

Courier: A novel of conspiracy and motorcycles by Terry Irving

Book Review By Wes Fleming #87301

YOU THINK YOU KNOW EVERYTHING about Watergate, but if you're the least bit into conspiracy theories, Terry Irving's *Courier* will challenge everything you think you know and open your mind to a whole new avenue of possibilities.

The novel takes place in 1972 in Washington, DC, and the city is abuzz with pre-Christmas tension. Rick Putnam is one of any number of faceless, troubled Vietnam vets trying valiantly to put his life back together. After his short, nightmare-ridden bouts of sleep, he spends the rest of his days crisscrossing the city on a BMW R50/2 as a courier, making sure TV network ABN's news film gets where it needs to go as quickly as possible.

It's one of those rolls of film that gets him in trouble; the footage could blow up not just the Nixon administration, but also Americans' perceptions of why the Vietnam War is being fought. Rick discovers he's a hunted man, and using his beat-up Beemer and a steadily shrinking circle of friends, he sets about laying waste to the lies and deceit that surround CREEP, Watergate, Richard Nixon and American politics.

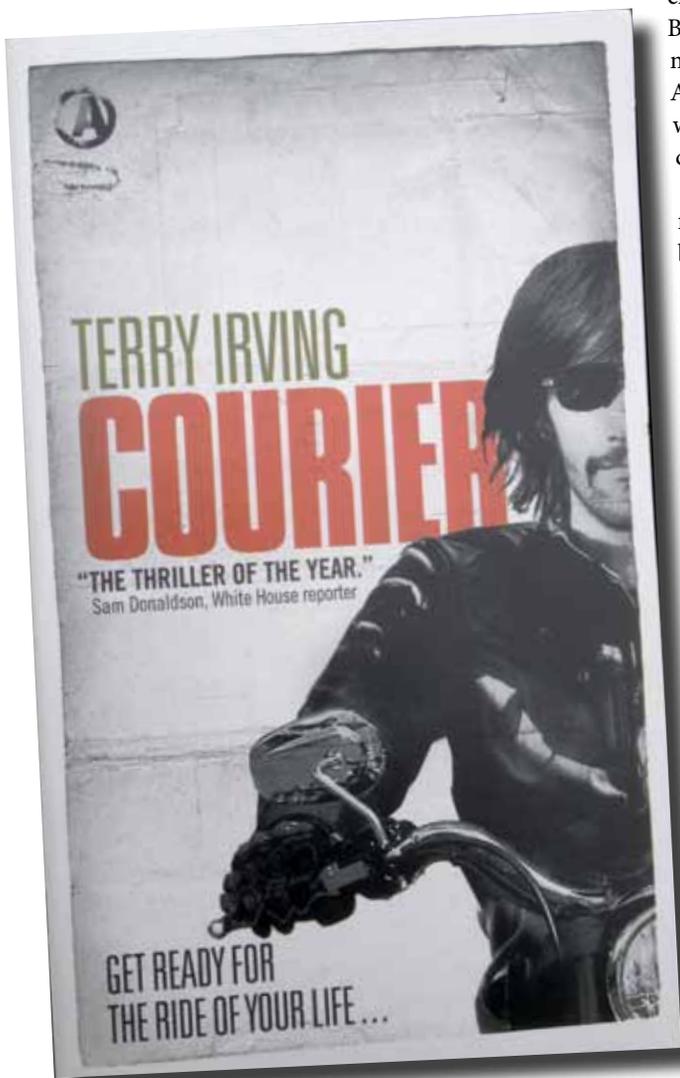
In some ways, *Courier* is a standard Vietnam era-based spy story. Rick is a stereotypical veteran tortured by his experiences, clearly suffering from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However,

Irving doesn't follow the stereotype all the way through; Rick deals with his PTSD by working out and riding just over the edge of safety, rather than turning to drugs or alcohol. In a way, it's refreshing to see a more 21st century sensibility to PTSD applied to a Vietnam veteran.

Most of the violence in the story works well for the genre, but there are a couple of graphic scenes that lead to the deaths of two minor characters at the hands of another minor character. In a way, these deaths seem senseless, as the killer is such a minor part of the story before those attacks that it seems as if the character comes out of nowhere simply to rob Rick of parts of his support network. There is a certain sense of heroic sacrifice involved, but the killer shows no possibility of being violent until, suddenly—bam! The minor characters that do show a penchant for violence, however, prove to be largely ineffective, never managing to do more than ratchet up the tension by chasing and scaring Rick and his friends.

The one somewhat major issue I have with the story is the burgeoning romance between Rick and Eve, a Native American studying law at Georgetown. There's no graphic sex in the novel, but Eve is a bit rough with her affection, constantly punching or pounding on Rick. It seems a little playground to me, and not something that I think a tortured Vietnam veteran would put up with for very long.

There's a good bit of violence in the story, but perhaps other than one death in particular towards the end of the book, it comes across as driving the plot rather than being simply gratuitous. The chase scenes are tense and well written, and when people get hurt, it makes sense for them to do so.



Irving even includes a bit of comic relief in the guise of a couple of young hit men who just can't quite seem to get the job done no matter how hard they try.

It's clear that Irving lived and worked in DC, as he thoroughly absorbed the city's early-1970s vibe. He meticulously details Rick's routes through the city, almost lovingly so, and does so well with that aspect of the story that DC residents will be able to see in their mind's eye exactly where Rick is riding—or "dancing," as he refers to it. For somebody that's not from or intimately familiar with DC, these passages might come across as a bit self-indulgent, but even if you don't know the roads, the writing propels you down the maze of streets with a sense of urgency that heightens the tension of every chase. Similarly, some of the details of DC's architecture and infrastructure will be lost on people who aren't from or at least familiar with the area. These things don't detract from the story, though.

I've read a lot of spy novels in my day, and *Courier* stands up as a solid example of the genre. Even though Rick isn't really a spy, he's thrown into a big, hidden conspiracy and functions as the—well, courier—of information that certain parties are trying to keep hidden. That makes him a spy if you ask me, and as a spy novel, this is a real page-turner. Irving makes you care what happens to Rick, and I found myself on edge wondering what would happen to the all-important film.

For motorcycle riders, one of the more appealing aspects of the book are the detailed passages where Rick is either riding his R 50/2, thinking about it, talking about it, or describing it. Anybody who rides will eat these passages up, and BMW riders even more so, especially if they have a penchant for vintage bikes.

There are some other nice touches in *Courier*, too, like a glimpse into the just-under-the-crust gay scene in DC and the very early days of what would someday become the Internet. Both of these things serve as important aspects of the plot, allowing the protagonist and his team to

manage (to some extent) both their information and their safety. I get the feeling that some of Rick's housemates may have been inspired by the Lone Gunmen from the long-gone Fox TV series *The X-Files*, and it's a nice touch even if it wasn't Irving's inspiration.

I really enjoyed Irving's take on the whole Watergate fiasco. I don't want to spoil it for you by giving it away here, but I will tell you that it's creative, inventive even, and not something I've come across in other Watergate conspiracy novels. It is this plot direction, perhaps, that does more to set *Courier* apart from other books of the genre than any other aspect of the plot. However, my favorite aspect of this story is that the climax doesn't come around too fast, or at least not so fast that it seems contrived. More than a few books I've read lately have endings that seem like the author thought, "Well, it's about time to wrap this up—better kill somebody, kiss the girl and save the day!" *Courier* isn't like that at all—Irving paces the last third of the book exceptionally well, gradually building the tension through a believable sequence of events that culminate in near-disaster for Rick. Of course we know that Rick will succeed in the end, but the escalating cost of his victory shroud whether or not he'll get the girl or indeed, even get away with his life.

For anybody that doesn't ride or at least know somebody who rides a motorcycle, there are parts of this book that simply won't resonate deeply. It's clear throughout that Irving loves (or loved at one time) riding, and Rick's difficulty in sacrificing his trusty Beemer to save his own life at one point is something that perhaps only another rider can understand.

Courier is a good read, a solid spy novel, and an excellent example of incorporating motorcycles into a story to drive the action. Terry Irving, who remains a DC-area resident, has a bright career ahead of him if he keeps writing books like this. Here's to hoping he sees fit to bring us another Rick Putnam adventure. ☺



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