



THE SPY GAME

A NOVEL
GEORGINA HARDING

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A novel about one family trapped in the grand narratives of history.

On a freezing January morning in 1961, eight-year-old Anna's mother disappears into the fog. A kiss that barely touches Anna's cheek, a rumble of exhaust and a blurred wave through an icy windshield, and her mother is gone. Looking back, Anna will wish that she could have paid more attention to the facts of that day. The adult world shrouds the loss in silence, tidies the issue of death away along with the things that her mother left behind. And her memories will drift and settle like the fog that covered the car.

That same morning a spy case breaks in the news--the case of the Krogers, apparently ordinary people who were not who they said they were; people who had disappeared in one place and reappeared in another with other identities, leading other lives. Obsessed by stories of the cold war and of the Second World War, which is still a fresh and painful memory for the adults around them, Anna's brother, Peter, begins to construct a theory that their mother, a refugee from eastern Germany, was a spy working undercover, and might even still be alive. As life returns to normal, Anna struggles to sort between fact and fantasy. Did her mother have a secret life? And how does anyone know who a person was once she is dead?

The Spy Game is a beautifully wrought novel about loss, history, memory, and imagination, and the way in which we shape these to construct our own identities. It is a painful and tender reminder of the importance of understanding the past and, in turn, the importance of letting go.

The Spy Game Details

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From Reader Review The Spy Game for online ebook

Erika says

Anna remembers her mother leaving, and people saying she died, but she and her brother Peter didn't get to attend the funeral. They both think there is something more to the story, and this book is about how they grow up and try to figure out this mystery that is their mother.

She starts the book talking about the fog that she remembers so vividly from the day her mother left. I think this is an interpretation of the whole fog of their lives concerning their mom and their background. The whole time I was reading I felt like I was waiting for some conclusion that never came. The book was more about how this not knowing shaped their lives as children, and then again as adults. The narrator goes back and forth from being a kid and talking about the things happening at the time, and being an adult and going to look for any proof of who she was, and who her mother could have been.

I really liked this book, it gives you the choice to come up with your own conclusion. And leaves you wanting more.

Judy says

Was Hilda a spy for the Soviet Union who returned to Russia before she could be unmasked and arrested or did she simply die in an auto accident? Eight year old Anna and her older brother, Peter, are told that their mother is dead, but there is no funeral, their father (who had a secret job during World War II in England and who met their mother in Berlin after the war) took them to the sea to stay immediately after their mother's death, and when they returned to their home all traces of their mother have been removed. Unable to understand what has happened or to have any closure, Anna and Peter, especially Peter, conjecture that their mother was a Cold War spy and begin to collect evidence. Undoubtedly their suspicions were aroused because there had been a major arrest of two Soviet spies in England on the same day as Hilda's death. The arrested spies had posed as a happily married couple living in rural England and they had been broadcasting and receiving information to and from Russia from a transmitter concealed in their home. Maybe their mother was still alive and living back in East Germany or the Soviet Union. This book focuses on grief, loss, and the inaccuracy of childhood memories as Anna and Peter begin to put together recollections of their mother, snatches of conversation they overheard, the realization that their mother was raised in a German village that was now inside the boundary of the Soviet Union, and suspicions of people and circumstances in their English village to convince themselves that if they figure out what really happened they will find their mother again.

John says

In 1961 as the Cold War raged, when Anna was eight and her brother Peter a couple of years older, their mother Caroline drove off into the thick fog surrounding their remote Home Counties home and never came back again. Later the children were told that Caroline, blinded by the fog, had driven into a tree and been killed. Peter, however, putting his mother's German accent together with the fact that just at that same moment there had been some sensational spy arrests -- the Krogers, Gordon Lonsdale -- developed the

conspiracy theory that Caroline was a Soviet sleeper in the UK, and persuaded Anna this must be true. Later he succeeded in persuading her, too, that her piano teacher, Sarah Cahn, a pre-War Jewish refugee from Germany, must likewise be a spy.

And so for years Anna played the spy game. Decades later, looking back on it all, she realizes the cruelty that she and Peter in their blithe ignorance inflicted on people like their father and poor Sarah Cahn, who eventually put her head in the oven (an awful irony). In the later parts of this spellbinding novel Anna sets out on a journey to try to find out just who her mother really was, and why she acted as she did. By now Peter has lost all interest in the spy game: he has a new life in New Zealand, and seems to want nothing more than to forget the past. Crucially, although Anna is finally unable to establish the truth, she discovers -- or, more accurately, *imagines* -- a version of the truth with which she can live.

I can imagine plenty of people being drawn by this book's title -- or even by my description above -- into thinking it's a thriller. It's not. What it is is an astonishingly well wrought portrayal of childhood and the follies to which childish misunderstandings and obsessions can give birth. Unlike other books of this kind that I've read, however -- such as L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* -- the writing has a sort of clinical dispassion that doesn't allow us to lurch into any easy sentimental forgiveness of consequences. The two characters in the book who're by far the most sympathetic are the children's somewhat diffident father and the quietly despairing piano teacher, Sarah Cahn, both of whom are in essence part of the supporting cast.

This is a novel that I suspect will haunt my mind for a very long time . . . until eventually I pick it up to venture back into its world once more. Its voice is a quiet one. The quiet voices tend to be those we remember the longest.

Tanzeys says

Not a bad tale which describes the imagined and possible life of a young refugee in post war Berlin and the links to a 1950s England family told through the eyes of the children. You are left guessing and probably never really know the answer.

Tori says

This was such a surprising book. I was expecting kind of an espionage story with lots of action. What I got was a slow-moving, thoughtful story that provided me with a lot to think about. I like both types of books, but since I wasn't expecting that out of this book, it was a nice treat! I won this book from Goodreads, and what a great prize it was - I might not have chosen it otherwise.

The story is about a little girl and her brother, whose mother dies in a car crash. Because that takes place in the early 60's, much has been in the news about spies and double agents, etc. Peter, the brother, begins to suspect that perhaps their mother didn't really die, but was a spy. A few coincidences occur to support that possibility. Because that seed of doubt was planted (and doubt is power, as the author says), the desire to solve the "mystery" of her death continues to haunt the children into their adult years.

I thought the author painted wonderful pictures with words, and got me examining some things in my own life. The narrator of the story was the girl - I can't even think of her name - and action moves back and forth

from the past to the present. Haven't we all just done "stuff" to take time, like the girl in the story who plays piano scales, builds card houses, and polishes silver in order to keep from thinking about reality?

Harding's story deals with the desire of most people to want to make sense of their past, to attach a logical reason for why things happen. Life is complicated, though, as the narrator finds out, and things aren't always what they appear. and if things aren't what they appear - it isn't necessarily bad. Sometimes it turns out to be a method of survival to reinvent yourself. And, as Harding sums it up: "This is what the whole world is doing: clearing, forgetting, reconstructing."

I thoroughly enjoyed the story - it was a fairly quick read, but carefully written. My only complaint - and perhaps this will be taken care of by the editor - is the failure to use the subjunctive. I don't know why it bothers me so much, but when a thoughtful book has "If I was" instead of "If I were", it grates on me! and there were at least 3 instances of that in the book. But - if that's the worst thing about it - so be it!

Noninuna says

People does not change because you knew something else about them. They still looked the same. Only, if you thought of it, the way you saw them changed. There was the person you saw, who was always the same, and then there was the other person you found out they were inside. Like Russian dolls. Or spies. Like Helen Kroger and Leontina Cohen.

When you read the title of a book, don't expect more than it is. For this particular one, as per its name, it is just a game.

Out of the blue, just right her mother death, her dad took Anna & her older brother, Peter to an island for a trip. She was just 8 years old at the time. Peter was sceptical with everything that is happening. He was fascinated with the spy that he wondered if their mother was one since she's a German. It was during the Cold War & everything seems possible.

The story was told from Anna POV & it was quite slow moving. We got to see how she grew up with his brother obsession about war, espionage & everything related. However, there was an incident that led Anna asked herself whether her brother was right all along.

There are a few other characters that add spice & colours to overall story such as Susan, her friend & neighbour with her parents who were basically family to them (~~who apparently was from Tanah Melayu. LOL the shocked when your home country got mention in a historical fiction~~) & Mrs Sarah Cahn who was her piano instructor.

I read this book without checking the rating on Goodreads so that I could get through it without prejudice and it work!

I really pity Anna. She was left with confusions for a child to deal with, up till she can't differentiate what is imagination & what is real.

I learned quite a lot from reading this. It's a good experience but a few issues got the stars out of the rating.

Betty says

An unusual plot line, a little disconcerting at first until you really get into it. Georgina Harding demonstrates how non-verbal family relations can create false imagery to young children. The novel centers around the mysterious disappearance of the mother of two children and how they try to cope. They are told nothing about the disappearance, simply that she has died in an accident. There is no funeral, the last sight to them was of their mother driving off on a foggy, frosty morning as she has so many times before. However, with lack of knowledge comes lack of closure for these youngsters. No one will talk to them about it. To them, she has simply disappeared.

The parents met in Germany in the aftermath of WWII. The father is English and the mother is thought to be German, or is she really Russian? The book covers past, present, and later jumps to the children as adults. In the present, the Cold War has a firm grip on reality and nobody trusts anybody yet they all keep silent. This story becomes quite fascinating, with glimpses of what life was like in the Cold War, glimpses of what life was like at the end of WWII, the hunger, the desolation, and the trauma of putting lives back together. The children demonstrate how their minds fill in the blanks when their father won't talk about their mother, and how they interpret what the Cold War is about. This is a good read of a strange time in history. It's even comical sometimes to see where their minds take them and what they learn in the process. Children are adaptable, but they need to know what to adapt from.

This review is based on an advance reading copy and so I am not commenting necessarily on the finished product, but I did note in this copy that although the book is in five parts, no chapters are marked and sometimes the reader finds him/herself suddenly in a different time period with no warning. This confused me at first, but I did get the hang of it. Perhaps in the finished book this won't be a problem. If the reader is looking for a thriller or a book on fighting in a war, this is not necessarily the book for you. For imagery, imagination, and coping, for a story about people, then definitely I would recommend it. This novel is suitable for young adults and older.

Annette says

Coincidentally, I read this straight after reading Audrey MaGee's *The Undertaking* which deals with similar territory. The writing is very different but the emotional power is just as strong and I would highly recommend reading the two together perhaps this one second as I have done, it works chronologically with the time frames both books deal with.

This is beautifully written and multi-layered book that gently shows you the story. It's such a joy to find writing like this that is subtle but clear rather than the heavily sign posted stuff that is often published.

If you've picked this up expecting a thriller, as I half did you will be disappointed unless you're able to go with it then it repays careful reading. The ending delivers just as Audrey Magee's book does and reminds you of the thousands of people we live along side who went through the war like this, on the other side, and what happened to them when it was over for the rest of us.

Basically, it's about two children's search for their mother's identity, they think she's a spy and they do indeed find out that she had secrets.

David says

2009 was a busy year for me, yet I still bought as many books as normal - the result being that I have several unread books from that year languishing on my shelves, this being one of them, despite my having read (and highly rated) Harding's other two novels. A dull novel that I was trudging through with little interest prompted me to finally pick it off the shelf, and I'm so glad I did. As beautifully written as I have come to expect from the author, this is a wonderfully layered examination of how people are constructed and can be reconstructed (or not) from pieces of fact and memories (which of course are not always reliable), filtered through the eyes of children who do not always understand everything they see. Some lovely metaphors for all this involving fog and blanketing snow which in one instance covers the bombed out ruins of a German city making derelict houses appear like fairy tale castles.

Diana says

This book is slim paperback and so it did not take me too long to read but I enjoyed every minute.

I thought her ability to get inside the mind of a child was excellent and also the relationship between the sister and brother. I don't remember being confused by the time switches as some other readers were. When I was a child I lived in Vienna, just after the second WW and I very well remember the division of the city between the four powers and the fear that was very common that if you went into the Russian sector you would never be seen again. I am sure it was the same in Berlin.

I also lived through the Cold War and vividly remember Khrushchev sending the ships with the missiles to Cuba and how as teenagers we were convinced our last hours had come.

To return to the novel, at the time it was set, it was considered best for children if they were not told anything upsetting, perhaps in certain circles more than others. Outrage was expressed by some when Jacqueline Kennedy allowed her small children to attend their father's funeral. So I think the author has evoked the era extremely well. I didn't mind that there was no resolution at the end, a more realistic ending. But read it, it's worth it.

Fiona says

I really enjoyed this book. It was just beautifully & evocatively written. The characters were well painted & very believable, it was also very moving.

It made me remember so many incidents from my own childhood & how believable fantasies can develop. It also illustrates very well the problems caused by adults not telling children the facts. A friend of mine knew her Mother was ill when she was a child, but no one told her how ill she was & one day when she came home from school she wasn't there. There is a lot of truth in this book.

Sara says

2.5 stars. This book was quite slow moving, and although I enjoyed parts of the story very much, it felt too vague and flimsy overall for me to fully enjoy it. The story follows a girl named Anna, whose mom supposedly dies in a car crash in 1962, when Anna is eight. On the news, there are all sorts of reports about spies, and Anna's brother begins to suspect that their mom did not die after all but instead was a spy and moved on to reinvent herself somewhere else.

I really liked the story about Anna and her brother trying to figure out pieces of their mom's past. They write down what they remember about their mom and figure out how to communicate in code if the need arises. I thought these scenes between the siblings were some of the strongest in the book - mainly because in these scenes, *something happened*.

In the rest of the book, not much occurred. The action jumped around from the past to the present without warning, making me all too often unsure about when the story was taking place. There were so many filmy scenes in which I think the author was trying to show how mundane life is, but these scenes didn't really relate to the main plot. Also, the beginning of the book - like, the first two chapters - were so incredibly abstract and gave me nothing to hold on to that it took me quite some time to actually get into the story. Even then, I wasn't fully drawn in because there would be an interesting scene, followed by... nothing.

The problem for me, I think, is that the premise of the book was more interesting than the execution. The book is not a thriller, not a mystery, and not very gripping. I'm all for literary fiction, but this novel didn't feel like it was written to tell a story but to relay the lives of the members of this seemingly ordinary family. There were a few interesting threads woven into the story but these were too bogged down with unremarkable scenes to make the book very memorable.

Jane says

"There are different kinds of memory, conscious and unconscious. There are memories that the conscious mind goes over repeatedly, that are recalled, observed, caught like a snapshot of the time, and oneself in it, one of the figures in the picture. Memories like these become like history, fact-filed for recall, detached from emotion. But there are others that come back without conscious thought and that are experienced again, more or less vividly, like dream versions of themselves."

On a cold morning in January 1961, eight-year-old Anna's mother watched her mother disappear into the fog.

Later she was told that her mother would not be coming home again. She was dead, after her car apparently skidded on black ice on the road to London.

Later the same day a sensational story broke on the evening news. A Russian spy ring had been uncovered in London and several arrests had been made. Arrests of seemingly ordinary people who had lead double lives and carried extraordinary secrets.

Anna and her elder brother Peter were told little about their mother's death, they didn't attend her funeral and they were never taken to her grave. Was there father trying to protect them, or was it something else?

The two children thought it was something else. They linked the disappearance of their mother – a German refugee – with the spy case.

They begin their own investigation. At first Peter takes the lead, but later it is Anna.

It would be unfair to say more than that about the plot, but there is much more to be said about the book.

It grips from the first page and doesn't let go.

The story shifts between periods and perspectives. It is sometimes a little difficult to keep track, but it serves the author well as she recreates England in the Cold War and the world that Anna sees just perfectly.

Georgina Harding writes wonderful prose and she shows great skill in creating characters who are utterly believable but also, ultimately, unknowable.

The themes are fascinating and well explored there are so many intriguing details.

It all adds up to a brilliant second novel!

Theresa says

Georgina Harding's The Spy Game is story of two small children dealing with the loss of their mother. Peter believes his mother was a spy and little Anna is unsure what to believe. This story is set in 1962 and the present, but clearly the author wants to address issues lingering from WWII. She has done so well and directly. Like a child's perspective the facts are clear even if the true meaning is a bit more muddled. From the descriptions of the family yard to the disconnection of the siblings, I enjoyed this child's view. I was involved with this story and felt I could relate to this family. Looking forward to more from this wonderful author.

Tracy says

Wow. This was my response as I started it: Spies! Orphans! 60s Cold War Britain! What a perfect beginning ... and yet the book is even better than that.

Everything about it just sang to me, the questions of identity and roots and memory. The childhood obsession with spies and the belief that their deceased mother isn't really dead, but a spy in hiding, Peter and Anna's counterespionage attempts, and then the adult Anna slowly going about trying to find the answers. It's a slim book, it probably only took 3-4 hours to read, but it's the sort that leaves you at peace at the end, just mulling it over. It just felt perfectly balanced.
