

Culture

VENICE BIENNALE

Serendipity spices a surprising Biennale

VENICE

Youngest-ever curator picks 150 artists, double the total of 2 years ago

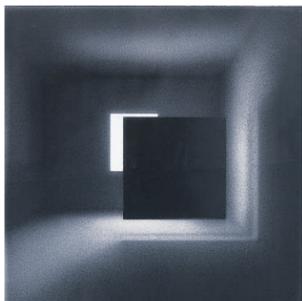
BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Sea levels may be rising and economies shrinking but the expansion of the Venice Biennale goes on regardless. Twenty years ago 53 countries were represented at the Venice event. This year there are 88 national pavilions,

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with Angola, the Bahamas, Bahrain, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Kuwait, the Maldives, Paraguay, Tuvalu and the Vatican officially appearing for the first time.

Portugal achieved a first by sailing its pavilion all the way from Lisbon and parking it outside the Giardini, or Castello Gardens. This seaborne representation takes the form of the "Trafaria Praia," a decommissioned passenger ferry boat that used to ply the waters of the Tagus, transformed over a period of



For its first-ever exhibition, the Vatican has chosen works of a group of artists representing the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

a year by Joana Vasconcelos and her team of 30 painters, seamstresses, carpenters, metalworkers and electricians into an inside-and-out work of art that will take visitors on regular excursions around St. Mark's Basin throughout the Biennale.

The exterior of the vessel has been encased from stern to prow in a wrap-around frieze of over 7,000 traditional tin-glazed, blue-and-white, hand-painted "azulejos" tiles depicting 20 kilometers, or 12 miles, of the Lisbon skyline. It is inspired by the "The Great Panorama of Lisbon" of 1700, which was itself inspired by panoramic prints of views of Venice from the 15th century onward.



"The Encyclopedic Palace," by the self-taught artist Marino Auriti, is serving as the Biennale's centerpiece. Top, "Untitled" 2012, by Marco Tirelli at the Italian Pavilion.

Below decks the main saloon has been transformed into a mysterious, dark-blue sea cave, padded from floor to ceiling with crocheted and stitched soft submarine forms, pulsating with fairy lights and gently vibrating with the ship's engine, evoking visions of the womb and of Jonah in the belly of the Whale.

The only installation in Venice to match this in size and complexity is Jacob Hashimoto's "Gas Giant" at Palazzo Querini Stampalia (through Sept. 1). He has filled the upper story of the palazzo with a beautiful, billowing, cloudlike, thread-suspended sequence of around 8,000 translucent pearly, patterned disks and panels through which visitors wander as in a delightful light-filled dream.

In the Russian Pavilion at the Giardini, the conceptual artist Vadim Zahkharov re-stages the ancient myth of Zeus's seduction of Danae in the form of a shower of gold as a comment on the materialism and greed of modern times. Visitors can observe from a gallery gilded coins tumbling from the ceiling above onto the floor below, where they form an enormous heap. Access to the lower floor is restricted to women, who are handed transparent umbrellas to protect them from the cascading largess, and invited to pick up coins and deposit them in a bucket, which is periodically hoisted up and its contents poured onto a conveyor belt to replenish the supply of coins falling from above.

Maxim Kantor was the artist chosen to represent Russia at the national pavilion in 1997 and returns to Venice with "Atlantis," an extensive exhibition of recent paintings and graphic works at Palazzo Zenobio (through Sept. 10). Here, canvases of Atlantis, disappearing beneath waves, and other apocalyptic visions act as metaphors for the crises of modern Western civilization, accompanied by Mr. Kantor's satirical graphics of historical and contemporary life and politics. The artist, who is also well-known in Russia and elsewhere as a novelist and cultural commentator, took up residence seven years ago on an island off the west coast of France. This experience has given rise to new departures in his painting in the form of striking new expressionist images of the beaches, dunes and seascapes around his new home.

Watery themes also characterize installations at the Arsenale. An improbable escalator (surely the only one in Venice) conveys visitors to the circular, domed chamber of the United Arab Emirates pavilion, where they find themselves surrounded on all sides by Mohammed Kazem's 360-degree film of heaving waves. The idea is "to experience what it is to be lost at sea, to walk on the waters unafraid," but is also remarkably effective at stimulating sensations of seasickness.

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At left, a giant rag doll with its internal organs spilling out, created by Paul McCarthy, is an exhibit at this year's Venice Biennale. Below, a nearly eight-foot, or 2.4-meter, sculpture of a blond woman in a blue suit by Charles Ray. The Biennale is often considered a barometer of the state of contemporary art.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CASEY KELBAUGH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ripples of rumination

VENICE

Talk turns serious at Biennale after frenzy of spending at auctions

BY CAROL VOGEL

They park their hulking yachts with names like "Lady Nag Nag," "Wally's Love" and "Sea Force One" on the choppy waters of the lagoon just outside the main entrance to the Venice Biennale. Every two years, scores of super-rich collectors arrive here by sea, joined by museum directors, curators, artists and auction-house experts. They come to see and be seen and to take the temperature of contemporary art today.

But amid the glamorous parties and the people-watching — celebrities like Elton John and Tilda Swinton were here, along with Milla Jovovich, who performed in a glass box atop a Byzantine-style palazzo — there was also serious talk about the contrast between this Biennale and the recent spring auctions in New York, in which Christie's sold nearly a half-billion-dollars' worth of art in just one night.

That frenzied moment of spending seemed like another world altogether compared with this year's Biennale, which opened to the public on Saturday and is about discovery and looking closely, not conspicuous consumption.

"Half the people I've seen here seem to be en route from the art fair in Hong Kong to Art Basel," said Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Yet this Biennale is anything but commercial. Massimiliano has managed to bring together a surprising and interesting group of artists in an exhibition that is both thought-provoking and engaging."

Mr. Campbell was referring to Massimiliano Gioni, the Biennale's 39-year-old artistic director, who has chosen "The Encyclopedic Palace" as the theme of this year's super-size event. It is taken from a symbol of 1950s-era Futurism — an 11-foot, or 3.3-meter, architectural model of a 136-story cylindrical skyscraper — that was created by a self-taught Italian-American artist named Marino Auriti and was intended to house all the knowledge of the world. While Auriti's dream was never realized, his model serves as the centerpiece and symbol of the exhibition.

Mr. Gioni said he chose "The Encyclopedic Palace" because it best reflects the giant scope of this international show and what he called "the impossibility of capturing the sheer enormity of the art world today."

In addition to Mr. Gioni's Biennale, which includes 158 artists, nearly double the number in the two previous ones, there are pavilions representing 88 countries. Many occupy spaces in the Giardini, the shaded gardens that have been home to the Biennale for more than a century. Others can be found in the Arsenale, the nearby medieval network of shipyards, or scattered around the city in cloisters, palazzos, medieval warehouses and disused churches. Among the first-timers is the Vatican, whose group show examines the biblical story of creation. There are countless collateral events too, like an exhibition by the artist Rudolf Stingel, who covered the Palazzo Grassi with his own Persian-inspired carpeting on which he hung his abstract and Photo Realist paintings.

By the time the Biennale ends on Nov. 24, officials estimate nearly 500,000 people will have come to see it.

But it is Mr. Gioni's show that anchors the Biennale. In two parts — a central pavilion in the Giardini and in the Arsenale — it features self-taught and outsider artists alongside superstars like Ryan Trecartin, Robert Gober and Danh Vo.

While there are paintings, drawings and sculptures dating back 100 years, there are also works made just months ago. In a circular darkened room at the entrance to the pavilion in the Giardini are 40 pages of Carl Jung's "Red Book," an illuminated manuscript on which he worked from 1914 to 1930. Off this space are galleries displaying an eclectic array of artworks including Shaker drawings, modern miniatures inspired by late-16th-century Mughal drawings by the contemporary Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi; abstract canvases by the Swedish painter and mystic Hilma af Klint and meticulously carved wild and mythical animals dating from 1870 to 1900 by the woodcarver Levi Fisher Ames.

In the central gallery there is also an enigmatic performance piece by the British-born artist Tino Sehgal, the winner of this year's Golden Lion award for best artist in the Biennale; two or three individuals sit on the floor improvising their own music, humming and chanting while responding to one another in movement and gestures.



As crowds poured into the show for the three-day invitation-only preview last week, museum curators could be seen taking pictures of the wall labels with their smartphones because there were so many artists they had never heard of.

Everyone had theories about what they were seeing and why. "It's saying that something in this old art needs to be incorporated into contemporary practices," said Leah

Dickerman, a curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Tobias Meyer, director of contemporary art at Sotheby's worldwide, called the show a "game changer."

"It finally addresses the theory of contemporary art that is based on Jung, on the unearthing of the subconscious," he explained. "The art world right now is all about Pop and global BIENNALE, PAGE 11

Angola to Vatican, new nations take a turn

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The Chilean pavilion across the way contains a large tank filled with opaque green water. Every three minutes a meticulously realized, glistening scale model in resin of the Giardini with its trees and national pavilions rises from the deep, before slowly sinking back again.

For its first-ever exhibition at the Biennale, “In Principio,” the Holy See has chosen the work of a group of artists to represent “the first eleven chapters of the Old Testament book of Genesis.”

But the combination of pictures, photographs and sculptures is so opaque and allusive, not to say elusive, as scarcely to begin to do justice to such

dramatic events.

In the Italian pavilion, also at the Arsenale, Giulio Paolini and Marco Tirelli illustrate how disciplines like mathematical perspective, which dates back to the Renaissance, can still be used today to produce vibrant and intriguing works of art. Mr. Tirelli’s extraordinarily subtle use of perspective, light and sfumato shading to produce sculptural forms on flat surfaces is displayed here in an absorbing array of his works on paper.

Massimiliano Gioni, the artistic director of the 55th Biennale, takes the overall title of his shows, “Il Palazzo Enciclopedico” (“The Encyclopedic

Palace”) — at the large Central pavilion in the Castello Gardens and the Corderie (Rope Walk) in Arsenale — from a 136-story tower designed by an amateur Italian-American architect, Marino Auriti, in the 1950s.

A model of this tower greets visitors in the entrance to the Corderie. Auriti’s hope was that this gigantic edifice, over 2,000 feet, or 600 meters, high and covering sixteen blocks, would be built in Washington as a repository of all hu-

Watery themes characterize installations at the Arsenale.

man knowledge. And in the first room of the Central Pavilion is a glass case containing Carl Gustav Jung’s “Red Book,” a compendium of visions, dreams and fantasies that he spent 16 years compiling.

At 39, Mr. Gioni is the youngest-ever curator of the event. He has chosen more than 150 artists, twice as many as were featured two years ago, and his selections look back at the art of the past 100 years as much as they explore the state of the contemporary art world. Quite a number of the artists that Mr. Gioni displays are or were, like Auriti, amateurs, and not a few of them in the grip of various obsessions and idées fixes. The overall effect is visually rich and diverting and has the virtue of being different from recent Biennales, although in its inclusion of historical and unusual pieces has echoes of the edition curated by Jean Clair in 1995.

To mention but a sample of the obsessional cases: After his death in 1992, the American Morton Bartlett was discovered to have a substantial collection of winsome, handcrafted Lolita dolls that he himself had modeled out of clay, and of photographs of them with and without their clothes on; Arthur Bispo do Rosário, a Brazilian visionary, spent five decades in a mental institution, where he created over 800 tapestries, robes and sculptures; and the Japanese commercial photographer Kohei Yoshiyuki devoted countless nights during the 1970s to snapping with infrared film voyeurs spying on couples having furtive sexual encounters.

Beyond the realms of art as psychopathology, there are a good number of serendipitous surprises. Imran Qureshi, for example, has reinvented the Mughal miniature by replacing courtly scenes and portraits with everyday figures from contemporary life in Pakistan, still executing the pictures with exquisite care using traditional gouache and gilding techniques. And the Belgian Thierry De Cordier has recently created a series of majestic paintings of mountainous seas that embody and convey a palpable sense of awe, even fear, in the face of wild nature.

55th Venice Biennale of Visual Arts. Castello Gardens, Arsenale and other venues. Through Nov. 24.



In the Russian Pavilion, Mr. Zakharov restages the myth of Zeus’s seduction of Danae in the form of a shower of gold coins as a comment on the greed of modern times. Access to the lower floor is limited to women, who are given umbrellas to shield them from the cascade.

Rumination rather than commerce at Biennale

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culture and dispersing images via the Internet whereas this is about exploring the deepest sense of oneself and the genesis of art. It is the antidote to Warhol and Koons.”

In past years the scrappy raw spaces of the Arsenale seemed endless and confusing. But this year Mr. Gioni enlisted the New York architect Annabelle Selldorf to reconfigure the space into a coherent museumlike suite of galleries where visitors could see an intriguing selection of paintings, sculptures, videos and objects. There are remnants from a 200-year-old church imported from Vietnam by Mr. Vo and a lounge-like space where new videos by Mr. Trecartin — a surreal mash-up of college kids behaving badly — play continuously. The winner of this year’s Silver Lion award for a promising young artist, the Paris-based artist Camille Henrot, has a video about the history of

the universe that is shown at the beginning of the Arsenale exhibition.

The American photographer Cindy Sherman organized a section where visitors are greeted by a giant rag doll, created by Paul McCarthy, whose internal organs are spilling out. Nearby is a nearly eight-foot-tall sculpture of a blond woman in a blue suit by Charles Ray as well as photo albums by Norbert Ghisoland of early-20th-century portraits that were discovered in the family attic by his grandson in 1969.

Many of the standout pavilions were inspired by Mr. Gioni’s theme of reflecting on the past, as is the case with this year’s winning national pavilion, from Angola. Located in two floors of the Palazzo Cini Gallery at San Vio, a museum that is rarely open to the public, are walls covered with old master paintings of madonnas and saints. Beside them on the floor, for the taking, are neat piles of 24 large-format photo-

This year’s Biennale is about discovery and looking closely, not conspicuous consumption.

graphic posters by the artist Edson Chagas depicting the complex contradictions of a post-independent African metropolis.

In the Russian pavilion, the artist Vadim Zakharov created an environment based on the Greek myth of Danae, who was locked in a room by her father, a king, yet impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold. Only women are allowed in the first-floor gallery, where they are handed clear plastic umbrellas to protect them from a shower of gold coins raining down from the ceiling, and every woman was allowed to take a coin. “It’s about how money corrupts,” said Udo Kittelmann, a curator from Berlin who helped or-

ganize the pavilion, “and the hope for the future of women.”

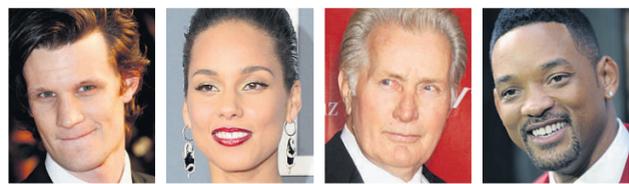
Crowds stood in rapt attention at the Romanian pavilion, where five dancers acted out artworks from past Biennales. Using performance as a vehicle for questioning identity and history, they posed as paintings by masters like Chagall, Matisse, Mondrian and Klimt. They also re-enacted installations by artists including Mona Hatoum and Yinka Shonibare as well as sculptures by figures like Rodin and Vito Acconci. “We went into the archives and looked at everything from 1895 and have included works that were political but also things we liked,” said the dancer and choreographer Manuel Pelmus, one of the artists who created the work. “It’s our way of writing our own history.”

ONLINE: MORE VIEWS OF THE BIENNALE

For a slide show of photographs of the event, see global.nytimes.com/art

PEOPLE

“Slave Labor (Bunting Boy),” by the graffiti artist **BANKSY**, was auctioned Sunday by the Sincura Group in London for over £750,000, or about \$1.1 million, Bloomberg News reported. The mural made its first splash in May 2012, when it appeared on a wall in the Turnpike Lane neighborhood of North London. When it was removed and put up for auction in Miami in February, neighborhood activists were outraged. Tony Baxter, director of the Sincura Group, told BBC News that he could not divulge the owner of the piece but insisted it was being sold legally.



MATT SMITH, ALICIA KEYS, MARTIN SHEEN, WILL SMITH

Somewhere, the Daleks are waving their telescopic appendages in celebration that another Doctor has been exterminated. But there is no joy among fans of “Doctor Who,” the long-running British science-fiction series, whose lead actor, **MATT SMITH**, will depart at the end of the year, BBC News said. According to the lore of “Doctor Who,” Mr. Smith is the 11th incarnation of the Doctor, and the third actor to portray the character since the series was revived in 2005. He has played the role since 2010, when he succeeded **DAVID TENNANT**. No actor (or actress) was immediately announced to play the next regeneration of the Doctor, so, as Mr. Smith suggested, let the speculation commence.

ALICIA KEYS said that she was going forward with a July 4 performance in Tel Aviv that has drawn calls from other artists to cancel as part of a larger cultural boycott of Israel. Ms. Keys is scheduled to perform as part of her first trip to Israel. But musicians like **ROGER WATERS** and writers like **ALICE WALKER** have publicly asked her cancel to protest Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians.

The actor **MARTIN SHEEN** has an upcoming role in New Mexico — that of mentor at a drama workshop for American Indian youth. The Farmington Daily-Times reported that Mr. Sheen will be in the

Navajo Nation community of Shiprock this week to work with children and adults at the drama workshop, which will produce a 45-minute video starring both Mr. Sheen and the children. (AP)

A box office era ended over the weekend, as **WILL SMITH**, once Hollywood’s most dependable summer performer, failed to draw at North American theaters. Mr. Smith’s “After Earth,” a Sony Pictures Entertainment movie that cost \$135 million to produce and \$100 million to market worldwide, earned about \$27 million from Friday to Sunday — 18 percent less than the lowest prerelease expectations.

PHOTOGRAPHS: EPA, EPA, REUTERS, EPA

An espionage insider takes on the spy genre

Red Sparrow. By Jason Matthews. 434 pages. Scribner, \$26.99. Simon & Schuster, £12.99.

BY CHARLES CUMMING

The undisputed master of spy fiction, John le Carré, worked for British intelligence for several years before the international success of his third novel, “The Spy Who Came In From the Cold,” allowed him to retire from the secret world to become a full-time writer.

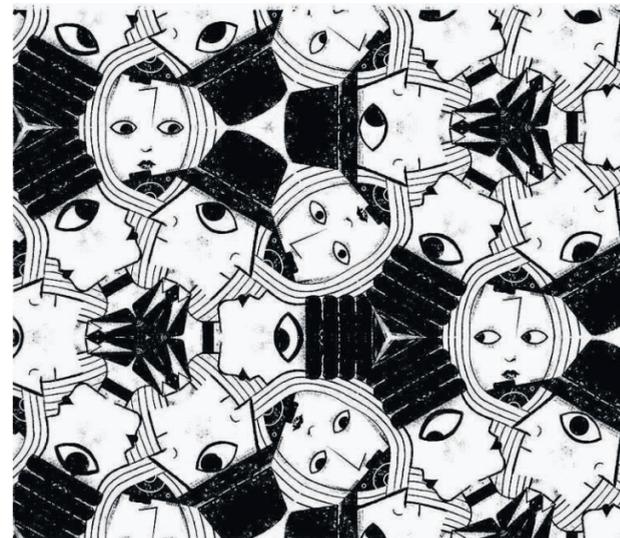
BOOK REVIEW

Le Carré’s real-life experience as a spy is not unique in the genre, at least in its British incarnation. John Buchan, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham and, of course, Ian Fleming all served as intelligence officers in the first half of the 20th century. More recently, a number of spy novels have been written by Stella Rimington, the director of M15 from 1992 to 1996.

Things are rather different on the American side of the pond. With the exception of Charles McCarty, there hasn’t been a first-rate American spy novelist who claims to have worked as an intelligence officer before turning his hand to fiction.

Until now, that is. Jason Matthews is a 33-year veteran of the C.I.A. who, according to the news release in front of me, “served in multiple overseas locations and engaged in clandestine collection of national-security intelligence.” Lord knows how he got the manuscript of “Red Sparrow” past the redacting committee at Langley, but he has turned his considerable knowledge of espionage into a startling debut.

The novel pits an ambitious, hot-headed rookie spook, Nathaniel Nash, against a gorgeous Russian intelligence officer named Dominika Egorova. The



SIMONE MASSONI

plot, which swings convincingly between Moscow, Helsinki, Athens and Washington, begins with echoes of Fleming’s “From Russia With Love” — an attractive Soviet “sparrow” is used to compromise a randy Western spy — and ends with an extended homage to the denouement of le Carré’s “Smiley’s People.” What distinguishes “Red Sparrow” from so many of its ilk is not merely Mr. Matthews’s skill as a writer. He is smart and fluent, with a terrific ear for dialogue and a gift for effective characterization. Here he describes a Russian spy chief:

“He looked to be 50 years old, with a red-veined tetrahedron for a nose. His eyes were dull and watery, his teeth



Will Smith, above, plays a general called Cypher Raige, who crashes to Earth in his spaceship with Jaden Smith, below left, his real-life son, who plays Kitai Raige onscreen.

Life lessons on Earth during a family outing

After Earth. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan.

BY MANOHLA DARGIS

A father-son encounter session tricked out with science-fiction clichés and steeped in motivational uplift, “After Earth” opens with a teenager, Kitai Raige (Jaden Smith), washing out from some kind of ranger academy. It’s a

MOVIE REVIEW

bummer because all he wants to do is please his father (Will Smith, Jaden’s father), a heroic if unfortunately named general, Cypher. Daddy Dearest has risen having honed tremendous self-control and a useful protective technique, “ghosting,” which renders him invisible to the monsters plaguing human civilization: the nonbearlike Ursa.

These shrieking creatures are introduced in one of those opening expositional heaves that filmmakers use to sketch in the who, what, when, where and why, oh why. In this case, the back story goes, after ruining Earth, humans relocated to Nova Prime, where they wear a lot of white and decorate their homes with flowing sailcloths. It’s a nautical motif that winds through the movie, which was directed by M. Night Shyamalan, who wrote the script with Gary Whitta (“The Book of Eli”) from a story by Will Smith. There’s even a nod to “Moby-Dick” shortly before Cypher and Kitai’s spaceship crashes to Earth, throwing them together for the usual and less-so life lessons, like: “Root your self in this present moment. Danger is very real. But fear is a choice.”

Casual students of Scientology may find their ears pricking up at those maxims because fear and its overcoming receive a lot of play in “Dianetics,” a foundational text by the creator of Scientology, the pulp science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. “There are five ways in which a human being reacts toward a source of danger,” he wrote in “Dianetics.” “These are also the five courses he can take on any given problem.” These options are attack, flee, avoid, neglect or succumb. Kitai would understandably like to split — 1,000 years after humans abandoned Earth,

he and Dad have landed on a now seemingly pristine, healed world teeming with cawing, clawing menace and some cute baby critters. But Cypher is made of sterner, righter, more rational stuff.

The story kicks in slowly after a debris storm downs Kitai and Cypher’s spaceship and they fall to Earth in a smashup that looks like someone decorated the set with wet toilet paper and plastic wrap. There, they trade bitter words, clench their jaws and hold back the tears amid long pauses and inert action scenes, most involving Kitai racing through the dense woods and confronting digitally rendered animals.

For the most part it is an uninteresting slog alleviated only by the occasional unintended laugh and moments of visual beauty. Mr. Shyamalan torpedoed his movies with overweening self-seriousness. But here and there he also of-



fers up an image — as with a close-up of Kitai’s face dusted with glistening snowflakes — that rises out of the torpor.

Those images are few and far between in a movie that loses its way long before Kitai reaches the belching volcano that leads to his inevitable destiny. Will Smith and his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, are producers on “After Earth,” which suggests that there was no one on the production who could really say no to him. An often affable screen presence, he spends much of the movie in a chair on the spaceship pursing his lips and watering his eyes. It’s a calamitously one-note, unperceptive performance that’s a match to that of Jaden, a pretty teenager with jumpy eyebrows whose character remains an insufferable brat. Once upon a time, Hollywood parents gave their children sports cars as gifts. These days, apparently nothing less than a big-screen vanity project will do for Junior.

on their blinis when they read how much has been revealed about their tradecraft. The author’s unrelentingly bleak depiction of the post-Soviet espionage also rings depressingly true.

This is not to say that “Red Sparrow” is perfect. I think it was a mistake to give Vladimir V. Putin a walk-on part, and some of the character names (Korchnoi, Ustinov, Delon) are oddly chosen, given their real-life antecedents. Perhaps in homage to the culinary spy-master Len Deighton, Mr. Matthews has chosen to end each chapter, save the last one, with a recipe. The technique is charming at first, but it has the effect of undermining whatever suspense the author has built up in the preceding pages.

These are minor faults, however. Although Mr. Matthews may have a rose-tinted view of the C.I.A., he is terrifically good on the turf wars and enervating bureaucracy of espionage. There are several digs at the F.B.I., which his former colleagues will cheer to the rafters.

A 33-year career as an intelligence officer would make Mr. Matthews, at a conservative estimate, a novelist in his mid-50s. That’s late to be getting into the writing game (although Raymond Chandler did publish “The Big Sleep” at the age of 51). “Red Sparrow” sometimes feels like a novel written by a man in a hurry, an impassioned former spook desperate to download everything he knows and feels about Russia and the murky world of spying. Does that mean “Red Sparrow” is a one-off and that Mr. Matthews will now disappear into the shadows? I certainly hope not.

Charles Cumming’s latest novel, “A Foreign Country,” is available in paperback.

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