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**Undercover: Memoirs of an
American Secret Agent**

by E. Howard Hunt

Putnam, 302 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Jane Larkin Crain

When it comes to the spy business, reality is nowhere near as entertaining as fiction. This, at any rate, is a conclusion that can be drawn from a reading of E. Howard Hunt's *Undercover*, the first half of which is devoted to his long career as a secret agent for the CIA. Hunt has written a number of novels, the latest of which, *The Berlin Ending*, is a conventional but wonderfully engrossing spy story about an ex-CIA agent who gets swept up in a deadly and complex Soviet plot to subvert the West.

In his memoirs, on the other hand, Hunt must deal with unembellished, unromanticized facts. These he sets down in passages that lack energy, clarity, and continuity—just as, one imagines, do most of the “real life” carryings-on of the CIA. When Hunt comes to his participation in the Watergate scandals, however, his substantial talent as a novelist revives. The whole business of Watergate has by now taken on an almost mythic dimension, and this provides built-in literary support for Hunt's own account. Thus, the second half of *Undercover*—dealing with such schemes as the rifling of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office, the clandestine visit to Dita Beard's hospital room, the Watergate break-ins, and the whole cast of characters involved in them—has everything the first half lacks: coherence, suspense, drama, and vivid portraiture.

Since his arrest, Hunt has suffered a considerable ordeal—morally, psychologically, and physically—and his account of his personal anguish and his anger over the appalling treatment he has received from government and prison officials is by far the most powerful and disturbing section of his book. Still, however much Hunt's plight may stir one's sympathies, it must be said that *Undercover*—almost unwittingly—raises troubling ethical questions which it does not begin to answer, and that Hunt's basic conception of himself as his government's *victim* is somewhat hard, finally, to swallow.