



The Cairo Affair

Olen Steinhauer

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Omar Halawi has worked in Egyptian intelligence for years, and he knows how to play the game. Foreign agents pass him occasional information, he returns the favor, and everyone's happy. But the murder of a diplomat in Hungary has ripples all the way to Cairo, and Omar must follow the fall-out wherever it leads.

American analyst Jibril Aziz knows more about Stumbler, a covert operation rejected by the CIA, than anyone. So when it appears someone else has obtained a copy of the blueprints, Jibril alone knows the danger it represents.

As these players converge in Cairo in *The Cairo Affair*, Olen Steinhauer's masterful manipulations slowly unveil a portrait of a marriage, a jigsaw puzzle of loyalty and betrayal, against a dangerous world of political games where allegiances are never clear and outcomes are never guaranteed.

The Cairo Affair Details

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Author : Olen Steinhauer

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From Reader Review The Cairo Affair for online ebook

Mal Warwick says

“In only three days, five politically active Libyan exiles vanished from the face of the earth” in different countries around the globe. Thus opens *The Cairo Affair*, a complex, multilayered spy novel featuring a young American couple, Sophie and Emmett Kohl — a mid-ranked diplomat and his wife of twenty years, a housewife, recently relocated from Cairo to Budapest. Somehow, the Kohls are connected to the disappearance of those five Libyans. Therein lies the tale.

With consummate skill, Olen Steinhauer relates the tale of Sophie and Emmett through a mind-bending series of chapters, alternating from the point of view of one of the principal characters to another: Sophie and four men, all intelligence agents, who play major roles in her slowly growing understanding of how her life and that of her husband are linked to the Libyans. It’s a masterful display of plotting, not always fully unpredictable but nonetheless surprising to the very end. The action moves from Cairo to Budapest to Germany and the Libyan desert.

This is spy fiction at its best.

The Cairo Affair is the ninth of Olen Steinhauer’s ten spy novels. He began his career with a brilliant five-book cycle of thrillers set in a fictional Eastern European country that artfully portrayed a society under Communism, with one novel for each of the five decades starting with the 1940s. (You can find reviews of all five on this blog.) Later, he wrote a trilogy of best-selling stories featuring Milo Weaver of the CIA, which top reviewers ranked with John Le Carre’s classic spy novels as the best in the genre.

Perry says

[Messalina, a la Emma Bovary, Steps into Espionage Thriller](#)

I don't read many espionage novels, but saw a promo for this one, read the description and thought I'd take a chance. Ten pages in and I was hooked. Steinhauer makes the reading experience pleasurable with good dialogue, an intriguing subtext and setting and a suspenseful storyline involving the spycraft in Cairo and a plot in Libya to overthrow Gaddafi.

I felt toward the main character Sophie about the same as I did toward Madame Bovary, at least for most of the book, in that they had similar *character defects*; the latter's were much worse. The ending here was brighter than was Emma B's.

I enjoyed the heck out of this book.

Rikki says

REVIEW THE CAIRO AFFAIR

Sophie Kohl, wife of Emmett, a diplomat at the American Embassy in Budapest, is horrified to see her husband shot in front of her. She flees to Cairo to her ex-lover, Stan Bertolli, a CIA agent and becomes embroiled in a world of espionage and double dealing.

Jibril Aziz, a US analyst in possession of a list of names of Libyans willing to start an uprising, has met with Emmett shortly before his death. He is desperate the list does not fall into the wrong hands. There is a covert plot (STUMBLER) in the pipeline in which the CIA wish to take credit for the Arab Spring and a regime change..

From start to finish, this book is packed with action, written by a man who knows the world of espionage. Thoroughly recommended for lovers of thrillers.

Zare says

What if whatever haunts you is not because of what you think but because of some obscure reason lost in the past - what if you are in danger because of what someone else thinks you know.

This is the corner-stone of this novel.

All the characters have done something bad (some something outright terrible) in the past and they are now chased down [and quite the few killed] because somebody has a feeling that they know too much (or maybe everything). Because of this it is decided to eliminate them just to be on the safe side.

Sophie, main character is wannabe Mata Hari - she enjoys living on the edge but very soon this takes its toll. She might seem to be an over-dramatic at times but what exactly one is to expect from situated person that wants more but settles on the role of the happy wife.

From all the characters she is most probably the most "damaged" one. But her guilt and loss pushes her forward while trying to solve the mystery and without her, total amateur in the spy-games, professionals would stop stirring the hornet's nest way earlier and leave the things lie down.

John, US agent, maybe best epitomizes the survivalist approach to intelligence activities - know nothing, hear nothing and play outright dumb in order to live through yet another day. Because if you become curious very soon the shadows will strike (like it happened to majority of characters in this novel) so better leave it to people who are at least payed to be nosy and are not expendable.

If above sounds like total opposite to what intelligence gathering is supposed to be you are right but in the world where you know secrets about others and you think other's actions are because of your secrets or actions in the past who can you actually believe to be "on the side of the Angels"?

Excellent, very paranoid novel, written in beautiful style that will make you devour 500+ pages in couple of hours. Could it be done in fewer number of pages - definitely could, but this page surplus does not diminish the story in any way.

Highly recommended.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This is more of a 3.5 star rating. This book was selected for the upcoming season of my only in-person book club, and I probably would not have read it otherwise.

It was a quick read that I knocked out in a few hours, and there are a few things that made it enjoyable - rather than use James Bond era or post-WWII era as the setting for a novel of espionage, Steinhauer uses a combination of the former Yugoslavia in the early 90s and Budapest/Cairo immediately following the "Arab Spring." The differences between cultures and approaches seemed realistic and I liked the currency of it.

What I didn't care as much for is that almost everything was completely obvious. One big reveal later in the novel was something I figured out very early on. This isn't helped by how the author tells the story by weaving sections of the book between some of the characters. What ends up happening is one person will reveal some things in their narrative and then the next person's section backtracks with no surprises. It might have been smarter to alternate between PoVs more often, every chapter rather than larger sections. This would have cut back on redundancies. I'm also not sure the primary female characters were as shocking as they were supposed to be.

Jack says

An effective espionage story with realistic characters, a few brief but intense action scenes, and a broad canvas spanning from the 1990s Balkan Wars through the not-so-long-ago Arab Spring. Steinhauer's lean prose is impressive, as is his LeCarresque (LeCarrian?) ability to weave a non-linear narrative without fumbling the many threads. LeCarre fans should look into this one; meanwhile, I'll be checking out some of Steinhauer's other works.

Jenny Boyce says

<http://bookreviewsbyme2.wordpress.com...>

I honestly didn't like this book. While it seemed like a book I would enjoy, a thriller based on serious world issues, I found myself constantly confused and bored with the story.

The story begins with a bang (literally) as Sophie, while sitting in a restaurant, confesses to her husband about the affair she had while in Cairo. The husband is then shot while still in the restaurant almost directly after the admission. Now- the tumultuous writing suited this section of the book as it fit well with the emotions the wife was feeling during this time period, but the writing had been confusing even before this scene occurred.

The storyline flops back and forth between perspectives in a way that is confusing and annoying to keep up with. I normally don't have any difficulty keeping track of different perspectives or changing time periods within a story, but I found that with this book I really struggled to keep up.

The information in this book is also really confusing. If you want to really understand what is going on in this book, you're going to need a thorough understanding of what is going on in Libya and with other current events. If you're like me and have only just glanced at the news and absorbed a little bit of what's been happening, you're going to be constantly scratching your head in confusion throughout this book.

I also found the ending really disappointing. I absolutely hate it when the ending of the book seems like the author just ran out of steam and ended the story, or as if there are a few pages missing. The ending to this story felt exactly that way. The only thing I am hoping is that there will be a sequel (even though I won't read it) and that is why the author ended the book the way that he did.

Overall, I found myself very disappointed in this book. It was confusing and difficult to read, taking away any enjoyment I might have gotten out of the book.

I received this book for review purposes via NetGalley.

Tracyk says

I have been a fan of espionage fiction for a long time, and Olen Steinhauer is one of my favorite authors in this genre.

The Cairo Affair starts during the activities of the Arab Spring, in February 2011. Sophie Kohl's husband Emmett is currently working at the American embassy in Hungary, but his previous assignment was in Cairo. Both of them have friends still in Cairo, and when Emmett is killed, Sophie seeks the reasons for his death there. Along her journey to discover the truth, we visit the couple in the early years of their marriage. Along the way, three other characters get pulled into the quest: Stan Bertolli, a CIA agent in Cairo; Omar Halawi, who works in Egyptian intelligence; and John Calhoun, a contractor working for CIA agents in Cairo.

I was very pleased with this novel. I loved the structure, with the point of view changing several times throughout the story, and the story moving back and forth in time. Some readers find this narrative style disorienting, but I thrive on that kind of story. As usual, Steinhauer's characterization is very good, although in an espionage novel, the author cannot tell us too much about the characters without spoiling the story. The characters are the focus of this story, showing how their jobs and their chosen way of life is affecting them. Once again, this is a spy novel with the emphasis on the problem of trust. In the world of politics and espionage, who can you trust? Your family? Your coworkers?

I received my copy of this novel from the publisher, via NetGalley.

Mel says

'Nothing is ever what it seems' -- hold onto that mantra; it will serve you well as a reminder while traveling through the pages of this globe spinning political conspiracy that will have you feeling like you are navigating in the modern political panorama through a house of distorted mirrors. A smart, complex story of espionage that relies not on the thriller aspects, but rather on the knowledge of what we don't know, the intricacies of a tangled web of spy vs. spy.

The novel spans 20 tumultuous years, 1991-2011: Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak, the Arab Spring, civil wars, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yugoslavia... and leaked political cables via WikiLeaks. The historical significance of those years is powerful when compressed and reflected on, and I suggest reading carefully the *Collection Strategies* that precede chapter 1. The story jumps back and forth through the years, and employs different points of view, which helps once you chalk up any *contradictions* to point of view and not actual contradictions. The cast of characters is daunting at times, some critics suggest superfluous. I didn't find that the case. Steinhauer keeps a sharp forward focus on a twisting plot of foggy alliances and surprising betrayals; the characters' weaknesses and strengths are revealed subtly, dangerously.

I admit to stumbling with reckoning a bored, blonde, manicured, middle-aged, lady-that-lunches, being recruited to work in such a deadly theater. (Who knew the days of the obvious iron bowler-hatted, or metal-toothed-giant no good-niks would give way to....basically...me.) Maybe a case of the perfect front? Nothing is ever what it seems.

About all you can be sure of with *The Cairo Affair* is that it comes together into a good, slick read, and may possibly leave some of you trying to quiet some uncomfortable thoughts -- beyond which Steinhauer novel to read next.

Darwin8u says

“God in His infinite wisdom Did not make me very wise— So when my actions are stupid They hardly take God by surprise”
? Olen Steinhauer, *The Cairo Affair*

I love great genre fiction. Steinhauer represents some of the very best of modern espionage literature. While he hasn't yet reached the level of le Carré, he is now reaching towards the top shelf of literary spy fiction with peers like le Carré, Littell, Furst, etc.

The Cairo Affair is an important bookmark in espionage fiction. In this 21st Century, post 9-11 world, Steinhauer (along with le Carré) is the go-to fiction writer to understand the nuances of private-contract espionage, post-Soviet global realignments, and the moral failings of a waning American empire (all with a non-US-centric outlook on espionage and foreign policy). *The Cairo Affair* highlights the fact that the CIA is slowly losing its place as the gravitational center of the spy universe (at least in fiction) and seems to have lost its principled, idealistic foundations as well.

This isn't nearly a perfect spy novel. There are flaws and imperfections through out. What I appreciate about it is Steinhauer isn't looking to land an easy jump. He is jumping into complicated territory and I'll grade him a bit easier knowing he is gravitating towards the more difficult and nuanced stories. Give him time and he is going to inherit the crown.

Steve says

Spy novels have dramatically changed from the old formula when the chief antagonist was almost always a ruthless Soviet KGB agent and the battleground somewhere in the hidden lairs and trenches of Eastern Europe.

The Cairo Affair is reminiscent of the Cold War espionage novels by John le Carré and Len Deighton, instead establishing a more modern setting of Northern Africa and the political gamesmanship of the Muslim world. This is a complex story, involving realistic characters and many, many questions to be answered.

There is no clear winner among the players. Not a single character could be considered a hero or villain in the strictest sense, and whatever victory achieved by any of them exacts such a heavy toll on the players that it could be said there was no victory at all. The writing was very good, and using the perspectives of several different characters for the same events did take some getting used to. There is a complex layering of the storyline that should keep the reader guessing to the very end.

Olen Steinhauer's use of the onset of the events leading to the Arab Spring in Libya and Egypt as the backdrop, as well as flashbacks set in civil war-torn Yugoslavia of the early 1990s, was brilliant. It's an eminently engaging story, but definitely not a thriller or mindless romp. As one would expect in spy novel, there are many betrayals, and the lines between friend and foe are incredibly murky. Ultimately, it is a novel about the domino effect of betrayals and the ever-widening circle of deceit over a span of over twenty years.

Olen Steinhauer must be considered a major talent in the genre. I'll continue to read whatever he writes.

Judith E says

A twisty spy story that involves the CIA in Libya, Hungary, Cairo, and Yugoslavia. A decent audio book.

Antigone says

You have to have mad internal strength to write an authentic loser. Someone who's derailed so often in life that loss has become a force of habit. That kind of failure is never easy to contemplate, and certainly a state of being no one wants to thoroughly plumb. It's completely counter-intuitive. Resistance is so pronounced on this front that you'll find an author hedging his bets; attempting to draw distinctions that serve to distance this character from his own personality and catalogue of mistakes. The man will get dumber. The woman will get weak. The edges will soften and slip into Everyman territory - and that's fine if you want to write Everyman, but Everyman isn't a loser. Everyman's luck will go south, no doubt, but in a little while it's going to turn north again and things are eventually going to balance out. A loser is a hard and fast skidmark to death. To write such a character well requires communing with that part of yourself it's most difficult to be honest about and natural to be ashamed of. You've got to get in touch with the loser you were on that one monumentally humiliating day, during that one crushingly catastrophic month, throughout that whole unholy godforsaken year. Own that, and then invest it in a character you're fully aware you're going to wind up caring about...knowing all the while the profoundly epic nature of the fail you'll deliver as his due. Mad internal strength. Not many writers have it.

Steinhauer's main characters have lost. Whether it's the dishonorably discharged, divorced ex-Marine now working as a contractor for the American embassy, the CIA agent who's misplaced something he's mistaken for his heart in an affair he can't control, the Egyptian Intelligence officer hobbled by age, apathy and disdain, or the catalyst of the crisis that will eventually unite them all - the diplomat's wife, untethered by

anything that might remotely resemble a soul. It's fertile ground, filled with failure, set against the backdrop of Middle Eastern revolution and the violent eruption of regime change. And while it is a complicated work, while it is authentic to a point, *The Cairo Affair* is missing a vital intensity at its core. For me, at least, it got sidetracked by its own ambivalence, and then stumbled into that Everyman territory and tangled itself up in attempts at redemption; the setting aight of the befouled course. A tangle it chose to stick with, unfortunately.

It's a fair book, with good plotting and solid character studies - from an author whom I suspect grew to care too deeply about his creations to allow them to be true to themselves.

Col says

Synopsis/blurb.....

Sophie Kohl is living her worst nightmare. Minutes after she confesses to her husband, a mid-level diplomat at the American embassy in Hungary, that she had an affair while they were in Cairo, he is shot in the head and killed.

Stan Bertolli, a Cairo-based CIA agent, has fielded his share of midnight calls. But his heart skips a beat when he hears the voice of the only woman he ever truly loved, calling to ask why her husband has been assassinated.

Omar Halawi has worked in Egyptian intelligence for years, and he knows how to play the game. Foreign agents pass him occasional information, he returns the favour, and everyone's happy. But the murder of a diplomat in Hungary has ripples all the way to Cairo, and Omar must follow the fall-out wherever it leads.

American analyst Jibril Aziz knows more about Stumbler, a covert operation rejected by the CIA, than anyone. So when it appears someone else has obtained a copy of the blueprints, Jibril alone knows the danger it represents.

As these players converge in Cairo in *The Cairo Affair*, Olen Steinhauer's masterful manipulations slowly unveil a portrait of a marriage, a jigsaw puzzle of loyalty and betrayal, against a dangerous world of political games where allegiances are never clear and outcomes are never guaranteed.

My take.....

I have previously read and enjoyed a couple of the author's earlier books back in the middle of 2011 – *The Istanbul Variations* and *Victory Square*, so was looking forward to catching up with his latest offering. Both of those books concerned Eastern Europe in the aftermath of WW2 and the Cold War. *The Cairo Affair* has a more contemporary feel with events concerning the Arab Spring in 2011, particularly with regard to Libya.

Difficult to decide what to put into a review and what to leave out, without basically re-hashing the synopsis above. The narrative jumps between two timelines; the early 90's and 2011. The delivery of events is presented from the perspective of several of the main players within the book; an approach which worked for me. I was reminded of a recent read – *Penance* by Dan O'Shea where a similar construction paid off.

A few bullet points thenEgypt, Libya, Langley, Budapest, 2011, Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats, 1991, America, desert, marriage, honeymoon, affair, diplomacy, intelligence services, police – both secret and other, heritage, freedom, loyalty, money, secrets, surveillance, Mubarak, Gaddafi, assassin, death, politics, plans, plots, truth, lies, trust, manipulation, cooperation, relationships, family, betrayal, revenge, poetry and much more.

A few more bullet points and a verdict Interesting, enjoyable, clever, intelligent, stunning, entertaining, educational, informative, eye-opening, satisfying and amazing.

Well-fleshed characters – not all of them likeable and great detail, the plot and the premise for “Stumbler”, makes you wonder whether Steinhauer has his own mole working inside Langley.

Time to dust off his other books.

5 from 5

Accessed via Net Galley. In the UK – The Cairo Affair was released last month.

Cynthia says

I was disappointed with “Cairo Affair” though it had lots of great parts it also lagged in many sections. The topic and setting is something that appeals to me...undercover intelligence in exotic settings. Most of the action as you can tell from the title takes place in Cairo but those events have a profound impact on the politics mostly of the Baltic area and have their roots in the past both the Baltic’s and in the past of a young married couple. Emmett and Sophie are in love and have been for twenty plus years. They’re also idealists.

Shifting principles and changing world events are one of the main themes in “Cairo”. Unfortunately so are shifting loyalties and that’s where the main conflict arises with deadly results. As always in undercover work who to trust is always in debate and if you choose incorrectly there are consequences. Even those who don’t spy for a living can become collateral damage...families can be in as much jeopardy as the spy. The problem with “Cairo Affair” is that the chase scenes go on for too long and the suspense is drawn out for forever, the crosses and double crosses are too elaborate.

Thank you to the publishers for providing an advance readers copy.
