



The Strivers' Row Spy

Jason Overstreet

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Stunning, suspenseful, and unforgettably evocative, Jason Overstreet's debut novel glitters with the vibrant dreams and dangerous promise of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, as one man crosses the perilous lines between the law, loyalty, and deadly lies...

For college graduate Sidney Temple, the Roaring Twenties bring opportunities even members of his accomplished black bourgeois family couldn't have imagined. His impulsive marriage to independent artist Loretta is a happiness he never thought he'd find. And when he's tapped by J. Edgar Hoover to be the FBI's first African-American agent, he sees a once-in-a-lifetime chance to secure real justice.

Instead of providing evidence against Marcus Garvey, prominent head of the "dangerously radical" back-to-Africa movement, Sidney uses his unexpected knack for deception and undercover work to thwart the Bureau's biased investigation. And by giving renowned leader W. E. B. Du Bois insider information, Sidney gambles on change that could mean a fair destiny for all Americans...

But the higher Sidney and Loretta climb in Harlem's most influential and glamorous circles, the more dangerous the stakes. An unexpected friendship and a wrenching personal tragedy threaten to shatter Loretta's innocent trust in her husband—and turn his double life into a fast-closing trap. For Sidney, ultimately squeezed between the Bureau and one too many ruthless factions, the price of escape could be heartbreak and betrayal no amount of skill can help him survive.

The Strivers' Row Spy Details

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From Reader Review The Strivers' Row Spy for online ebook

Donna Siebold says

The premise of this book really sounded intriguing, an early black F.B.I. agent is hired to spy on Marcus Garvey, a black Jamaican who is trying to rally American blacks. He wants to keep the black and white societies separate and thinks blacks can only reach their potential by segregating themselves from the whites. He wants to do this by relocating the entire black population to Africa.

His fund-raising methods are not on the up-and-up and if you don't follow his lead he spurns you and may even have you physically beaten.

Our stalwart hero, Sidney, is a fresh college graduate. He has a master's degree in engineering and Hoover hires him to infiltrate Garvey's inner circle. Something no one else has been able to do because they are all white.

Sidney appears to be apolitical but he is actually a strong supporter of W.E.B. du Bois. Hoover has found another black agent to spy on duBois. Sidney begins living a double life. No one knows he is with the F.B.I. (not even his beloved wife), he is trying to pin down the actions of Garvey without revealing himself. Meanwhile he is also sending secret notes to duBois advising him of the spy Hoover has in his midst.

We hear details about the charming life Sidney and his wife lead in Harlem. We see the actions of duBois presented in a supportive and positive light and those of Garvey present a darker presence.

Ultimately Sidney's ruse is discovered and an attempt is made to blackmail him into killing Garvey. When he won't cooperate these men reveal his secret life to Sidney's wife. She leaves him and goes to Paris with a friend. It takes some doing but Sidney is able to make an escape from the blackmailers and plans to follow his wife. However, they find him! Sidney manages to overcome the four men and escape to Paris where he finds his wife and learns she is pregnant with twins.

See, it sounds interesting, sadly the execution does not live up to the idea. The writing is a bad parody of a hard-boiled detective story. The language is stilted and repetitive. Sidney's skills are astonishing - having never touched a gun in his life - manages to kill six people by the end of the story - and them all men with guns! I was strongly disappointed in this book.

Erik Deckers says

Striver's Row Spy is a great first novel that not only entertained, but I learned a lot from it as well. I remember learning some of the names and events in school, but it was interesting to see them explained and experienced first hand. I found myself doing a lot of online research and found that several of the characters were based on real people.

This is a definite must read for anyone who enjoys spy thrillers or wants to learn about African-American history in the early 1900s. I can't wait to read more about Sidney Temple and Jason Overstreet's work.

Evaine says

Well, I tried.

I got almost 1/3rd of the way in on *The Strivers' Row Spy* before calling it quits. Life is too short and my TBR pile too high to continue reading a book that was only making me sigh in annoyance and wish I was doing something else other than reading.

I had high hopes too. It started with a great cover. I mean, good God, this is a gorgeous cover. It continued with a setting of a time period I like to read and the blurb made the story sound like it would be intriguing and exciting and I might even learn a few things. And, to keep all those diverse writing warriors happy, it's a story about POC and written by an MOC.

Well, a history book couldn't have been more dry.

The main character of Sidney Temple never came alive for me as more than a pedantic, boring, smug and supercilious young man. I never felt any connection or empathy or even interest in what he was doing, and I think that was because he never evinced any enthusiasm. All so bland and matter of fact. Often his conversations with the other characters became lectures. People don't really talk that way, I hope, because OMG, YAWN!! I felt as if I was being lectured and told, page after page. Show, don't tell, does not apply here.

So, I DNFed. And I feel a little guilty because I very seldom give up on a book, but again... Life is too short and the TBR pile is too big!

Kathleen Gray says

This is a really interesting book not least because while the era is familiar, the setting is not one we've seen much of in literature. Sidney is a fascinating character to take this journey; I enjoyed the details of his personal history and family as well as his interactions with real people. Thanks to Netgalley for the ARC- this is a well written historical novel which allowed me to explore something I was not familiar with. You will like this if you are interested in the 1920s, historical fiction, or just a good read. Thumbs up!

Yolanda Gore says

When I first read the synopsis of this books months ago, I immediately added it to my list of books to read because I'm a lover of Historical Fiction. I love giving new authors a chance because soon I'll be a new author and I want readers to give me a chance. Jason Overstreet proved that I made the right choice. The book started off slow, but it soon took off and had me wondering what was going to happen next. He did a great job of developing each character and showing the dimensions of each. I gave this book four stars and can't wait to read his next novel.

Andrea says

I won this book through the Goodreads First Reads Program in exchange for an unbiased review.

I read this book to learn about 1920's USA, the fledgling FBI and race relations at the time, and era I knew very little about. Sidney Temple was an interesting character, one who the reader becomes attached to quickly and eagerly wants to know how things turn out, whether it be with his job as one of the only black agents working under Hoover, or with his wife Loretta who was another wonderful character.

It doesn't have the pacing of many other spy novels, because well, it is a real spy story. Spies like James Bond don't exist, and if they do, they don't last very long. It is about patience and determination and finding a way to be in the right place in the right time. Things only start to unravel when the mysterious Timekeeper tries to up the pace a bit, at which point things get very exciting indeed.

Rather, this is a book not only about the big things, the battle between Du Bois and Garvey, and the Bureau's attempt to stop them both, but also about the little things. Loretta and Sidney getting kicked out of the theater, Sidney getting pulled over by the police for driving in the wrong direction at the wrong time of day, but also the moments where race didn't matter, such as Loretta's birthday party, where art mattered more than the colour of one's skin.

A very enjoyable and educational read.

Crittermom says

The Strivers' Row Spy is an incredible debut novel. Jason Overstreet skillfully exposes readers to a frequently forgotten part of African American history - the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and the push for civil rights by two very different charismatic leaders W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. The Strivers' Row Spy is fiction, but its setting, environment and many of its characters did exist. Jason Overstreet brings history to life in a way that entrances readers, encouraging them to ask questions and dig deeper - making the novel ideal for young adults and book discussion groups.

In a country where racism is the norm and the government fears anything that hints of communism, Sidney Temple is an ideal find for J Edgar Hoover - an apparently apolitical African American college graduate. When he is chosen to become the first African American FBI agent, he feels honored. Then he realizes that he is to be used to gain information on the "radical" civil rights leaders, Marcus Garvey leading the "Back to Africa" movement and W.E.B. Du Bois. The latter, a man Sidney greatly respects. Unable to share his true work with his beloved wife Loretta, Sidney struggles between doing what is right and following the Bureau's biased instructions. The fine line he walks places him in more danger than he ever imagined.

Jason Overstreet's debut novel is not a mystery in the traditional sense, but I believe that fans of historical fiction and period novels will be very impressed.

5/5

I received a copy of The Strivers' Row Spy from the publisher and netgalley.com in exchange for an honest review.

Carol Kean says

Jason Overstreet's debut novel "The Strivers' Row Spy" has inspired me to do a lot more research on real-life characters who come to life in historical fiction. Rare is the book that opens so many doors and makes me so eager to learn more about a time and place, the movers and shakers and people who defined an era.

Middlebury College, 1919. Only two black men have earned diplomas. "Momma had saved up for Lord knows how long" for Sidney Temple's graduation gift, shiny, black patent leather shoes. For years she's been "scrubbing other families' homes, cooking for and raising their children," but at age 25, with a degree in civil engineering, Sidney resolves, "I would see to it that she wouldn't have to do that anymore."

Much sooner than expected, Sidney is buying expensive new suits, driving a car in New York City at a time when hardly anyone could afford to own a car, throwing parties for his beloved wife Loretta and meeting her friends in the art world, and living in a beautiful home with security on Striver's Row in Harlem.

"Harlem was quickly becoming the epicenter for colored politics--perhaps throughout the world," Sidney narrates. Strivers' Row was an aristocratic area in West Harlem, attracting well-paid professionals, aka strivers. "The colored folk who lived there had supposedly 'made it.' In fact, most were involved in the fields of law, medicine, the arts, and even architecture. I was likely the only government spy."

Sidney's occupation as an FBI agent for a young J. Edgar Hoover puts him in contact with some of the most fascinating people in U.S. history, from Jamaican-born poet Claude McKay to W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, "the fiery little man" who tried to start a Black Star Line to Africa to remove America's colored people, descendants of slavery, to a new country in Africa where they'd be free of white dominance. That sounds like a plan the Ku Klux Klan would support, and once the FBI set out to take down Garvey, he did indeed stir up even more controversy by meeting with KKK leaders.

Sidney's job is to take advantage of his skin color and get close to Garvey, offering his civil engineering skills while secretly reporting to Hoover. Little does Hoover know that Sidney is a great admirer of W.E.B. Du Bois, and that whenever Du Bois is targeted, Sidney writes anonymous letters to tip him off.

His secret life comes with dangers, of course, one of them being what his wife might do if she learned the real reason her husband won't talk about his job or allow a phone inside their home. Other threats, like attempted assaults from armed men, are easier for Sidney to ward off. Sidney's aversion to murder is one of many good qualities he manifests. He's the most devoted, supportive and loving husband, but his career may put his wife in jeopardy.

Tension, conflict, and hard choices confront him at every turn. Sidney faces an order to assassinate someone. Does he end up killing anyone, even in self defense? The violence that comes with his line of work is bound to change him. How does an honest man keep up so many pretenses, and what happens if an adversary blows his cover?

The prose is packed full of historical incidents, names, and descriptions. Fans of the thriller genre might feel the pace isn't fast enough, but fans of historical fiction could hardly ask for more. The climax is as tense and

brutal as any thriller reader could wish.

The ending is a lovely but bittersweet surprise. The future Sidney envisioned for himself and his family in America is ripped away from him, but for the rest of America, things are looking up. No more talk of shipping all the Blacks back to Africa, united as one nation under Marcus "the Emperor" Garvey. The NAACP under Du Bois is making strides, no thanks to the FBI, but thanks to people like Sidney, who would sacrifice so much for the good of all his people.

I learned so much from this novel that none of my history teachers ever mentioned. We've all heard of W.E.B. Du Bois but how many of know about Marcus Garvey? Overstreet's novel inspired me to spend hours online, learning more. I've added several nonfiction titles to my Kindle. One author says if Garvey had accomplished his dream of getting the African diaspora to leave the United States and Europe, uniting them in their own nation in Liberia, Garvey would have been as despotic as Idi Amin. I still haven't read enough to find out how crazy or dangerous Garvey was, but his grandson recently asked President Obama to grant a posthumous pardon to clear Garvey's name of mail-fraud. Was Garvey framed and unjustly imprisoned? His red-green-black flag has been brought back. Watch for it in news photos of Black Lives Matter events.

How many Americans know the fascinating history of a little nation called Liberia? I can only hope Jason Overstreet will make it the focus of a future novel. If he doesn't, I might have to drag memories out of my son-in-law, who fled Monrovia during the Charles Taylor takeover, spent three years in a refugee camp in Ghana, found his way to America, and now has a degree in engineering, a good job, a home, and a family--in America--not Liberia. Why was there no exodus from the United States to young nation in Africa that promised economic opportunities, abundant natural resources, and freedom from white majority rule? History teachers, start with a novel like "The Strivers Row," and set your students on fire with the desire to learn more.

This review doesn't even begin to cover the political climate, race relations, segregation, and the sheer excitement of 1920s Harlem. I absolutely love all the references to jazz (my son Miles is a jazz bassist in Chicago), the Cotton Club, and the aspiring musician Peavine, a minor character who plays a major role in one of Sidney's most daring and dangerous plots.

My Kindle is packed with lines I highlighted, but for a book review, there's room only to say, "Trust me. You will love this."

Note: Thanks to NetGalley for an ARC of this novel.

Lexxi Kitty says

I received an ARC of this book from NetGalley, Dafina, and Kensington Books exchange for an honest review.

This is both the author's first book (as far as I can tell) and therefore my first book that I've read by him (that's the both part – first book (written by him; read by me)).

I'll start off with something that I normally put at the end, or nearish the end, the rating. Under my long ago and not currently active rating scheme, used pre-web based book cataloging by me, I would have rated this book somewhere between 3.74 and 3.84. I am uncertain how that actually corresponds to my current rating

scheme, but, somewhere around 4 stars.

Two things before I move into a more detailed review; women and 'roaring twenties'/time in general. I put that discussion under spoiler tag, not because there is anything spoiler-y about it, but because I kind of lost whatever point I was attempting to make, and so that section is boring. Boiled down – for the most part the book is focused on the male actors in this 'Roaring '20s Harlem Renaissance', though there were a few 'powerful' women who make brief appearances; other than a few mentions of prohibition, and a few mentions of how people are flocking to the area, many of them arty, the Roaring Twenties/Harlem Renaissance part was kind of thin.

(view spoiler)

So, book.

During a college graduation ceremony, while Sidney is actually in his graduation robes and climbing some stairs, some man approaches Sidney and thrusts a card at him (I'm wording this wrong) and indicates that the BOI, Bureau of Investigation might be interested in hiring Sidney – or at least in interviewing him. If interested, call the number on the card. And so begins Sidney's slide into the undercover world.

Three things to note – BOI – the description for the book is slightly misleading, specifically the 'And when he's tapped by J. Edgar Hoover to be the FBI's first African-American agent': 1) the BOI did not become the FBI until 1935; 2) Sidney is not the first African-American agent hired by the BOI in the book (the first in real life and in the book is mentioned in the book, and plays a small role – James Wormley Jones – and Jones is described, on Wikipedia, with a task similar to the one he has in this book, and the one Sidney is given – to infiltrate the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) under the leadership of Marcus Garvey – and Jones actions lead to some similar results in RL and in the book); 3) Hoover did not become head of the BOI until 1924, 5 years after the start of this book here (the guy who preceded Hoover, William J. Burns, wasn't even in office as the head of the BOI by the start of this book (he became the head in 1921; a guy named William J. Flynn was the head when Sidney was hired by the BOI, he was in office from 1919 to 1921 – it is possible the guy before him was actually in charge at the start of this book, since Flynn didn't start until July of 1919, though the book did mention that the guy Sidney talked with was just getting appointed to be the director – heh, one of the driving forces in this book, and for Hoover, was the bombing of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's house – something that Flynn was brought in as director to investigate; Hoover, though, was with the BOI in 1919, and a new division head – he was head of the new General Intelligence Division).

Real life Hoover was tasked with monitoring and disrupting the work of domestic radicals. And his "Targets during this period included Marcus Garvey, Rose Pastor Stokes and Cyril Briggs, Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berman; and future Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter who, Hoover maintained, was "the most dangerous man in the United States". I mention all this because Sidney, in this book, is tasked with monitoring three people – Marcus Garvey (UNIA), James Weldon Johnson (NAACP), and Max Eastman (and indirectly, W.E.B. Du Bois of the NAACP)).

I got distracted by history there, looking up the real life history of the time. Hmms. Dr. James Eason is also a real life figure, member of the UNIA – had a similar end story as to the one in the book.

shakes self Right sorry.

This was/is a quite interesting undercover story about a time and place that I knew relatively little about – specifically the time and place of African Americans during the 1920s. There were both times of great ‘sinking’ into the scene, of feeling it, while other times things seemed more surface, more remote/removed from the action. And a few cases where things were just way too rushed.

Only read the spoiler after reading the book (view spoiler)

Overall I enjoyed the book and look forward to reading the next book by this author.

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ArtBooksLife Denise D Cooper says

This book put me in the time where Dubois and Garvey really seemed alive and I had to choose a team and my team was family at the end. I loved this journey.

Stefanie Hughes says

Great insight into Garvey and Du Bois position on race in America in the 1920s; very informative and interesting. I was expecting more action for a "spy" novel, but this is a more realistic portrayal (more patience), so the plot dragged some. I kept forgetting that it was set in the 20s because it lacked ambience and how exciting Harlem must have been during that period which garnered the four-star rating. I felt like it could have been set anywhere which was a little disappointing. Still, a look into historical perspectives on race that does not receive its due attention, and a timely novel considering contemporary racial issues in America. This is a great one for book clubs.

African Americans on the Move Book Club says

Jason Overstreet's *The Strivers' Row Spy* is a must read. Period. The book is written with so much detail that the reader feels as though he or she is right in the midst of the plot with the main character Sidney Temple. Jason Overstreet places the reader in an emotional sync with Sidney Temple and doesn't ease up. Right from the beginning of the novel till the end Overstreet keeps the language consistent and creates the mood and feeling of the 20's. The feel of racial tension, the chill of the USA during the communism scare, and the thrill of the possibilities of the Harlem Renaissance were all colliding in this novel. Overstreet makes history seem sexy. He creates an aura of respect and reverence for W.E.B. Du Bois and creates the air of power and strength for Marcus Garvey. I was constantly fearful for Sidney Temple as he

placed his life in harms' way to protect what he believed was worth dying for – an integrated America. The history of African descendants is rich in this novel. Overstreet drops several knowledge bombs on his readers. He incorporates real artists and real works into his novel. These allusions mix nicely with the purpose and tone of the novel and give it a realistic semblance. He even goes the extra mile by adding Claude McKay into the storyline and plot. It was brilliant.

Personally, I believe this book should be inserted into every curriculum at every school in the U.S., maybe in the world. Overstreet perfectly captures the confusion and the struggle of the Negro in America. The overarching questions are real. What do they do for equality? Is leaving America the only real way to achieve respect and freedom for coloreds? Although this book is set in the 20's, it asks many questions that are still worth asking today. And I believe that was the point of the novel.

Where are the intellectual African American heroes of today?

Jerrel Stills

AAMBC Reviewer

Cin says

This novel is incredible. I read more about African American history due to this novel. Definitely the kind of books which make readers dig deeper. Very well written and enlightening. I enjoyed reading this novel and would recommend others to read it.

I received a free hard copy of this book from the Goodreads First Reads program. Thanks a lot!

Liz says

I won a copy of this book in a Goodreads giveaway.

This is an enlightening book. It presents a fascinating story of a young black college graduate hired to investigate the fledgling NAACP and the Marcus Garvey/W.E.B. DuBois feud. It has a well written main character, Sidney Temple, and a number of interesting secondary characters. The action is tense and fast paced. The locations are realistic. The historical context is engrossing.

Although a fictional novel, it has the sense of living history and I enjoyed it.

Nandi Crawford says

I know so much about Marcus Garvey from my parents who hail from the Caribbean and Panama. My mom spoke on how as kids during the 30s, they had the UNIA money and would play with it, call is "funny money". She said the adults wanted very much to return to Africa. Then, my father and uncle spoke about him with reverence. My uncle even had a picture of him on his wall at his place. This story is a fictional account of a man recruited out of college to be a spy for the Bureau of Investigation(the forerunner to the FBI); and to spy on Marcus Garvey, who had his movement in Harlem and was attracting many followers. Believing he was doing the right thing to help "the race", he does it. They ask him to be covert in his dealings and have him set up an engineering practice in Harlem. For a while, he does well. He even gets to meet and get close to Garvey, all the while the Bureau puts pressure on him to find dirt that will put Garvey

under. When he doesn't find anything, he is then approached by another outfit that wants Garvey dead and threatens to out him to his family, he tries to ignore but the bricks come crashing down and he is in the race of his vey life.
