

Insight

Watergate figure authored long list of detective thrillers over 30 years

'Sexpionage' and

Howard

By Donald Zochert

"She seemed to uncoil from the depths of the chair. I heard her glass clink as it came to rest on the table and then her hands clasped behind my neck. Her lips were as warm and full as I had imagined them to be. Her body strained against me rubbing calike until she found a position she liked and then her weight was on me. . . Her breath warmed and I heard her slippers drop against the carpet.

"The sound of the telephone froze us both. Her eyes opened and her head drew back. 'The hell with it,' she murmured. 'It's probably only my husband.'"

Steve Bentley, hard-boiled CPA, was in another scrape.

Morgan Vernay, "a beautiful, nymphomaniac actress married to one of the most powerful men in the country," was in his arms.

And the telephone was ringing. No, Morgan Vernay, you old nymphomaniac actress, that wasn't your husband.

That was E. Howard Hunt Jr. — former secret agent for the Central Intelligence Agency, convicted Watergate conspirator, forger of State Department cablegrams, admitted second-story man, and author of more than 30 thrillers, novels and espionage tales under — naturally — assumed names.

IF WATERGATE HAS A SURPRISE a day, today's is the literary career of E. Howard Hunt.

It was E. Howard Hunt who helped line up the troops for the bugging of Democratic Party offices in Watergate, and who pleaded guilty.

It was E. Howard Hunt who masterminded the burglary of the office of the psychiatrist of Pentagon Papers defendant Daniel Ellsberg.

It was E. Howard Hunt who told a grand jury that he used a razor blade and a White House Xerox machine to fake



E. Howard Hunt

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THE NEW STEVE BENTLEY THRILLER

CURVAINS FOR A LOVER

BY ROBERT DIETRICH

HE MADE LOVE TO ONE WOMAN TOO MANY

Hunt

cablegrams in an attempt to make the Kennedy administration look bad in the assassination of South Vietnamese Premier Ngo Dinh Diem.

It was E. Howard Hunt whose wife — accused of passing out “hush money” to the Watergate burglars — died in a plane crash near Chicago’s Midway Airport on Dec. 8 last year.

AND IT WAS E. HOWARD HUNT — masquerading as John Baxter, Gordon Davis, Robert Dietrich and David St. John — who has turned out a small library of fast-paced books of intrigue during the last three decades.

As John Baxter, he wrote “A Gift for Gomala.”

As Gordon Davis, he wrote, “I Came to Kill” and “House Dick.”

As Robert Dietrich, he wrote “Be My Victim,” “The House on Q Street,” “End of a Stripper,” “Murder on Her Mind,” “Mistress to Murder,” “Calypso Caper,” “Angel Eyes,” “Curtains for a Lover,” “My Body,” “Ring Around Rosy” and “Where Murder Waits.”

As David St. John, he wrote “On Hazardous Duty,” “Return from Vorkuta,” “The Towers of Silence,” “Festival for Spies,” “The Venus Probe,” “Diabolus,” “The Coven,” “The Sorcerers,” “The Mongol Mask” and “One of Our Agents is Missing.”

And at the very beginning of his literary career, in the 1940s, he wrote under the name Howard Hunt: “East of Farewell,” “Limit of Darkness,” “Stranger in Town,” “Maelstrom,” “Bimini Run.”

Some of these early books may still be found in public libraries, most of the others are out of print. Even though his publishers have been prominent: Lippincott, Fawcett, Dell, Lancer, Knopf, Random House, Signet, Weybright and Talley.

TWO OF HIS CHARACTERS — around whom he built series — have won praise from within the industry.

The tough and cynical CIA agent Steve Bentley, said one reviewer, “belongs in the top drawer of all-time suspense novels.” Hunt created Bentley under the pseudonym of Robert Dietrich.

And the crisp, suave CIA agent Peter Ward — the man of many faces who figures in the “sexpionage thrillers” turned out by David St. John — was hailed by the prestigious “Publisher’s Weekly” as “more sophisticated than James Bond . . . a very likeable super-agent.”

Steve Bentley’s stamping ground is Washington — “a great town,” he says, “if you’ve got the stamina of a Cape Buffalo and the wealth of a Punjab prince.”

Bentley has to settle for stamina:

“Only an empty room now. I wiped clammy sweat from my forehead and slumped onto the dressing stool. For a while I rested my head on folded arms and then I sat up slowly and stared at the mirror. The same shock-reddened eyes, the same sap-disordered hair, the same blood-drained face I had come to know and tolerate . . . My mind cleared slowly.”

CIA AGENT PETER WARD hangs out around Washington too — Georgetown — but only to sip Canadian Club and stuff Middleton 5 into his pipe. Usually he’s off and around the world, tracing Chi-Coms, Castro agents, men in gray overcoats and beautiful women who have been taken advantage of.

Peter Ward has stamina AND the wealth of a Punjab prince. And all sorts of tricks up his sleeve.

In “Festival for Spies,” he uncovers “an unspeakably vile and unscrupulous Communist scheme” to pull Cambodia into the control of China. “Even Peter, who has seen many things in the course of his career as a spy, is revolted at the very thought of it,” remarks his publisher.

In “The Venus Probe,” Peter encounters a calypso beauty whose speciality was “a Martinique beguine that blistered the paint off the steel drums to whose rhythms she danced.”

IN ANOTHER CAPER — “One of Our Agents is Missing” — he discovers a “beautiful Nipponese belle who’s simply murdered in the bath.”

In “The Sorcerers,” he saves the daughter of a turncoat Canadian diplomat from the clutches of the Communists. First he takes care of the diplomat: “So many people are busy building bridges to Moscow and Peking,” he complains, “our closest ally’s been ignored.” Then he takes care of the daughter: “He yawned and felt a body nestle against his.”

Hunt’s earliest work is more conventional (he was a Guggenheim Fellow in creative writing after World War II), fancied up with learned lines from William Cullen Bryant and Pliny the Elder.

He dropped the poetry in his more recent works, much of it published in paperbacks which themselves drop out of sight after a few months. But he proves himself sure-handed in the genres of private eye and espionage thrillers. One of his publishers boasted that more than 2 million Steve Bentley thrillers had been sold.

E. HOWARD HUNT’S OWN LIFE is as exotic and mysterious as that of many of the fictional characters he has created.

His long-time literary agent, Maxwell Wilkinson, of Shelter Island, N.Y., plainly doesn’t want to discuss it. “Oh for God’s sake!” Wilkinson sputters. “Are you kicking that around? I know very little about it! Good-by!”

But another of his publishers provides this background:

He was born Oct. 9, 1918, attended Brown University, and served in the U.S. Naval Reserve from 1940 through 1942. He was a writer for “The March of Time” and a war correspondent for Life magazine until enlisting in the Army Air Corps in 1943. By the end of the war he was in the OSS, and ended the war as an OSS officer in China.

His Guggenheim followed, after which he served for a year on the staff of Ambassador W. Averell Harriman in Paris.

Yet another publisher reports his service in Europe, the Far East and Latin America for the Central Intelligence Agency, and retires him to the south of France.

BUT THERE IS STILL ANOTHER biographical account of E. Howard Hunt, author, and it appears in a multivolume reference work entitled “Contemporary Authors.” There he is listed not as E. Howard Hunt, but as Robert Salisbury Dietrich.

Under this pseudonym, which passes for his real name, he lists another of his pseudonyms — Gordon Davis. And he makes up a life for Robert Dietrich, close but not quite the same as that of E. Howard Hunt.

Robert Dietrich, says the book, was born on Oct. 9. So was E. Howard Hunt. But Dietrich was born in 1928, not 1918. Hunt thus made himself 10 years younger, a prerogative of women, mystery writers and CIA agents emeritus.

Dietrich was born not in Buffalo, N.Y., like Hunt, but in Washington, D.C., where he could learn about stamina early.

He served not in the OSS and the CIA, but in the Internal Revenue Service, and then began his own private practice as a tax consultant, not unlike hero Steve Bentley: “I’m an accountant and a tax adviser, not a snap-brimmed private dick.”

He served not in the Navy reserves or the Air Corps, but in the U.S. Army Infantry, and — lo! and behold! — was awarded the Bronze Star.

But wait: E. Howard Hunt IS Robert Dietrich.
Or is he?

This spy business seems to be catching. Like tough-guy Steve Bentley told his favorite nymphomaniac actress:

"Let's say the mood changed. Mood's a fragile thing. Morgan. Like morality. Once stretched it's never quite the same again."

For that, he gets a slap in the face.
