

The City of Lights and Shadows

Alan Furst's ninth historical espionage novel is coming out this month. Once again, his characters have found their way to Paris.

By Carol Berens

Oh, for a time when your enemy was known and issues were clear and easy to understand. Today, World War II is talked about in such terms. But what was it like when the outcome and players' sides were not known?

Set in the shadows and confusion of the beginning years of WWII, Alan Furst's books trace the battle between good and evil through the anonymous, everyday people whose circumstance, if not conviction, enmesh them in war. Seldom the world-weary espionage professional seeking adventure, his characters find their world overrun by competing armies and political whims.

Somehow or other, however, they always find their way to Paris. Furst and his wife are in Paris now, the city he loves and where he hopes to buy an apartment. Since the early 1990's when they returned from a six-year Paris stint, they have lived in Sag Harbor, New York, on Long Island. A native New Yorker who grew up on the Upper West Side, Alan Furst now writes in a converted 1930's garage with a brick floor and terrace that looks out onto a garden.

I interviewed him on a crisp, sunny winter day in Southampton, soon after he submitted the manuscript for his latest book, *The Foreign Correspondent*, to his publisher, Random House.

In this new book, Italian émigrés flee Mussolini in 1939 and seek safety in the hotels and cafes of Paris while working on underground newspapers to support the nascent Italian resistance.

Furst is a writer, first and foremost, although commercial success was elusive. Critically well-received, his books were out of print until the rave reviews, especially in the New York press, for the sixth in this series, *Kingdom of Shadows*, in 2001. (All have since been reprinted.) For many years he kept afloat

In fact he believes his writing improves with his need to type and retype and retype as he revises. With computers, he says, "people generally move paragraphs around."

He first turned to writing historical espionage novels after traveling on the Danube River for an article in *Esquire*. This river wends its way through Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, and Austria—the part of Europe that plays an important role in his novels today.

His meticulous accounting and intuitive understanding of European sensibilities and

my eternal godfather. He established the idea of novels of intrigue about the political life in Europe seen from a neutral point of view.

It's impossible to read his books without asking yourself, 'what would I have done?'

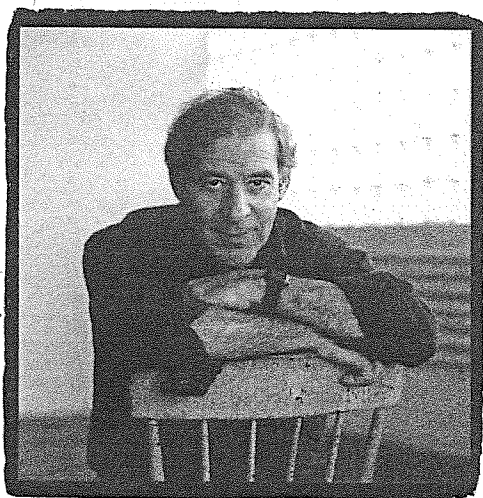
I wrote an homage, a first paragraph that was a complete Ambler paragraph. It was just meant to honor him." In his latest book, there's a scene with a man "writing on yellow paper with a half glass of wine." Joseph Roth. "His mentality was enormously important to the era." In *Paris*, Furst likes to give interviews in the Hotel Tourmon where Roth used to stay. The saga of those dark days in obscure European corners starts with *Night Soldiers* (1988), set in Bulgaria with stops in Russia, Spain, and of course, Paris. Each subsequent book—the ninth arrives this month—tells the stories of fictional characters with a backdrop of actual events: the upper class Hungarian who becomes a spy to aid resistance groups; the French filmmaker who works for the German-controlled French film industry and radios coded messages from Parisian attics; the Polish captain who smuggles the country's gold supplies out of Poland as the Nazis advance; the Russian-trained spies who infiltrate the European countryside.

"I identify somewhat with all the heroes [in my novels], Furst says. "One woman says about the French, 'Yes we're terrible.

We like to drink wine, we like to make love, we like to stay up all night and talk about the world. We should all be executed immediately.' I put that in her mouth because I like her spirit."

And what about the French during the war? He points to the complexity of their response. "They really were broken by WWI. They really couldn't mount an effort again. They were not cowards at all but were really crushed. In 1939, there was no family that didn't have a woman in black who was a widow, no family who didn't have somebody with black lungs from gas. Plus, they had a terribly corrupt political situation. America has been cruel about that."

It's impossible to read Furst's books without asking yourself, 'what would I have done?' When asked, his response was quick, "I would have joined the resistance and been killed almost immediately!" He laughed, but was entirely serious. "It's obvious. I would have all the wrong people in my address book. They would have come and got me and they would say talk or we'll execute you. I would have been lucky if I got to the police station." ■



Alan Furst.

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cities permeate his novels with a feeling of unease, an acute awareness of what was at stake in those crucial years between 1938 and 1942 nothing less than the demise of western culture, of old Europe.

"Every word that I ever wrote deals with the great understanding, the great intelligence, the great aesthetics, the great romance [of Europe]. And that it was destroyed. There are no Americans in my books, or occasionally an American. I'm not writing about America, I'm writing about Europe."

When asked how he does his research, the image of a scholar rummaging through long-ignored manuscripts and reveling in obscure details that find their way into his books, emerges. He reads huge amounts of contemporaneous material.

"All kinds—novels, journals, books. By people who've seen things. I never have people tell me stories. If they tell you the great story of their life, and you don't use it, you've really insulted that person horribly."

Aside from incorporating real-life details into his books, he likes to place people whom he respects or who've influenced him into the action or scenery, but subtly. Eric Ambler stands out. "He was such a great writer. He's

His intuitive understanding of European cities permeates his novels.

as a freelance journalist writing for magazines, and when he lived in Paris, a weekly column on the back page of the *International Herald Tribune* for a year.

"You should be very self-motivated to be a writer," he admonishes. "You have to get up Monday and be at your typewriter at 7:30 in the morning." Yes, he still writes on a typewriter—an IBM Selectric. (In Paris, he found a repairman who made house calls.)