

'Shame Is Like Our Mother's Milk'

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AGENTS OF INNOCENCE

A Spy Story

by David Ignatius

(W.W. Norton: \$17.95; 444 pp.)

Reviewed by David Lamb

If a reader is looking for flaws, he will have difficulty finding any in David Ignatius' first novel, "Agents of Innocence," a fast-paced spy story set in Beirut. The book is a first-rate achievement in the best tradition of Graham Greene—historically accurate and fictionally engrossing.

Like Ignatius, a former Wall Street Journal reporter and now an editor at the Washington Post, I spent a lot of time in Beirut in 1982 and 1983. Our paths crossed

often. I thought I knew the Byzantine world of Lebanon, but I must now admit that Ignatius learned it better than I and that his portrayal of the Middle East's spy apparatus adds a new dimension to my fascination with the forces that are pulling the region apart.

The novel covers the most turbulent years in Lebanon's sad history, from 1969, when Vietnam, not the Middle East, absorbed U.S. diplomatic energies, to 1984, when U.S. foreign policy in the region lay in shambles and Americans had been driven from Lebanon by suicide bombers and wild-eyed kidnapers.

Tom Rogers, an undercover CIA agent who believes that honesty and openness still count in the world of espionage, arrives in Beirut in September, 1969, to take over the Palestinian "account." With terrorism taking on international dimensions, Washington is desperate to penetrate the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and Rogers' task is to recruit a high-level operative within a Fatah group run by the Old Man, who, though not identified as such, is Yasser Arafat.

Lamb is a national correspondent for The Times based in Los Angeles.

The man Rogers targets is Jamal Ramwali, one of Arafat's rising young stars. Ramwali is 27, bright, articulate and—very much the Palestinian nationalist when he's not in bed with some diplomat's wife. But, like many Arabs, he is torn between an attraction to the West and the bonds of his Arab culture, between his hope that the Palestinians' destiny can be saved by the Americans and his awareness that America is the enemy.

When Rogers and Ramwali finally meet in a CIA safe house in Kuwait, Ramwali is uncomfortable, feeling like a traitor to his cause. Though insisting that he will never be an American agent, he passes to Rogers, with the Old Man's approval, a list of Palestinians responsible for the hijacking of a plane in Munich. He has crossed the line, and—in trying to strike a separate deal with Ramwali that will affect Washington, Israel and the Palestinians—so has Rogers.

"How can I not feel ashamed?" Ramwali asks Rogers. "Meeting with an American spy in secret in the desert. It is shameful. But don't worry. We Arabs have grown used to shame. It is like our mother's milk. We live on it."

Ignatius has done a skillful job of revealing in finest detail the inner workings of intelligence agencies in the Middle East. He doesn't lose control of the drama or the characters for a moment. Into the web of intrigue, of dealing and double-dealing, are brought the nervous, efficient Israeli spy, Yakov Levi; Samir Fares, the suave head of Lebanon's intelligence agency; Frank Hoffman, the crusty CIA station chief who has lost his innocence but not his sense of decency, and the Bombmaker, a Christian Palestinian who, for fun and money, teaches competing Lebanese factions how to rig explosive devices against each other.

The Bombmaker is a symbol of Lebanon itself; killing is acceptable if for no other reason than that it has become a way of life. The only interests that matter are self-interests, and the agenda of the foreigners in this stricken little country—the Americans,

the Europeans, the Israelis—has little to do with ending Lebanon's violence. What counts is minimizing losses to maximize intelligence efforts in order to find out what everyone else is up to. Lebanon is the playground for these international adventurers and the Lebanese are the pawns.

When Rogers tracks down the Bombmaker, his inclination is to have him killed. Hoffman cautions him that the best approach is simply to get out of the way because Lebanon is going to self-destruct anyway. Says Hoffman: "Saving the world isn't our job. We aren't priests and we aren't assassins."

Beirut was the most frightening, disturbing place I have ever been in, and Ignatius captures the flavor

of the place and its people beautifully. In the process, he carries us through an important phase of the Middle East's contemporary history, from Black September—in which the Palestinians were driven out of Jordan—to the disintegration of Lebanon and finally to the destruction of the American Embassy by terrorist explosives.

The events of Lebanon entwine Rogers' and Ramwali's lives—and seal their fates. As the Israelis track Ramwali, believing that he may be America's secret contact within the PLO, Rogers must decide what obligation a spymaster has to a recruited agent who essentially represents the other side. What he and Ramwali, the two agents of innocence, learn is that in the Middle East one pays dearly for innocence.