a
few days before in the crash of the presidential plane. He was still ‘in
darkness’, which seems to be a phase through which souls pass between death
and their meeting with the deity. Zia’s spirit was very angry. According to my
friend this is a common mood among revenants who have died violent deaths.
‘Your husband is asleep!’ he wrote on the Ouija board. ‘Wake him up!’

Zia then proceeded to tell my friends that his death was no accident. He
had been assassinated. A little girl had presented him with a basket of
mangoes just before his plane took off. One or more of these mangoes, Zia’s
spirit said, had actually been bombs disguised as mangoes. These had been
planted by his political enemies, who had obtained them from someone in the
Soviet intelligence service.

At this point a second spirit interrupted. He identified himself as Arnold
Raphel, the American ambassador to Pakistan, who had been a guest on the
presidential plane and had perished like everyone else aboard. Raphel protested
mildly that there was no proof whatsoever that the mangoes were anything but
mangoes. But Zia continued to insist that they were infernal machines that had
brought down PAK One, as the presidential aircraft was called.

Shortly after hearing this story I lunched in Washington with another old
friend, a US ambassador between assignments. He had a professional interest
in the Middle East, so I told him what I have just told you. He gave me a most
peculiar look, not surprising under the circumstances, and changed the
subject. Months later, information purporting to have been leaked from an
official investigation of the plane crash was published in the newspapers. The
media stories stated that traces of phosphorus, chlorine, potassium, antimony,
and another chemical I won’t even try to pronounce were found at the crash
scene. These chemicals are the ingredients of ZX, a nerve gas possessed by
many nations that causes instant loss of consciousness, swiftly followed by
death. Mingled with these chemicals were fragments of mango skin.
Mangoes, it seems, had been loaded onto the plane at the last minute. The
speculation was that one of the mangoes was actually a bomb filled with ZX
gas that detonated in or in close proximity to the cockpit, killing the military
pilots who were flying the plane.

Clearly this information is great material for a spy thriller. However, as far
as I know, no such book has ever been published. No doubt there are any
number of reasons for this, and one of them, perhaps, is that it is not a
believable truth. It is too neat, too plausible – in short, too good to be true
even if it is true. Besides that, even a thriller writer might tend to be cautious
about identifying the dead as a usually reliable source. Actually, when you come to think of it, the dead have taught us most of what we know, though they usually do it before the Grim Reaper rings the doorbell.

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN TRADECRAFT AND WRITING A SPY NOVEL

When I worked in intelligence during the Cold War, the practice of the craft often seemed to me to resemble a novel. An operational plan, after all, is a plot, and recruiting an agent is a lot like creating a fictitious character. Agents have minds and intentions and appetites of their own, not to mention backstories that pop up like jacks-in-the-box and complicate matters in ways that make the old saying about weaving tangled webs seem like an undersimplification.

An intelligence service, though it is composed of many different human parts all working as one, at least in theory, is not so very different from a solitary novelist. Both work in isolation in windowless rooms, both live largely in their own intellectual domains, both expend great effort to produce what sometimes are small results.

You could even argue that the writer of fiction is a member of a secret and numerous company. He lives in his imagination with dozens, sometimes hundreds of co-workers, the characters who are constantly volunteering to join the operation. These working conditions are enough to make one feel like the NKVD handlers described by Professor Allen Weinstein in *The Haunted Wood*, his excellent history, based on KGB archives, of Soviet espionage in the United States. In the 1930s and 1940s, these unfortunate apparatchiks complained to Moscow that they were so inundated by American leftists who were volunteering to betray their country that they had no time left over to handle the agents they had already recruited.

Novels about espionage, though they have seldom been as full of surprises as Professor Weinstein’s scrupulously researched work of history, have always been regarded by the literary establishment, and by some of their readers, too, as thrillers, genre material – certainly not as the stuff of serious literature. When I started publishing fiction back in the early 1970s, the sex lives of assistant professors of English were regarded by the literati as the very stuff of literature, whereas the life-and-death struggle between East and West for the soul and body of mankind was dismissed as mere entertainment.

This absence of high regard also haunts the profession of intelligence. In the minds of many outsiders tradecraft is a faintly ridiculous way to make a living – grown men and women running about putting chalk marks on lampposts and leaving secret messages in hollow trees and stabbing people with poisoned umbrella tips.
Yet at the same time, this hidden world seems deeply sinister, a sort of Faustian universe parallel to our own, omnipotent and omniscient. A Persian intellectual once assured me that people in Tehran during the sunset of the British empire believed that everything that happened there, including traffic jams, was the work of the British Secret Intelligence Service. This sense that diabolical powers are at work in the civil service seems to be particularly strong among survivors of the counterculture.

Some years ago I was hired to write occasional columns on politics and other matters for *U.S. News & World Report*. Some of the magazine’s editors formed a rump group that objected to my connection to the magazine on grounds that I had once been in the CIA. At the very least, they argued, I should be identified in a footnote as a former spook every time my byline appeared. I asked the leader of this kitchen revolt why he felt this was necessary. After all, I had resigned from the Agency more than 30 years before and had led an eminently public life ever since. This was his reply: ‘If a child rapist moved into a neighborhood, the families who lived there should have a right to be warned’.

*A KAMA SUTRA WRITTEN BY SHAKERS*

Only those who practice the craft of intelligence understand how slow, how routine, how unromantic, how, well, bourgeois, secret life really is, on the whole. Of course it does have its exciting moments. A character in one of my novels described secret work in the field as ‘like being in love’. Espionage, he said, was composed of long periods of loneliness and frustration and fits of suspicion and jealousy, punctuated by rare and fleeting moments of fulfillment and ecstasy. Many spies, including at least two former CIA directors of my acquaintance, love spy novels. Maybe this is because thrillers eliminate the dull moments and every mission impossible runs like clockwork, in contrast to the real thing, where everything that can go wrong usually does go wrong.

Although a number of people who write novels about the secret life spent some time in intelligence work, it is nevertheless also true that many more of those who have written about spies never were spies themselves. In other words, they wrote what they did not know and created a world that shared little or no DNA with the world it purported to be. In theory that should not matter. After all, Shakespeare had never been a king or a fat and windy old drunk or a demented maiden or a gravedigger. The Brontë sisters wrote about the kind of love that one hopes they never experienced, and Miss Jane Austen, a spinster, wrote the manual on the capture of husbands.

The point is that what these outsiders made up about the business of espionage became the conventions of the genre, which is to say their product
tended to resemble a Kama Sutra as written by Shakers. When I set out to write fiction, I understood the difficulties of contradicting convention. At the same time, I wanted to write what I knew as truthfully as possible. The old saw about the wisdom – indeed the necessity – of writing what you know is perfectly valid. But it also helps if you actually know something.

Before I was 25 I wrote three novels – the usual one about star-crossed love, and another about an evangelist who was in it for the money and the girls if you can imagine such a thing. The third was a doomed attempt to improve on Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*.

As you can see, I was searching for a subject. The writing in these early books was okay – not so very different, technically speaking, from things I wrote later on in life. Yet all three books remained unpublished. The reason they did not succeed, I realized, was that I did not yet know enough about the world to transform it into believable truth. Therefore, I stopped writing fiction with the idea of learning more about life before giving it another try.

Not long after this, a learning opportunity presented itself. The cabinet officer for whom I worked during the Eisenhower administration invited me to lunch in his office with a lofty figure from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and then to my surprise left the two of us alone to chat. We had a nice talk, and over dessert, the man from the CIA looked me in the eye and said, ‘How would you like to come to work for us, young man?’

I replied that I was flattered, but that I wasn’t sure what I could do for him. He said, ‘That’s not your problem. It’s my job to find out what it is you want to do and make it possible for you to do it.’ His answer, of course, is the ultimate description of how covert action works, and after clearing the matter with my wife, I was off to the races in my quest for knowledge of the world and *homo sapiens*.

**THE REAL WORLD**

Quite soon I was very busy in foreign lands, learning something interesting almost every day. In the CIA I knew, workaholism was epidemic and the company was excellent. Allen Dulles’ apparent goal was to recruit every bright young person in the United States, and he came close to succeeding. The average IQ, I thought and still think, was roughly 20 points higher than that in any other organization with which I have ever been associated. Because we had all been investigated to a fare-thee-well and underwent regular polygraph examinations, we trusted each other absolutely – not in the long run the wisest policy, as the case of Aldrich Ames illustrates, but awfully nice to come home to.

The hiatus in the writing of fiction lasted for 15 years – much longer than I had thought it would – and by the end of that time, which included
10 uninterrupted years overseas under deep cover and other instructive (and entirely separate) years in presidential politics and journalism, the last thing I wanted to do was write what I had learned about the world and the people in it.

In time, this feeling passed and I began to write fiction again. Naturally I wrote what I knew, and what I knew was the life of a CIA operative under deep cover engaged in covert action operations in some of the world’s most godforsaken places, plus the inside of politics from a speechwriter’s point of view, and finally the outside of just about everything as a journalist.

What I knew for certain at the end of my long apprenticeship for the life of the imagination was that the reality of all these worlds, and the nature and behavior of the men and women who lived in them, were quite different from the versions rendered by the cynicism of the press and the folklore of the movies and the romance of popular novels.

I understood that the folks who created these inexact portraits of worlds I knew at first hand were just trying to make a living, and I did not think that it was any of my business to correct what seemed to me to be questionable impressions. After all, how could believable truth prosper in the absence of mendacity?

However, I had acquired the habit of reporting the unequivocal facts and I did want to write stories that were true to my experience. Owing to the National Security Act and because the confidential relationships I had enjoyed with politicians were permanently binding, I was not at liberty to tell all even if I wanted to do such a thing, and indeed I probably would not have been at liberty for very long if I had done so. You might say that I wanted to write what I knew, but not everything I knew. I thought it was possible to write about this precarious way of life in the same way that many other professions and trades had been described by novelist.

The examples of the works of my fellow spook, W. Somerset Maugham, who, as everyone present tonight surely knows, was a British intelligence agent during World War I and wrote brilliantly about it in his Ashenden stories, and Joseph Conrad’s novels about spying, and, above all, Kipling’s Kim, which is not only the ur novel of the genre and the best tale of espionage ever written but also a brilliant intelligence report on India under the British raj, persuaded me that it was possible to write the essential truth without spilling the beans.

Willy Maugham, famous for slipping across the frontier between fact and fancy, managed to do just that, going so far as to burn some of his Ashenden stories after his friend Winston Churchill advised him that they contravened the Official Secrets Act.

I had no Churchill to advise me, but in an attempt to avoid mixing what I had done in life with what I hoped to do at my writing table, I debriefed
myself by typing out everything I could remember about my life in the CIA – more than a hundred single-spaced pages. I then burned this document in the fireplace of the remote New England farmhouse in which my wife and I and our children were then living.

I suppose this act could be viewed as a rite of exorcism by somebody who did not love the dear old Company as I did, and still do, but I looked on making a list of what I knew and then sending it up in smoke as a sensible precaution. If the conscious mind knows what it knows, I thought, it is less likely to confuse invention with memory. Let me explain what I mean by that.

Over the years I have come to think that the act of writing – and, I suppose, of painting or sculpting or composing music or any other art – in some way unlocks and throws open the doors of the mind, so that the conscious, the subconscious and the unconscious flow together and become one. The conscious mind is the policeman, insisting on structure and commas and periods and moving the crowd along. The function of the other two parts of the mind – the mischievous ones – is to keep the copper on his toes and the reader interested.

If I burned the operational details of my life in the secret world, I kept for my own use the atmosphere, the emotion, the absurdities, the culture – in fact every aspect of a life in espionage or politics except the classified parts. The life as I had lived it and observed it was my material. All I had to do was invent my own details. It was never my intention to write thrillers, let alone a better sex manual. What I set out to do was compose conventional novels about people who happened to be spies or politicians. Had I been a pediatrician or a fireman, I would probably have written about pediatricians or firemen.

FROM THE MIERNIK DOSSIER TO OLD BOYS

However, I was and am what my genes and my life have made of me. My first published novel was called The Miernik Dossier, a sort of merry-go-round about a lugubrious Pole and the young people of many nationalities who are friends but work for several different intelligence services. I had known people who resembled these characters, and I certainly knew what it was like to be young and under discipline, but everything in the book was invented. No kidding. Miernik was written in such a wildly experimental way that it had the honor of being rejected by the traditional 30 or 40 publishers before one of them decided to take a chance on it.

Next came The Tears of Autumn, in which Paul Christopher, an American character from The Miernik Dossier, suspects and ultimately proves that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was an act of revenge for the political murder two weeks before of the president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem,
in a coup supported by the US government. Christopher’s shocking suspicion was one that I had been carrying around in my own mind for 10 years, but again, the novel was a work of the imagination, not a conspiracy theory. What interested me was the moral question and the balance of sorrow that the novel examined, and also the question about President Kennedy’s death that no one seemed to have asked – why?

With one exception, a political comedy entitled Lucky Bastard that amused some, but not all, who read it, my novels are about an American family called Christopher and their cousins the Hubbards. I think of this ongoing story as one very long novel. At the moment, the mother book amounts to something more than 1.5 million words. The Christophers and the Hubbards have intermarried and intertwined and interfaced with one another in almost every imaginable way since what we Yanks call the French and Indian Wars. Paul Christopher is the protagonist of most of these works, and in over 11 volumes I have subjected the poor fellow to the torments of the damned. He is a poet and an intelligence operative and a child of the 20th century. He is the son of an American father and a German mother.

When I sent The Miernik Dossier to the press in 1972, I had no idea that I would ever see Paul Christopher again. But a couple of years later, back he came, bringing with him his family and his friends and the gloriously beautiful love of his life, along with that shocking theory about the assassination of John F. Kennedy and a lot of other baggage.

All these elements I combined into The Tears of Autumn. Over the next 30 years, it was followed by 10 other novels. Every single one of these books is a child of all the others. They are different in their details and sometimes in their form. However, all of them proceed from the character Paul Christopher, who was present at the creation and has been adding to his life story ever since.

Like Leonardo da Vinci and Ludwig von Beethoven, Paul just doesn’t seem to know where to stop. But he and the characters he has introduced to me and the stories they have told me have relieved me of any temptation to sneak old secrets into my narratives. Christopher’s world is far more fertile ground than mere reality.

A WRITER SHOULD LIVE IN THE REAL WORLD

There is yet another factor at play that feeds the imagination. I live, as a writer should, in the real world. A man really does learn something new every day if he keeps his eyes and ears open and hangs out with interesting people, and even if he cannot always use the raw material of experience as fiction, it informs his work and his imagination in many different ways.

Let me share with you a story told to me by a Japanese friend named Tel Satow. Satow-san was a remarkable person – the first woman to climb
Fujiyama and Kita Dake and other difficult peaks in the Japan Alps, and in the 1930s and 1940s, a fiery feminist in a country where few such women existed.

On the night of 23–24 February 1945, she observed the great firebomb raid on Tokyo by the United States Air Force. This incendiary raid by 334 B-29s created a firestorm – that is to say, the air caught fire – and killed approximately 100,000 people while destroying some 41 square kilometers of the city. Satow-san watched this holocaust from high ground west of the city, where her house was located. When the bombing ceased, it seemed to her that what her friends in Tokyo would want and need most was water. She donned her mountain-climbing clothes and boots, filled several large sake bottles with water, packed these into a knapsack, and set off for the city on foot. She was lost almost from the start in Tokyo, which was still burning, because landmarks and signposts had been consumed by fire. The streets were littered with dead bodies, most of them charred beyond recognition. Survivors stumbled blindly through smoke and darkness.

As the sun rose, she came to the Sumida River. It was filled from bank to bank by black writhing things, and in the half light she wondered if the Americans had invented a way to drop poisonous snakes from a bomber. Then, as the sun strengthened, she realized that what she saw undulating in the Sumida River was the long, unbound black hair of hundreds of Japanese women who had plunged into the water with their children in an attempt to escape the fires. They had suffocated or drowned.

That story has haunted me and informed my work for 30 years and more. Obviously Satow-san’s story has nothing to do with espionage, but it has everything to do with so many other things that matter more than the Great Game that it has been a presence in my books and in my mind. It has helped me more than almost anything else I know toward an understanding of human nature and human suffering, and the way in which good and evil impersonate each other.

Like Satow-san, the fictitious Paul Christopher has had the misfortune to live in interesting times. Like myself, he was born in the earlier years of the 20th century. He witnessed what seemed to be the death of capitalism and then its resurrection. He lived through the Great Depression. He lived on the same planet not with just one antichrist but with Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and a few more who operated on a smaller scale. He lived through World War II and the Cold War with its many ‘small’ shooting wars. He was present at the deathbed of Bolshevism. He was an eyewitness to the rise of terrorism.

In _The Better Angels_, published in 1979, the suicide bomber was invented. In this work of fiction, young Muslims died on the orders of a fantastically rich religious fanatic who lived in hiding and wished to destroy the United States and Israel and their religions as a means of ridding the world of evil.
In the same novel an American presidential election was stolen through the manipulation of computerized voting machines and it was suggested that by the year 2000, terrorism and the getting and burning of petroleum would so obsess the government of the United States of America that it would base its entire foreign policy on these issues.

In a sequel, *Shelley’s Heart*, written and published more than 20 years later, the poor-boy Southern president who had benefited from the theft of votes was impeached and the Constitution saved, though just barely, from a coup d’état by a vast conspiracy of political extremists. In my most recent novel, *Old Boys*, the story of Judas Iscariot is retold in a subplot as a covert operation of Roman intelligence that went awry.

And there is more, much more. It is fair to say, I think, that with a little help from my imaginary friends, the characters, I have managed to fill pages without raiding the secret archives of the Central Intelligence Agency. I freely confess that I had not planned to write this never-ending story in all its twists and turns. Certainly I never sat down and drafted a master plan. I invariably find my new novels in my old novels. And invariably I am surprised by what I find. I cannot really explain this. As I have suggested, the writing of fiction is a mysterious business that doesn’t happen entirely on the conscious level. Other writers have remarked on this.

John Milton famously believed that God wrote *Paradise Lost* while Milton himself merely held the pen. Rudyard Kipling thought that his fiction was composed by a daemon without his conscious participation, and lived in anxiety that his daemon would someday desert him and leave him wordless.

When in his 90s and working on his last play, George Bernard Shaw, perhaps the least superstitious writer of his or any other time, said that it was pointless to ask him what the play was going to be about because he had never known the answer to that question in regard to any of his works. His plays wrote themselves page by page, Shaw said. Characters and plot and the words themselves appearing as if by magic. He never had a clue about what the characters were going to say or do or how the thing was going to come out till he got to the end and all was revealed to him. I have often been asked that same question by readers, and I gave the same answer as Shaw long before I ever knew that he had said what he said.

At this point I will mention a caveat. Despite the help of the awakened mind, writing fiction is by a factor of 10 the most difficult thing I have ever done, requiring a depth of concentration and an effort of recall and an exercise of technical skill that make editing a magazine or overthrowing governments or writing presidential speeches seem like child’s play.

When I start writing a novel, usually after 30 years or so of mulling it over, I have in mind a character, a first line, and a general sense of what the story is going to be about. One day the book knocks on the door, ready to be written.
This can be a blessed event or it can be a great inconvenience. Sometimes it can be false labor. I wrote the same 10 pages of *The Bride of the Wilderness* for 60 straight mornings until on the 61st the real, the predestined first chapter was born. After that the novel, more than 150,000 words of it, flowed onto the page as if a daemon had taken his finger out of the dike.

And sometimes it can be a surprise. I was about halfway through a novel about the end of the world for which my publisher had paid a large advance when another novel came pounding on the door. This was *Lucky Bastard*, a book I had never even thought about before I started to write it. Nevertheless, it insisted on being written. It made so much fuss that I put aside the novel I could not write and wrote the one I could not not write. I wrote *Lucky Bastard* in 90 days flat and changed hardly a word or a punctuation mark before sending it to the printer.

That is a case where a novel just happened. In a sense, that is true of all my novels. They have a life of their own. The story seems to spring from nowhere, the characters do and say things that I never in my wildest dreams imagined them saying or doing, the language flows from some hidden place in the mind to the fingers and onto the keyboard and then comes to life on the page. This is not to say that I ignore research. I do a lot of it, sometimes with serendipitous results, and usually to confirm or expand upon something I already half know.

While studying up on Arab folkways in the Maghrib for my novel *Second Sight*, I came across historical research identifying certain tribes of Berbers as the descendants of Israelites who had crossed North Africa from Judea in the time of King David. The Jawabi, as I called my fictional tribe of Jewish Berbers, became the hinge of the book. I also did a lot of studying in the hope of getting the details of 17th-century life along the Connecticut River right. After weeks of reading, I realized that the life that English settlers led in that era differed very little from the primitive, live-off-the-land existence I knew while growing up on a subsistence farm in the Berkshires in the 1930s and 1940s.

As I said in the beginning, the more that is stored in the brain of the writer, the happier his or her readers are likely to be. On the whole, though, I would have to say that in writing, as in romance, and even in the world of covert operations, that which is done on impulse usually turns out well, while that which is done by calculation almost always turns out badly.

At times it appears that Kipling was not so far off the mark about his indispensable daemon. Sometimes it has seemed to me while I am writing that an entire species of them are using me to create a new world for themselves in which they hope to live forever by leaping off the page into the minds of readers. They may sleep on a shelf for a hundred years undisturbed, but (they seem to be sure of this) one day a man or a woman with a few hours to kill will pick up the dusty old book and reawaken Brigadoon.
Now, I don’t actually believe in daemons. I understand that whatever is going on when I write is going on in my own brain without outside help, let alone through the intervention of the supernatural. And of course I control it to the extent possible. In *The Tears of Autumn*, for example, Paul Christopher kept jumping into bed with his beautiful lover, Molly, and who could blame him? My policy was to let them have their fun, even though I guess this made me a voyeur, then delete that passage – less is more where fictitious sex is concerned – and send poor old Christopher off to the Congo or Vietnam, where less pleasant duties awaited him.

What duties exactly? I had no idea. Christopher and the other characters, some of them as yet unborn, even unsuspected, would tell me when he got there. A natural question about a work of fiction is, ‘How much of it is true?’ The answer is, or should be, ‘To the author, every single word’. For how can the reader be expected to suspend disbelief if the author himself does not believe, and believe completely, that he is writing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

And when all is said and done, what is a work of fiction if it is not a collaboration between the author and the reader? What we who write send out into the world is an exposed strip of film. It is not complete until it is developed in the mind of the reader – indeed, in the minds of many readers.

A work of art of any kind is a stew into which all sorts of ingredients are thrown – the artist’s experience of life, the people he has known and the stories he has heard, chance encounters and a glimpse of a beautiful face on a crowded street, the experience of many others living and dead, and finally the element that makes everything possible, the techniques of his craft.

The fact of the matter is, truth in art and truth in life are not the same. Fiction must be consistent. Real people and real life itself almost never are. What reader, for example, would suspend disbelief about a character who wrote speeches in a presidential campaign for a candidate who lost the election, and the next day but one was invited to lunch, signed a new contract with the intelligence service he used to work for, and when he had done so, was instructed to ‘go to Africa’?

That was the entire instruction – go where you wish, study the situation, make friends who might be useful in the future and look for opportunities while in the next two and one-half years, less time than it took Stanley to find Livingston, 32 entirely new countries spring into being. Who would believe such a story? Clearly it is very far from being a believable truth, but the truth is that the dark continent of secret operations, more than any other single experience, gave me the knowledge of the world that I set out to discover. Its reality is always in my mind, and so are the extraordinary people I knew there in deepest secrecy.
After almost 50 years in the business of writing, I cannot take the entire credit for my work or blame any part of it on anyone else – except, of course, Paul Christopher and his merry cohort, may the Lord bless and keep them for the good friends and companions they have been for all these years to me and, I hope, to some of you.