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BOOKS

By Jonathan Yardley
Washington Star Book EditorA Chilling
CIA NovelSpectrum
By David Wise. Viking.
370 pages. \$13.95.

David Wise

David Wise has covered the Central Intelligence Agency for two decades and has written several books about it, most notably "The Invisible Government" on which he collaborated with Thomas B. Ross. Now, in "Spectrum," he has turned his hand to fiction; the novel seems certain to set tongues wagging in the offices and hangouts of the intelligence community.

That's because Wise has combined his impressive factual knowledge of the CIA's inner workings with a bizarre conspiracy theory that contains just enough of a hint of plausibility to make the novel simmer. "Spectrum" is a roman a clef of the sort that Washington readers gobble up; it's populated by public figures in thin disguise, and it engages in fanciful embroidery upon actual events.

Of those events, the one around which the novel is constructed is the disappearance in 1965 from a

nuclear-processing plant in Western Pennsylvania of 381 pounds of "weapons-grade" uranium. The disappearance was investigated by all the appropriate government agencies and commissions, but nothing was ever found — or at least nothing was ever made public. The vanished uranium was officially listed as "Material Unaccounted For."

For Wise, this is where the fun begins. He invents a clandestine CIA domestic program called Operation Spectrum, the supposed purpose of which is to funnel uranium to Israel in order to help expand its nuclear force. The CIA sets up a Mafia cover near the nuclear-processing plant and pays workers to smuggle out small amounts of uranium. The stuff is then delivered to the Israelis, and shipped across the Atlantic for processing.

But here's the rub: Israel only needs 132 pounds of uranium, yet the CIA has swiped 381 pounds. What has happened to the remaining 249 pounds?

That is the question that comes to haunt Robert Travers. He is now, in 1981, chief of the CIA's London office. But in 1965 he was involved in — though not totally informed about — Operation Spectrum: The chief of the operation was Graham Townsend Black, then assistant to the deputy director for Plans and now director of Central Intelligence. There was bad blood between them then, and over the years their relationship has not improved; posting Travers to the London office is Black's way of isolating him from the central office in Langley, Va.

But he can't get Travers out of his hair: Watergate and the disclosures in the late 1970s of CIA undercover domestic activities disturb him greatly. The more he learns about Spectrum, the more he smells a very large and very dangerous rat. Finally he decides to make a surreptitious visit to Sen. Barry Owens, a.k.a. Gary Hart, in hopes of setting off a Senate inquiry.

"Travers had grown weary from talking, and Sen. Barry Owens seemed drained by what he had heard.

"If I understand you correctly, Mr. Travers,

Owens said slowly, 'your agency now has some 12 atomic weapons. What you are saying is that the CIA has become the world's ninth nuclear power.'

"Or," said Travers, "Towney Black has."

From this point Wise is off and running. He sets off an elaborate and carefully plotted chain of events that permits him to give the reader a guided tour of the dark side of the CIA. While Travers in London and Owens in Washington stealthily try to get to the heart of the matter — where the CIA's nuclear cache is hidden — Towner Black and his cohorts in Langley marshal the full arsenal of the agency to "eliminate" Travers and the explosive secret he carries.

It makes, on the whole, for terrific reading. Though it is difficult for the non-initiate to know where reportage ends and fiction begins, the portrait Wise paints of the CIA's potential for domestic mischief is convincing and chilling.

Yet it's not really an anti-CIA novel. Travers, who evidently speaks for Wise, strongly supports the CIA's intelligence system; the abuse of that system is what troubles him. As he puts it, more than a trifle sententiously: "I think people in this country believe in freedom and law. If we abandon those principles in the name of defending them, we subvert the very institutions we're trying to protect. We become no different from the enemy."

In his debut as a writer of thriller fiction, Wise proves himself to be no Le Carre. His characters tend toward the black and white, and too often the reader is too conscious of the actual people on whom they are based; one also senses at times that Wise wrote "Spectrum" as fiction because he didn't have enough hard evidence to write it as fact.

But "Spectrum" is several cuts above run-of-the-mill spy fiction — several cuts, to be specific, above the novels of Frederick Forsyth. It moves along smartly, it's smoothly written, and it provides all the thrills and chills that the genre demands.