

Hunt as author: a critic's appraisal

E. Howard Hunt Jr.—a.k.a. John Baxter, Gordon Davis, Robert Dietrich, David St. John and Howard Hunt—could have had a middlingly successful career as a full-time writer, though it is doubtful that he would have made any big waves either financially or artistically. Such is the conclusion after reading some of the Hunt corpus, which now, according to "Who's Who" stands at more than 40 books. Most are out of print; mainly paperbacks, they have long since been shredded, one presumes.

Hunt began writing in the early forties, and one of his first books, "Limit of Darkness" (1944), probably stemmed from his stint as a war correspondent. "Limit of Darkness" is no "The Naked and the Dead," but it is a creditable war novel of the "I-see-it" variety so popular during the war.

One of Hunt's best novels, still in print, is called "Bimini Run" (1949) and tells of a drifter and gambler who becomes involved with a rich couple who charter a boat for marlin fishing. The situation is a little reminiscent of the film "Knife in Water," the ambience is "To Have and Have Not"

and the violent ending has the hero aware that he has been used by the wife, with whom he was half in love. Implicit is a message of distrust of the wealthy, who, like the Buchanans in "The Great Gatsby," break things and then patch them up with money.

Later in his career, Hunt turned to more commercial novels of intrigue under pseudonyms with two recurring heroes—a tough C.P.A. named Steve Bently and a C.I.A. agent named Peter Ward, who runs with the Virginia horsy set when he is not foiling his Communist opposite numbers. The Peter Ward novels are rather James Bondish for their menu and brand-name dropping ("The service plates were Revere gardoons, the crystal was an opaline much favored by the Sun King's sycophants and the settings were *Vieux Paris*.") but without Fleming's E. Phillips Oppenheim plots. Drawing upon his own C.I.A. experiences (one presumes), Hunt interlards his stories with insider's detail; the world view, however, is standard cold-war Manichean. After the carnage set in motion by his efforts to

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snare a Soviet defector in "Hazardous Duty" (1966), Peter Ward reflects, "We become lawless in a struggle for the rule of law—semi-outlaws who risk their lives to put down the savagery of others."

Hunt's latest novel, "The Berlin Ending," to be published by Putnam in September (and the most circulated Xerox MS. in town since the Pentagon Papers), has as its hero a former C.I.A. agent turned architect who feels his life lacks excitement and danger. The "agency," he thinks, has "grown old and cautious. Prim. Reliant on technology far more than human beings." Caught up in a complex intrigue involving the stepdaughter of the West German Foreign Minister, he begins to live again; but the book ends in sour failure, the girl once again is a betrayer who prefers ease and security to danger (a conflict that ran through "Bimini Run"). The book introduces a new kind of Communist villain, "the agent of influence," a sort of highly placed Comsymp (read "liberal?") who manipulates his country's policies toward accommodation with the Soviet Union. One

is struck by the resemblance between the Foreign Minister and Chancellor Willy Brandt. That this resemblance was intended is confirmed by Hunt himself. He sent a picture of Brandt with Leonid Brezhnev to his editor at Putnam, Ned Chase, with a scrawled comment: "Here's the dirty dog with his master." In the book, a retired C.I.A. old-timer plots dirty tricks to destroy the Brandt figure. The writing is rather flat, but the characters reflect Hunt's sense of worldly sophistication—and his bias.

And one wonders why Hunt did not always follow through on his sophisticated fantasies in real life. In one of his Peter Ward novels, Hunt describes a C.I.A. burglary operation. The burglars fit a "small device of spring steel into the door jamb to prevent a surprise opening from the outside." If Hunt's team raiding the Watergate had used such quality equipment instead of the now-famous pieces of tape (to prevent doors from locking behind them) they might never have been discovered.

—RICHARD R. LINGEMAN