

REEL TALK

Updated Thursday, June 16,
2005

*Could your next-door-neighbor be a spy? Hey, ya never know, as author **Mark Terry** reveals in this month's Reel Talk.*



Spies Like, Uh...Us.

By Mark Terry

I'm not going to write about the movie *Spies Like Us*. My taste in movies may be suspect, but it's not that bad. It's just that, hmmm, into everyone's life a few spies must fall.

I attended Magna cum Murder in October 2004, a small mystery conference held every year at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. I was there flogging my first novel, *Dirty Deeds*. One of the authors I met was Barry Eisler, who writes thrillers about a half-American, half-Japanese assassin named John Rain. Rain's specialty is killing people and making it look like death by natural causes.

In Barry's bio, it mentioned that he lived in Japan for a while working for the State Department. He was introduced by a moderator at Magna with an oblique reference to his mysterious activities in Japan, and Barry rolled his eyes and looked embarrassed. I later picked up Barry's first book and had him sign it, and we chatted about the martial arts, an interest we have in common. The book, *Rain Fall*, was terrific, and I promptly bought the second one, *Hard Rain*, though I haven't gotten around to reading it yet, tied up as I am reviewing crime novels for *The Oakland Press* in Michigan.

In Barry's latest newsletter, he commented that he is indeed coming out of the closet with his mysterious past, and that he recently applied for a change of status with his former

employer, the Central Intelligence Agency, so he could put it in his bio. I popped onto his website (www.barryeisler.com) and read the new bio, which does say that Barry worked for the CIA's Directorate of Operations. The DO group is populated by the people running around spying and running spies, rather than sitting in cubicles in Langley analyzing intelligence.

This made me think of the movie *Spy Game* (2001), starring Brad Pitt and Robert Redford. Redford is Nathan Muir, an old spy hand, somewhere high up in the bureaucracy at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. It's his last day on the job before retirement. In a series of flashbacks, we're introduced to Brad Pitt's character, Tom Bishop, an Army



sniper Redford recruited during the Vietnam War and turned into an assassin and "operations" guy. We find ourselves in 1991 with Brad Pitt breaking into a Chinese prison as a physician, getting caught and tortured. When Redford's character is informed of this unsanctioned operation and the government's intention to let Pitt's character hang, he sets up a scheme to break Pitt out of the prison—all without leaving CIA headquarters and while being investigated by his CIA brethren.

The structure of *Spy Game* is pretty crazy, with Redford's present day actions inter-cut with flashbacks to operations he and Pitt ran together, leading up to the reason Pitt was in that Chinese prison—attempting to rescue his lover, whom Redford had betrayed, convinced she was going to betray Pitt and their mission.

This movie sort of flew under the radar, considering it starred two of the better looking males on the planet, both of whom can act. Part of the genius of the movie is the way in which it mixes schemes—plots within plots within plots, all with multiple ticking clocks—and operations: the attempt to assassinate a terrorist leader, a poisoning, and a Lebanon bombing that got out of hand. It's a lot like a novel, which is probably why it appealed to me. It's not linear, it has an unusual focus on character and motivation, yet it manages to get the heart pounding and engage the

brain at the same time.

So, do real spies really look as good as Pitt and Redford? Well, check out Barry Eisler's website. Or Gayle Lynd's website (www.gaylelynds.com), an author of espionage fiction with a bit of a murky past, as well. Certainly in the movies or on TV spies look damned good—Redford and Pitt, Sean Connery, Roger Moore, Pierce Brosnan, Jennifer Garner, Matt Damon...

I recently signed a two-book contract with Midnight Ink/Llewellyn for a pair of thriller novels starring Dr. Derek Stillwater, a troubleshooter for the Department of Homeland Security and expert in biological and chemical terrorism and warfare. On the Llewellyn author questionnaire, they asked me if I knew any experts on the book's subject who might blurb my book. I commented that I did not personally know any terrorism experts (or terrorists). Having given it some thought, though, I seem to be running into spies a little more often than I would generally expect.

Many years ago, back in the late '80s, I was unsuccessfully working on an espionage novel involving the National Security Agency (NSA), the super secret group that intercepts codes and electronic transmissions. I was talking to my brother about this and he gave me a funny look and said, "You met D-----, didn't you? A---'s brother?"

A--- was my brother's first wife. And yes, I did meet D----- at their wedding way back in the late '80s. "He's an engineer," I said. "Wasn't he going to work in Colorado?"

"Yeah," my brother said. "At an NSA listening station in Colorado."

Small world. I recently called a friend with a suspicious-sounding research question. She's a toxicologist and has always been a great resource for my crime fiction. She also trains cadaver dogs—dogs that can sniff out corpses--which is why I called her. Did she have some insights on how to trick a bomb-sniffing dog? It turns out she's consulting with the Department of Homeland Security on agricultural and biological terrorism. Now, Sue's not a spy, but...

Sigh. Some days it just seems like everybody has more

interesting jobs than you. Maybe I should start being mysterious about my work history, saying, “Well, I used to work in infectious disease research and genetics, but I really can’t talk about it any more,” and give a secret little smile. It would help, naturally, if I more closely resembled Brad Pitt or Robert Redford—or even Kiefer Sutherland, if your anti-terrorism tendencies lean toward TV’s “24”. Of course, maybe that’s the perfect disguise!

Mark Terry is the author of Catfish Guru and Dirty Deeds. A freelance writer specializing in medicine, health, science and biotechnology, he disavows all knowledge of any previous employment with the federal government. Really. Visit his website at www.mark-terry.com.