



Assignment in Brittany

Helen MacInnes

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OCCUPIED BRITTANY, 1940...

Hearne looked at the unfamiliar watch on his wrist. Three hours ago he had joked with the red-haired pilot over a last cup of hot chocolate. Three hours ago he had stood on English earth. Three hours ago he had been Martin Hearne with 27 years of his life behind him.

Now he was Bertrand Corlay, with 26 years of another man's life reduced to headings and sub-headings in his memory. He looked down at the faded uniform which had been Corlay's, felt once more for the papers in the inside pocket.

All set. He patted the pocket of the tunic with his earth-stained hand, and smiled grimly. From now on, he would not only have to speak, but think, in French ...

Assignment in Brittany Details

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Author : Helen MacInnes

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From Reader Review Assignment in Brittany for online ebook

Lucy says

The first scenes of jumping into Brittany were used as training for parajumpers in the military. Great story!

Kristina Pasko says

I read this years ago and its characters (especially the pair brought together in a strange romance) have always remained with me. Reading it now, I better appreciate the author's perception of her time -- the uncertainty of the war's trajectory in 1942 -- and now I understand the metaphor of the ending. I feel desperate for a sequel or an epilogue to learn what happened to the main characters a few years later when the war finally ended.

Jeff Dickison says

Helen MacInnes was a major author from the 40's to the 80's. Her books were always looked forward to and were consistent best sellers. She is all but forgotten today. I read her a lot in the 60's & 70's. There is no better author of the dramatic spy novel than MacInnes. The book was published in 1940 (her second) and was made into a movie in 1942 starring a French actor whose name I cannot now recall. An Englishman parachutes into Brittany to take the place of a look-alike who has fascist tendencies. The suspense builds throughout and leads to a somewhat ambiguous ending. But remember, in 1940 the ending of the war was ambiguous. Highly recommended. If you have not read MacInnes I would recommend "Decision At Delphi", "North From Rome", and "The Salzburg Connection".

Jenna L. says

I never thought I was much of a spy/adventure reader, but I'm hooked because of Helen MacInnes. This is the third book I've read of this author and I'm sure I'll work my way through all of them....sort of like potato chips. Each of MacInnes' characters are well defined to a point where I felt personally connected with them. Suspenseful to the very end.

Anna Richland says

I am on a classic thrillers of the genre kick right now (escapism?) - these early HM books are amazing. The characters and plots and writing all superb - utterly superb - and the pacing and density of the story remind me of how writing decades ago felt more meaty than a lot of similar genre fiction now. There is just no comparison between this and most modern thrillers - this is amazing.

But the thing that is always in the back of my head is the view that MacInnes, who was there in Europe in the

1930s, and was writing these books BEFORE AND DURING WORLD WAR TWO, had of the build up and the events. Unlike today's writers, she's not coming from a place of what she's studied about the rise of fascism - she was there for it. Hiking all over Europe during the rise. Married to a spy. She was there. She obviously thought deeply about the conditions precedent and about what it takes for good people - the average person in the average town, the leader of the little town, the shopkeeper of the town, the NEIGHBOR - to turn.

She was there. If you want to know what it was like - read her books. They are far more terrifying than any horror story, because humans are the ultimate killing machine, are we not?

F says

Even though my 1967 DELL paperback copy calls this book a "haunting novel of romance and suspense" on its front cover, it is most definitely a dyed-in-the-wool spy novel. Because the copy was given to me in a box of books, I persevered and read the entire 336 pages. With the book written in 1942, I thought it was interesting that Ms. MacInnes pointed out in her introduction in the reprint of the book that after WWII, she personally met veterans who tried to track down the places described in the book. I did further research while reading the book, and found claims that the U.S. military actually used the novel to train Allied personnel who would be working covertly in German-occupied France. Ms. MacInnes' talents must have been abundant to pen a novel that was apparently so true to life for the times. However, here's fair warning, to pick the novel up as an expected romance, it's misleading. DELL must have been trying to sell more copies of the novel to claim it as a romance on the front and back covers.

Tony says

ASSIGNMENT IN BRITTANY. (1942). Helen MacInnes. ***.

MacInnes was a very popular writer of spy novels – up there with Ambler and Greene in her day. Her novels tended to be low-key, but well plotted. In this adventure, Martin Hearn, a member of one of our intelligence groups, takes on the responsibility of heading off to France to learn more about what is going on in Brittany. He has a cover: a man who looks exactly like him has just been rescued after a battle with the Axis forces. That man is Bertrand Corlay. He was a resident of a small town in Brittany, but is now out of the picture and confined to a hospital in England where he faces a long period of recovery from his battle wounds. Hearn is prepped for the job of espionage he must take on, and is parachuted into France near Corlay's home town. He is supposed to find out what the enemy is doing, and what the resistance is doing also, and feed this info back to his commander in England. It is about half-way through the war, and plans for D-Day are underway. All information is needed. Hearn goes through a lot of role playing, but has been prepped to cleverly mimic Corlay – even down to a cosmetic birth mark applied at the last meeting. Of course, there are some difficulties. The girl he was engaged to marry represents an acid test, along with the rest of his family. This sounds kind of boring, but, believe me, it isn't. Once the required information is gathered, he must get it back to England. The best way is for him to give it to his superiors in person. That presents another series of difficulties. Good plotting and good dialog make this a superior entry in the genre.

Stacy says

Good spy novel set in WWII

O Babs says

I have been re-reading Helen MacInnes novels, which were beach-reading staples as a teenager. Her work holds up very well, considering the significant changes since she wrote.

Assignment in Brittany was her second novel, set during World War II and published in 1942 -- very much of-the-moment in her day. She captures beautifully the isolation Hearne feels as he hides in occupied France and figures out what he can and cannot accomplish. The romance is a little predictable by modern standards, and the crotchety mother has become a bit of a stock figure, but these are small quibbles. Still a very good choice to take to the beach or anywhere else a pleasurable read is needed.

A note on Titan reprints. MacInnes novels are easier to find because of Titan Books, and that's nice. However their process of digitally scanning old volumes does not include any copy editing. Their editions are filled with bizarre punctuation, misspelling and downright errors, which is not so nice for the reader.

Good companions for *Assignment in Brittany* would be *Brat Farrar*, by Josephine Tey, and *Rogue Male*, by Geoffrey Household. *Brat Farrar* is also a dead ringer who sets out to take the place of a missing son and has to figure out the other man's life in context. The central character in *Rogue Male* is hiding from a menacing military presence, and his efforts to hide and gain intelligence are similar to Hearne's.

Amy Hay says

I am a huge fan of Helen MacInnes. *Assignment in Brittany* is one of her early works set during WWII. One thing I think MacInnes excels at is writing from the male perspective. Add in a tense espionage mission, a "Tale of Martin Guerre" case of assumed identity, and love and you have a story with real stakes. The uncertain ending just makes it especially poignant. Highly recommend!

Susan Harrison says

To prepare for a fiction class I recently taught, I re-read *Assignment in Brittany* which I had read back in the '70s. It was, as then, a wonderful read: good, old fashioned espionage. It says a great deal about a book when the major spy organizations in the UK made this book required reading for their agents. MacInnes' husband was in MI6, and her book was so well done that the government suspected her husband of revealing classified information to Helen. He had not (Tom Clancy had the same experience after his book *The Hunt for Red October* was published. He was called before a congressional committee to reveal how he got his submarine information. His reply: "I went to the public library.") The characters are well drawn and the situations very realistic. The book is so well written that there is tension/suspense on nearly every page. MacInnes will always have a special place in my pantheon of favorite writers. Apparently I am not alone in my love of her books. In 2013 all were reissued.

Johanna says

This was something my husband picked up at a flea market and I expected very little from it. It turned out to be an excellent, absorbing and well-paced story. And it gave a great sense of the fear and confusion in the late days of the second world war in France, where the protagonist goes undercover to gather intelligence in occupied France.

Kathryn Guare says

Oh, how I am enjoying my ramble through these old classic spy thrillers!

This is my fourth by Helen MacInnes, and what I particularly love about her is how completely she immerses the reader in the setting. Physical descriptions that are unique to the place, details of culture, history and food, particular characteristics of national/regional identity - it's like a travelogue seamlessly wrapped around the action of the plot. In this one, we get a close-up view of traditional Breton life as it was in the 1930s/40s and it has an unmistakable ring of authenticity to it.

I also appreciate how the 'old-timey' authors in the thriller genre (and a handful of contemporary ones) give themselves time to let stories and characters develop, for action and tension to build naturally. There's something that feels more mature and accomplished about that approach instead of the shoehorning of explosions, assassinations and chase scenes in the opening pages of a novel. Yes, of course, there are aspects of the writing that speak to outdated social conventions and they grate on the modern nerves (they are always chiefly related to gender roles, even when the writer is a woman), but I'm sure there's writing today that we'll roll our eyes over in 50 years so I don't subtract points for that.

The premise of the book requires some suspension of disbelief. Could a British agent really so convincingly impersonate a well-known resident of a small rural town? Oh, who cares?! It's an entertaining story and there's a nice little romantic subplot. My only beef? Damn, Helen, WTF with that ending?!

Scott Head says

Review taken from my blog, [headsfilmreviews dot com](http://headsfilmreviews.com)

Helen MacInnes was a remarkable woman. She was a Scots Presbyterian young lady of Glasgow (my mother's stomping grounds), degreed in French and German, a librarian, a classic German literature translator, a European traveler, an amateur actress and a wife of an MI6 British intelligence agent. She has a number of espionage thrillers to her name, and her second novel, *Assignment in Brittany*, reads as though she had been fully immersed in Breton culture. So realistic were her spy novels that this particular one was required reading for agents being sent to occupied France to aid the French Resistance. It gives a very finely crafted picture of the details and care that such work requires. Other books from her pen have been accused of taking nuggets of classified material from her husband's mind and incorporating them into the plot, which makes for a great dose of authenticity. Written in 1942, *Assignment in Brittany* had all the richness of a tale spun by one who'd "been there and done that."

While it seemed to get off to a rather slow start, it quickly picked up the pace and became a well-written spy-yarn and filled with rich images and suspense. The plot follows a British agent, our hero Hearne, who is discovered to be the spitting image of a guy who had been picked up wounded in a battle with Axis forces, one Bertrand Corlay. This fellow Corlay, a Frenchman from Brittany, will spend the rest of the war in the hospital. Here is an opportunity to send Hearne in his place. Hearne learns him well, his language nuances, his town, the people there, what they do and who they are. Hearne learns Corlay's business, and even had a cosmetic birthmark applied, which comes in handy later. He is going to drop in by parachute, take up the role of Corlay, and find out all info about the state of things in Brittany, and report back regularly. After all, the war effort includes a coming invasion almost two years away, so any kind of intel about the Nazis is vital intel, especially in this area where a future invasion might occur.

Can Hearne pull off the doppelgänger assignment? We learn quickly that there are things Corlay did not tell Hearne, especially once he realized why Hearne wanted to know everything about him. Would Hearn fool Corlay's own mother? His betrothed? The farm hands? His mistress that he didn't know about... More importantly, would Hearne be able to move seamlessly into the role that Corlay did not even mention, his darker side? Would you tell some stranger who looked just like you every secret you kept?

They say that if you just boldly act like you know what you are doing, you can pull off miracles. Or as Buchan wrote in *Greenmantle* about the awful Colonel von Stumm - that is, treat the Germans with a radical brazen audacity - you can pass muster as who you purport to be, despite the chinks in your armor. I loved Hearn because he did just this with great gusto. It was all or nothing with his act, and it bought a few seconds, sowed a few doubts, provoked a hesitation or two. This is a fantastic plot that moves along with just the right balance of rich detail and action.

MacInnes has the ability to craft a scene, a place, and characters. I found myself scouring maps of north-western France for some of the place-names so I could examine the land on Google Maps' street view. Besides the obvious larger cities, I discovered like so many readers, that the places are mostly fictional. That said, MacInnes' travels, familiarity with the languages and nuances of regional cultures, and her experience in Brittany gives her credible subject-matter authority. The Breton culture, its rebel attitude, its mistrust of outsiders, shine through and form good plot-moving devices. The condition of the minds and hearts of the locals is well presented.

As for writing craft, she excelled. There was a fishing village with a lurid and run-down pub called Golden Star that was so vivid I felt like I was there. I could feel the damp night and smell the mud flats. In my mind I had visualized the proprietor, a burly old salt named Louis, as soon as I had met him. It was one of those 'scenes' that seems to represent the whole book when you think back on the story as a whole.

MacInnes knew spy craft very well, and if you were sharp you picked up some good observational advice. Like how one guy was a bit too liberal with the use of cooking oil while everyone else in occupied France is scraping by and using as little as possible. That clue, combined with a few others, show that the cook might be in the pay of the enemy. Assignment in Brittany was full of practical little observations of that sort, which made it a useful training tool for men heading behind the lines. These are the details that shine.

The end of the story is frequently maligned as sentimental sap. Indeed, it resolves a sub-plot, and it is a bit sappy. But this is easily overlooked and outweighed by the rest of the story. I ended up skimming the last chapter once I knew how it resolved.

MacInnes was also staunchly pro-liberty. This is certainly a natural result of her Calvinistic worldview taught from the Presbyterian tradition of her upbringing. Such protestantism can't help but stir up a powerful

anti-tyrant and anti-statist mind, which is why the west was built by protestant thought to begin with (there's my jab at fascists, communists, heathens and lefties). Her position was refreshingly clear in many places - Hearne himself mused on the cruelties of fascism and the fools in charge of the European decline so plainly seen as modernity progressed onward. She observed, through her main character's thoughts: "There was the tragedy of it: if only they could have realized the danger while there was still time, while they were still free to carry a gun and still free to make guns for themselves. Instead, they would now find that it costs three times as much to retrieve a position as it takes to hold it."

It was a refreshingly excellent story in terms of its avoidance of cheap thrills and base filth. She wrote cleanly while leaving out no gritty details, even making known the steamy affairs of a femme fatale with skilled taste. She did not need to resort to the graphic crudeness and perverted imagery of lesser authors, she is a real writer. Indeed, my hardback edition was a used library copy from a midwestern American high school, which means nothing in today's hyper-sexualized, humanistic state schools, but through the mid-sixties, its vetted presence on the shelf meant something. So I would suggest this book to anyone interested in the subject of espionage, World War II, France, or just good thrilling stories that aren't template-tales and aren't filled with crude brain-rot. *Assignment in Brittany* was a thrilling tale with a unique plot, and gave me insights into the French condition I would not have had without. If I had to rate it with stars, 4 out of 5. For full disclosure, I did read most of this book while thoroughly enjoying a well-earned few days of vacation, which always makes a book better received. Still, I'm going to have to look for more works by MacInnes, especially of this period.

Wanda says

2018 Summer of Spies

How is it that I have never run into Helen MacInnes before this? If I ever do another reading project featuring espionage literature, I will definitely be adding more of her work to the reading list!

The premise is an unlikely one—after a WWII battle, someone notices an injured Breton man who looks just like an active English spy. Not only does this spy Hearne uncannily resemble the disabled man, but he also speaks Breton (a pretty obscure Celtic language) and has studied the culture. He spends a great deal of time interviewing the Breton fellow, learning as many details of his life in his small village as possible and then is parachuted in, to report back on Nazi activity in the area.

I have to hand it to MacInnes, she handles this rather unlikely scenario so skillfully that I soon gave up my reservations and plunged wholeheartedly into the story. It's a good, tense plot with excellent pacing. First Hearne must deal with "his" closest family and fiancée while passing off his differentness as shell shock. But it turns out that he has exchanged places with a pretty unlikeable guy and his own honourable behaviour causes others to question his real identity. Will they unmask Hearne or will they help him with his mission?

The very first thing I thought of when starting this novel was Tana French's second *Dublin Murder Squad* book, *The Likeness*, where a young detective, Cassie Maddox, is called to a murder scene. The victim is Cassie's double, using a fake identity developed by Cassie when she was undercover. Of course, Cassie gets sent into the life of the dead girl to see what she can discover. French also was able to carry off that most unlikely scenario, in my opinion, through the sheer brilliance of her writing. I'd really like to think that she maybe got her idea from Helen MacInnes.

I love finding great writers and finding links between the works of authors that I enjoy. This book was a win in both of those columns.

A.D. Morel says

With the Nazi occupation of northern France, the underground resistance is forced to sneak about in the dark. Hearne, British soldier whose French is excellent, is sent to spy as part of that resistance, and he finds help in hiding with the beautiful Anne. Danger abounds. Action, adventure, suspense -- a gripping story here, memorable in itself and for the skill with which it is told. Helen MacInnes seems to have passed from the scene, but her spy novels are well worth looking up, and this one could be best of all in my view.

Joseph Grinton says

I have been reading an old musty edition of this book, which I borrowed from a friend because it appears to be out of print. It is a spy story in which the main character impersonates a Frenchman, whom he resembles, and takes up residence at his home in Brittany. The Frenchman's mother is shortsighted and much is made of this -- unnecessarily, in my view. I am also shortsighted and I am absolutely sure that very little of the information we use to recognise people is visual. Many great stories involve some sort of implausible impersonation, of course, so it's probably best to leave that to one side and plunge headlong into occupied rural France. The author takes us there by parachute and it's an exhilarating descent. I find the way Helen MacInnes writes to be very congenial. It is without humour, which is a bit dull, but she pays close attention to all the evocative little details that bring a place to life. Reading one of her books is quite a sensual experience, which makes it especially frustrating to have to read a foetid old cast-off from a friend. But it's OK to read in the bath, especially if you can afford a liberal lacing of pungent lotions or oils. The story becomes more plausible as it develops and I enjoyed it more and more.

Stacy says

I loved that this book was written ABOUT the war DURING the war

David Bonesteel says

Helen MacInnes starts with the hoary cliché of the spy who just happens to be a dead ringer for the man he is assigned to impersonate to tell a frequently involving story that too often depends on unlikely coincidence to move the plot along. The novel is strongest when it is depicting the grim camaraderie that arises among an occupied people. I admire the way MacInnes didn't include action just for the sake of it, but nevertheless I sometimes felt that something was needed to break up the interminable tramps through the countryside. There's a sweet love story and the whole thing ends on a nicely ambiguous note.

Loretta says

I am headed to Brittany in May. So the title had me from the get go.

I loved reading about the old towns and kept my map handy. Unfortunately of course the smaller villages are imaginary.

But I mean to track down what I can. And the history of the Breton language is interesting.

A good old fashioned WW2 intrigue.
