



Typhoon

Charles Cumming

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"Hong Kong 1997 - only a few short months of British rule remain before the territory returns to Chinese rule. It's a febrile place. And in that claustrophobic environment of uncertainty and fear the spooks are hard at work, jostling for position and influence. So when an elderly man emerges from the seas off the New Territories, claiming to know secrets he will share only with the Governor himself, a young MI6 agent, Joe Lennox, sees an opportunity to make his reputation.

But when the old man, a high-profile Chinese professor, is spirited away in the middle of the night by Joe's superiors, in collusion with the CIA, it's clear that there's a great deal more than a young spy's career at stake. The professor, it seems, holds the key to a sinister and ambitious plan that could have awesome and catastrophic repercussions for China in the 21st century."

Typhoon Details

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Author : Charles Cumming

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From Reader Review Typhoon for online ebook

Jill Mackin says

Dragged midway thru and ended with a nice bang!

Christopher Culp says

A great read. But I am biased. The book is set primarily in Hong Kong and Shanghai, and, so, knowing both of those cities well, I am biased. Especially in Hong Kong, I remembered many of the locations in the book from when I lived there, and Cumming captured the atmosphere in both cities very nicely. Even apart from bias, the characters are interesting and you care about them, and the plot is intricate, unpredictable, and frighteningly plausible. One need not know HK or Shanghai to enjoy this book. This is well-done all-around and is a terrific spy novel with an Asian backdrop and flair. I definitely recommend to those interested in the espionage genre, especially in Asia.

Inspire me says

a book with as many intriguing issues as you want to read: Spy, China, HK handover, Xijiang independence movement instigated by CIA, intermingled with Pakistan intelligence. Life in modern shanghai, old bund, nightspot, French concession.... there's also a triangle love story, a young and flawed character. moral questions are raised and conflicts between MI6/CIA showed.

Of the two parties of the book, I like the first one the most, it's more intensive and character building more real.

Don Booty says

I recently finished Typhoon. I discovered Charles Cumming when I picked up his novel A Spy by Nature at my local library last year. I had not heard of him, and when I began reading that novel, I experienced that unique reader's thrill that comes with coming across a writer with extraordinary talent in storytelling, whose style is exceptionally lucid and engaging, and to my mind, whose insights into the human condition are astonishingly insightful for one new to the genre. Typhoon turned out to be further validation of this writer's craft, and in an interesting bit of the ironic way that "life imitates art", shortly after I finished it, the scandal in China broke with the dumping of the highly-ranked Chinese official Bo Xilai and the accusation that his wife Gu Kailai poisoned a British businessman Neil Heywood who had worked with both Chinese luminaries - a story that could very well have been penned by Mr. Cumming. His style and approach remind me of one of the greatest - in my mind - spy novelists ever, Charles McCarry, whose Tears of Autumn may be the most powerful, compelling and tragic tales of Vietnam and the Kennedy assassination ever written.

Ian says

Cumming writes well, tells a good story and gives the impression of having 'been there'. He takes his readers to the Far East in a convincing manner and gets inside his characters' heads. A fine piece of fiction that could have a lot of fact camouflaged inside it.

Jeremy says

This story starts as the British are handing over Hong Kong to the Chinese. A strange Chinese (Wang) swims to Hong Kong and manages to bluff his way to interrogation rather than repatriation. While the British agent is interrogating him the Americans manage to spirit him away. And so starts the life of the strange Typhoon conspiracy. Told as a narrative of a novelist it follows the life of Joe Lennox into Hong Kong and back to the UK and then into China itself as a SIS operative always working undercover. Ultimately the real purpose of the Typhoon operation is revealed to Joe as is the relationship between Chinese professor, the americans who spirited him away and the highly complex web of international political intrigue that leads, as always, to the insatiable thirst for oil in the West. The tale ends, more or less, with a semi successful plot to explode bombs (IED's) in cinema's and clubs in China and the prologue makes a veiled link to these events and the London Bombings known as "7/7".

This is a truly excellent book and well worth the praise heaped on it by others and Charles Cumming may well be, as the Observer has said, taking up the Le Carre mantle. This was an audio book

Elyse says

It took me about two-thirds of the book to really be intrigued by the story. Partly, that's because I'd recently read another novel (Palace Council) that's fairly heavy with historical detail. Partly, that's because Cumming's narrative style is just different from other espionage authors.

What I found somewhat tedious in the telling was the fact that so much of this novel is just matter-of-fact dialogue between the main characters. Very little actual activity or action until near the end. No doubt, that's actually a more realistic portrayal of an MI6 or CIA operative's lifestyle! Fair enough, but it's not what I usually find entertaining about these stories.

In addition, there's probably a bit of a generation gap here - I'm substantially older than the author. So I tired pretty quickly of the hip-bar-scene scenarios. May be a genuine insight into the social scene for these expats in Hong Kong and China, but I just grew weary of the CIA agent's constant sexual foraging.

All in all, an enjoyable read - just not what I expected.

Sue says

A really good spy novel - well written & intelligent.

Zhiqing says

An excellent spy novel with my hometown Shanghai as the backdrop. I just love Charles Cumming's writing, cool and elegant, and like Le Carre's books, no unrealistic happy endings. It also gave people a better understanding of the Uighur situation in China, a complicated subject matter that didn't grab much attention in the media. Overall a very well researched and enjoyable read.

Jeffrey says

The novel starts in the future with Joe Lennox a british spy asking one of his agents, the narrator, to write a story about the Typhoon operation.

The novel then drops back to the past in Hong Kong, where it all began. Joe Lennox is a NOC, an undercover agent for MI6, one of the British equivalent's for the CIA. He is undercover in Hong Kong right before the turnover of that country from Great Britain to the Chinese. Isabella, a beautiful reporter is his lover, but is unaware of his real career. Miles Coolidge is a CIA agent who is overt in what he does, and he knows what JOe Lennox's job actually is. Miles is envious of Lennox's youth and also wants Isabella. Lennox plans to propose to Isabella at one of the parties prior to the handoff.

Lennox is at dinner with Miles, Isabella and another reporter, who is a nameless reporter and narrator of the story. He also knows what Lennox does because Lennox is his handler. Lennox receives a call and is sent to interview Wang at a British safehouse. Wang is a Chinese defector who has swam from old China to Hong Kong with information about atrocities committed by the Chinese in one of the more Muslim provences. He has been captured by a British soldier. Miles figures out that something is up and using another British agent Ken Lenan, who he has turned to working against British interests, basically steals Wang from the safehouse for the purpose of bringing him back to China to run a terror network run by Miles and the Americans for the purpose of undermining the Chinese regime. The plan is codenamed Typhoon.

After Wang is whisked away, Miles learns from Kenan that Lennox plans to propose to Isabella, and Miles plans to use on of his sources to get Isabella away from Lennox by revealing that he is a spy who has been lying to her during their two year courtship. The plan works to perfection and Isabella turns to Miles.

8 years pass, and Lennox is approached by his boss about running an operation in Shanghai, where Lennox will again go undercover as having left MI6 so that he can find out if Miles is still running the Typhoon operation as several British subjects who were involved have turned up dead. Miles has been planning to turn his terror network loose upon the Olympic games in two years but wants them to stay low right now. However, once you arm a terrorist, its hard to control who they want to kill. It turns out that one of the main recruits in the terror network that Miles is running has been indoctrinated against USA interests by the Pakastani secret service and his muslim brothers, and is moving out from under Miles control with his own plan.

Lennox is eager to do go against Miles b/c Miles is married to Isabella, who lives with him in China. It all comes to a head in an ending that was telegraphed in the beginning to some extent.

Cumming's latest spy novel, a New York Times noteworthy book, is great for the setting and the characters and that spycraft did not end with the Cold War and Le Carre. these are not the novels of secret boxes, but is a world where terror is the linchpin. Although there is collateral damage in the novel and the human drama between Miles, Wang, Lennox and Isabella which forms the core of the novel is well written and convincing, I found the novel a touch antiseptic.

All of the violence takes place off screen, with people finding out about others being killed, beaten or brutalized after the fact. I think this is part of the narration because its supposed to be from the reporter. Further we never feel that Lennox is in danger. Maybe that is because of the plot devise of starting the novel, with Lennox having escaped some kind of explosion.

Nonetheless, this appears to be a more modern take on the spy novel as the action takes place in the far east and involves terrorism. Also its a conflict between Britain and the US, which is unusual.

Peter says

Charles Cumming is touted as the 'new' LeCarre, an odd description since we still have LeCarre but publicists are publicists. This novel is set in China, largely post 9-11 and leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games and captures some of the essence of 'global' attitudes. A fast paced account of a too good to be true British agent and an oh so believable American one. As far as spy stories go, this one works.

DGT says

As "Typhoon" nears its conclusion, a supersize poster of David Beckham gazes down on the scene of Shanghai's media-fuelled capitalism, "with Chinese characteristics". Charles Cumming is sometimes billed as John Le Carre's successor, though any posters in the latter's Cold War thrillers no doubt toe the party line and are torn by the wind funnelled down streets next to the Berlin Wall. The dominant colour of the cityscapes in Le Carre is grey, whereas Hong Kong, Shanghai and even Beijing are full of brand-names, multi-screened colours and 30-somethings partying into the early hours.

The tensions are similar, though: a triangle of the Chinese state and its secret police, the CIA or at least a rogue American unit and the British secret service, with a separatist Uighur minority from Xinjiang in North West China (a world away from the coastal location of a dramatic economic boom, as China "comes out") as the catalyst. Cumming catches the peculiar mix of, on the one hand, Shanghai youth and business out-doing New York to be the capital of capitalism, and, on the other hand, a pervasive fear of the one-party state and its tentacles of surveillance and arrest, followed by imprisonment or execution. Somehow, M on the Bund and the shining malls are part of the same world as torture cells in provincial cities.

The plot is to discover and then thwart an extreme project to de-stabilise parts of China and undermine Beijing's triumphant emergence onto the world stage at the Beijing Olympics. The plot is driven by a personal triangle between the British SIS agent, Joe Lennox, the CIA agent, Miles Coolidge, and an expatriate woman, Isabella, initially Joe's girlfriend, and then Miles' wife. The motivations of these three characters are not the strongest part of the novel and the scenes between them seem clichéd, though it is

always possible that Cumming is simply describing the superficial life of a cast transplanted from Spooks.

The other shortcoming of "Typhoon", is the way the story is told - through an insider journalist who writes a book about the events between 1997 and the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China and the approach of the count-down to Beijing, 2008. It is part of John Le Carre's skill that knowledge of events and motives are put together piecemeal, with some people knowing some things and not others. The telling becomes part of the story. "Typhoon" loses some of its credibility and tension because we know that the journalist knows. If there is a distinction between the thriller and the spy novel (and mostly, they overlap), it has to do with the uncertainty of knowledge. The narrative structure of "Typhoon" works against this important part of the genre.

Jeanne says

So nice to return to a reliable author after experiencing two disappointing new books by other writers that received favorable reviews but were not to my liking. Of special interest to me, having visited Hong Kong, was the account of the reversion to China. Cumming consistently tells a good story and I always come away with a history lesson.

Sloan says

Fully engaging spy thriller pairing a British spy and a journalist in a timely story about China's treatment of the Uighur population in western China. The book has a page-turner cinematic quality that kept me flying through the book nonstop.

Nancie says

In my opinion, Charles Cumming is the natural successor to John le Carre. And as wonderful as le Carre's books are, if you are either too young to remember, or lack awareness of, WWII or the Cold War, reading him has a rather untethering sensation.

Cumming's works take place in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st centuries and so if you have been paying attention at all the backdrops are familiar.

Exactly the case of Typhoon, which begins with the transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997 and continues the stories of two spies -- one CIA and one MI6 -- to the Mainland in the run up to the Beijing Olympics. Not everything is resolved in the end, but a really, really good read.
