Kingdom of Shadows: A Novel by Alan Furst

Outstanding

Penzler Pick, January 2001: The thrillers of Alan Furst usually take place in the dark days preceding World War II, but while the main participants in that war are of course portrayed, Britain, France, Germany, and the United States do not usually star in Furst's novels. He prefers instead to focus his stories on the citizens of those countries whose allegiances and roles in that particular theater of operations are much more contradictory and conflicted. Kingdom of Shadows is set in Paris during 1938 and 1939. It is unclear at that time what the fate of Hungary will be if Hitler has his way, but a small group of expatriates would like to insure that events turn out in their country's favor. Nicholas Morath is an Hungarian aristocrat who fought bravely in the Great War. He is now part owner of an advertising agency in Paris, while his uncle, Count Janos Polanyi, is a minor diplomat stationed in Paris. Polanyi calls on Nicholas to take part in missions against the Hungarian Fascists: carrying letters or bringing individuals back across the border in the course of his business trips.

As Nicholas's dinner parties, business deals, and dalliances with his mistress start to take a back seat to the escalating crisis in Europe, his tasks become more complicated, dangerous, and bewildering to him. He knows far less than the reader, who understands that his actions will have far-reaching consequences even beyond the fate of Hungary. Nicholas just does what he can without the luxury of historic hindsight. Furst has fashioned here an elegant gem that vividly portrays the city of Paris during the last peaceful days of 1938 and the menace of Hitler's ambitions in the Sudetenland and beyond. Nicholas Morath is a charismatic and sympathetic figure who will come to understand, as the war progresses, the consequences, both good and bad, of his smallest actions during that turbulent time. --Otto Penzler

My Personal Review:
Nicholas Morath is a minor Hungarian noble living a comfortable, but not quite ostentatious, life in pre WWII Paris. It seems that he has been content with running a small advertising firm and living the cafe life with a
young and vivacious Argentian mistress. But this is 1938 and dark clouds are brewing in Germany, Austria, the Sudetenland etc. Morath is called to run various errands for his tight-lipped uncle Polanyi, a true to life Hungarian count. The book chronicles these errands which become ever more dangerous.

The outstanding features of this book are severalfold. The dialogues are crisp, clean and believable. The characters are quirky but nicely sketched. Furst creates a very believable atmosphere of pre-war Europe. Everyone knows that war is coming, yet people still need to live their lives. Thus there is still a cafe society and the titled ex-pats still throw lavish parties. Meanwhile, poorer immigrants running from tyranny barely scratch out a living. Furst delivers his character to many interesting locations that are not prevalent in American fiction. Morath travels through the countryside of Hungary, Roumania and Czechoslovakia meeting up with Poles, Ukranians, Croats. One minute Morath is eating a grand banquet in an elegant eastern European chateau--the next he finds himself chained in a dank Roumanian prison.

Then there are the intrigues that Morath finds himself immersed in upon the bidding of his uncle. Morath never quite knows what the endgame is. Who is pulling the strings. How do his missions fit in the overall scheme. Therefore, the reader is also left guessing. Other reviewers have sited this as a weakness--I, on the other hand, view this as the great strength of the book. There are semi-powerful factions trying to forestall the inevitable and the puppeteers choose not to disclose to Morath how he fits into the larger puzzle. Ultimately, we all know how things turn out here. Nothing Morath and his uncle accomplish is going to save Europe from the calamity of WWII. Yet Morath and the reader are kept on edge trying to figure out what the heck is going on within his smaller universe. There are no tidy answers, because in real life there seldom are tidy little answers. This probably is not a book for someone who likes mystery and intrigue but needs to have the hero figure out all the puzzles and vanquish the badguy's with a spine-tingling final flourish. That cannot happen given the historical backdrop to this book, for we all know that no matter what Morath and Uncle Polanyi are able to accomplish--World War II is going to happen: Paris will be occupied, London will be bombed, millions will die. But that does not mean that their effort is wasted or that the book is not extremely worthwhile. For those who are comfortable with unanswered questions and filling is some of the holes themselves, I highly recommend Kingdom of Shadows.

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