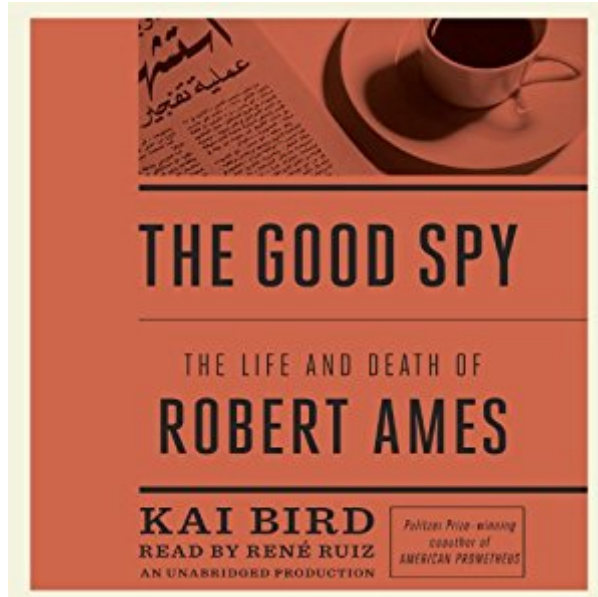


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The Good Spy: The Life And Death Of Robert Ames



Synopsis

The Good Spy is Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Kai Bird's compelling portrait of the remarkable life and death of one of the most important operatives in CIA history - a man who, had he lived, might have helped heal the rift between Arabs and the West. On April 18, 1983, a bomb exploded outside the American Embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people. The attack was a geopolitical turning point. It marked the beginning of Hezbollah as a political force, but even more important, it eliminated America's most influential and effective intelligence officer in the Middle East - CIA operative Robert Ames. What set Ames apart from his peers was his extraordinary ability to form deep, meaningful connections with key Arab intelligence figures. Some operatives relied on threats and subterfuge, but Ames worked by building friendships and emphasizing shared values - never more notably than with Yasir Arafat's charismatic intelligence chief and heir apparent Ali Hassan Salameh (aka "The Red Prince"). Ames' deepening relationship with Salameh held the potential for a lasting peace. Within a few years, though, both men were killed by assassins, and America's relations with the Arab world began heading down a path that culminated in 9/11, the War on Terror, and the current fog of mistrust. Bird, who as a child lived in the Beirut Embassy and knew Ames as a neighbor when he was 12 years old, spent years researching The Good Spy. Not only does the book draw on hours of interviews with Ames' widow, and quotes from hundreds of Ames' private letters, it's woven from interviews with scores of current and former American, Israeli, and Palestinian intelligence officers as well as other players in the Middle East "Great Game". What emerges is a masterpiece-level narrative of the making of a CIA officer, a uniquely insightful history of 20th-century conflict in the Middle East, and an absorbing hour-by-hour account of the Beirut Embassy bombing. Even more impressive, Bird draws on his reporter's skills to deliver a full dossier on the bombers and expose the shocking truth of where the attack's mastermind resides today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a difficult book to review because it will encourage reactions that have nothing to do with the book's material at all, but rather how a reader applies this knowledge to the present day. So it's easy to go off on tangents, which I couldn't avoid as I wrote this review. The fact that it did connect so well to the present day is a large part of why it deserves five stars. This is not dusty history - this had a direct bearing on who we are today. I would consider this less a biography of Robert Ames than it is using the story of Ames to tell the much larger story of the Mid-East in the 1970s-80s, an era we've basically forgotten. There were lessons that we SHOULD have learned from that time, but we chose other directions. Ames' story is intriguing and nuanced - he was navigating the difficult backrooms of diplomacy, trying to build relationships with high-level PLO officials that he was actually barred from talking with (unless they were paid 'agents' of the CIA). At the same time, Israel intelligence was actively opposed to these contacts, and was essentially trying to subvert any US moves toward normal interactions with PLO figures that Israel considered terrorists. A parallel (and this is a tangent) is Nixon's approach to China, which put the Soviet Union on its heels a little bit. Israel clearly did not want to find themselves as the lesser member of a three-party discussion. So while discussions between the PLO and the US could have helped those nations/organizations come to an understanding, that was not in Israel's interest. Readers who think history began on Sept. 12, 2001 would be well-advised to read carefully the history of Beirut in the 1980s, and some questions will be answered about how we found ourselves in the mess we're in.

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