

## Spy Games

The literary — and literal?— life of Ross Thomas

by Roger L. Simon

Back in 1986, I found myself at a midnight meeting in the baronial hall of a Mexican hacienda, ostensibly to form the first writers' organization with members on both sides of the Iron Curtain — the International Association of Crime Writers. Around the table were the Soviet "Robert Ludlum" Julian Semionov (a reputed KGB colonel), Spanish novelist and chief theorist of Euro-communism Vazquez Montalban, and Mexican mystery writer Paco Taibo, himself rumored to have been personal friends with Che Guevara. I was a mere detective novelist/screenwriter from L.A., a bit over my head (maybe a *lot* over my head), and feeling that, without serious help, I could end up dupe of the year and probably blacklisted in the bargain. So when the assembled group asked me what other American writers should serve on the "Central Committee" (yes, they used that term — later modified to "Executive Committee") of this fledgling

organization, my first reaction was to say forget it, until the one obvious name jumped into my head: Ross Thomas. Not only was he one of the best U.S. crime novelists then, he was the only one I knew with what appeared to be the background to handle whatever cloak-and-dagger nefariousness lay before us.



(Photo by Debra DiPaolo)

Looking back now — in the midst of the reissue of Ross' wise and witty thrillers — I realize I picked the right partner. Although he lived near me in Malibu, I didn't know him personally. And I didn't know the *truth* about that "background," but I had my suspicions. Several of his books were set in the intelligence world, and I had heard something of his colorful past — stints as a "public relations" operative for labor unions, a "political consultant" in Washington, a "diplomatic correspondent" in Bonn (two years) and a "campaign organizer" in Nigeria of all places (the location of his novel *The Seersucker Whipsaw*). It was at least more than a remote possibility that he had been — like his predecessors Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene and Eric Ambler — a spook.

I didn't ask about any participation he might have had in the "great game" when we met for the first time over lunch after my return from Mexico, nor did I question him about it over the numerous meals and voyages to international cultural events we shared until his death in 1995 — not even during one long night in Hemingway's own Casa Botín in Madrid, when I was completely snackered on gin and sangria (Ross never drank). I just didn't have the guts. Although he was unfailingly polite, generous to his colleagues and the possessor of a sense of humor dry as a Santa Ana, Ross Thomas was *not* the kind of man to whom you addressed direct personal questions. So that question lingers on. (When I queried *Wall Street Journal* mystery critic Tom

Nolan about what I should ask Ross' widow when I interviewed her for this article, he e-mailed me: "Find out if he was a spy!")

The man I encountered over lunch in '86 was like a courtly English gent from a London men's club. But his accent was Middle American with the flat tones of his native Oklahoma, although his familial roots were from small-town Alabama. He had that same English diffidence, too, that I recognized more from novels than from personal experience, as if an E.M. Forster character had been captured whole and transferred from the playing fields of Eton to a Chinese restaurant in Santa Monica. His skin was pale and, like most men of a certain age, his hair thin up top. And there were those eyes, orbs from which the clichés "piercing" and "heavy-lidded" drew fresh meaning. I always had the feeling Ross was looking through me; still do as I write this piece about him. He was, after all, the author of *The Fools in Town Are on Our Side*. That title says it all about Ross Thomas.

I can still remember his laconic answer when I broached at that same lunch his possible participation in the International Association of Crime Writers. "I'm not a joiner," he said. I learned soon that that was Ross' way of saying yes — it was almost like dialogue from one of his books. So join he did, to the delight of the Soviets, who were pleased to have such a high-ranking Yankee scribe aboard, even though they persisted — despite being corrected several times — in calling him "Thomas Ross." Perhaps that was just a natural confusion from his having two, to them foreign, first names, but Ross speculated on a couple of occasions, always with a wry smile, that it was just the way he was listed on his KGB file.

That was the atmosphere of our organization in those days before the Berlin Wall came down, the Eastern writers wondering who the Western writers really were and the Western writers wondering why they would care. I suspect the Russians were especially interested in Ross' true identity, although in our meetings, whatever connections he once had, he always seemed the best sort of political liberal, empathic yet hardheaded in his opinions, and an outspoken supporter of free expression, sometimes to the consternation of our hosts.

The place to look for clues to the deepest identity of most novelists is in their works, and, in Thomas' case, there is great pleasure in the search because even the least successful of his thrillers are compulsively entertaining. For a few years many were out of print, but we now have the handsome new set of trade paperbacks being published by St. Martin's Press. The series has begun with four books: *Out on the Rim* and the Edgar Award-winning *Briarpatch*, out last winter; *The Cold War Swap* and the aforementioned *The Fools in Town Are on Our Side*, this spring. Twenty more are scheduled, including several written under Ross' pseudonym Oliver Bleack. All will have introductions by noted contemporary crime writers such as Donald Westlake and Lawrence Sanders.

*Rim* was the first Thomas novel I read after we had met, and I read it — as you do when, in that rare case, you know the author — as if he were whispering the text in my ear. The book is set in the Philippines, a place Ross knew well, having served there in World War II and returned in the wake of the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos. Its characters, too, are familiar: the con man "Otherguy" Overby, that pretender to the Chinese throne, Artie Wu, and his partner, Quincy Durant. They are the engaging protagonists of *Chinaman's Chance*, among Ross' most popular books (his novels were consistent-, not best-sellers), and re-appear once again in 1992's *Voodoo, Ltd.*

*Out on the Rim* is a darkly comic story of greedy plotters after the fall of a dictator and would seem an apt cautionary tale for our times. But since we are now living through a period of far greater chicanery of this type (with myriad scalawags looting the Iraqi museums of all sorts of Sumerian treasures, not to mention a billion dollars in cash lifted from a state bank), the book may have lost some of its original sting. This weakening by the onrush of events is a problem endemic to political crime fiction. Only the most sharply accurate, such as le Carré's *Smiley*

stories, seem to be able to withstand this — even Greene's *The Quiet American* felt passé in its latest film avatar.

Being dated is not a problem for *Briarpatch*, one of the best, most coruscating portraits of small-town American life and politics since Sinclair Lewis and Robert Penn Warren. This book shows why Ross is getting what most authors dream of and few merit: the posthumous publication of his work. *Briarpatch* is a classic of the “corrupt town” genre. Here we have the America of Ross’ youth, with Texas standing in for his native Oklahoma. A man, Ben Dill, returns home to investigate the car-bombing murder of his sister, who happened to be the local homicide detective — and then the complications set in. The book is populated with the kind of petit-bourgeois American graspers you find in *Dodsworth* and *Babbitt*, but morphed in a way that, paradoxically, is at once more nastily comic and strangely forgiving than Lewis.

Ross has a way of making you despise his villains while you see yourself in them and laugh. His heroes are always blemished and frequently corrupt. Ben Dill is no Gary Cooper riding into a Texas cesspool to clean it up. He’s just some unemployed schmuck in D.C. with five grand in the bank and a used Volkswagen, trying to figure out what to do with his life after his wife has left him. (Speaking of Cooper, this book would have made a great movie but, like the rest of Ross’ works, has as yet not reached the screen. Their complex plots seem to have eluded adaptation.)

This spring’s first offering, *The Cold War Swap*, is actually Ross’ first novel, which won the Best First Novel Edgar Award back in 1967 (three firsts!). Like Raymond Chandler, he began writing relatively late in life and composed the book when he was 40. The details of its creation should raise the hair on the neck of any literary aspirant and put the lie to one of the great clichés: It’s 10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration. Wrong. Inspiration is more important. If you don’t have that spark, forget it. You can work for 50 years and produce nothing. Ross Thomas, having never even particularly thought about writing novels, was between jobs and just sat down and wrote one — in six weeks. Then he wrapped it up in brown paper and sent it off to a publisher, who accepted it — in two weeks. No wonder he decided to do a couple of dozen more.

The results of this quick labor hold up pretty well for a book with one of the more shopworn Cold War plots: scientists trapped behind the Iron Curtain. What makes it work, of course, are the originality and precision of character and setting, in this case that very Bonn where Ross had done time as a (ahem) “diplomatic correspondent for the Armed Forces Network.” Here for the first time we meet Ross’ other series characters, saloonkeeper “Mac” McCorkle and the erratic onetime OSS agent Mike Padillo, who team up to get a pair of defectors through Checkpoint Charlie. Their scenes with Cook Baker, a Hunter S. Thompson type, are drop-dead funny. The book also demonstrates that from the outset Ross had a cynical, less heroic view of spying than even le Carré, as if the “great game” itself was just another pathetic human folly, a series of comic pratfalls almost out of Abbott & Costello. This is Ross’ primary insight and his contribution to the genre. Many have followed in his footsteps, but few, as is usually the case, have executed it so well. One of the reasons for this, I suspect, is that many of these writers came to their lampoons of spying from a political/literary perspective and without the firsthand knowledge that Ross had.

The other spring reissue offering, *The Fools in Town Are on Our Side*, also features a former espionage operative as its protagonist. Lucifer Dye, who grew up in a Shanghai whorehouse, is currently out of work, which makes him a perfect candidate to form an alliance with an ex-call girl for some wheeling and dealing in the Gulf Coast city of Swankton. *Fools* is another small-town corruption novel, and the book reads like a raucous rehearsal for *Briarpatch*, but it’s not as good. The novel does, however, contain one unforgettable character, the hard-boiled ex-police chief Homer Necessary, who has one brown eye and one blue eye. For Thomas, the constabulary are, like intelligence agents, fallible, buffoonlike humans.

Ross’ sly and subversive work can be read as a refutation of Edmund Wilson’s essay “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?,” which dismisses crime writers as second-class citizens of the

literary realm, mere puzzle makers. Beneath the comedy, Ross was always deadly serious. But virtually all suspense authors suffer moments of defensiveness over Wilson's rejection, and I assume that the need for validation was another reason Ross was attracted to the International Association of Crime Writers, which gave a tony veneer to our profession. (It also provided for a fair amount of juicy research.) The association lost some of its allure after the Cold War ended, so Ross and I both withdrew from it somewhat, although we remained friends.

My last memories of him come from the aftermath of the Great Malibu Fire of 1993, when his house burned to the ground and he hurried home to save the half-finished manuscript of his then-work in progress — *Ah, Treachery!* — and one copy of each of his novels. "I've written too many books!" his wife, Rosalie, told me he yelled out with characteristic irony as he stuffed them in a plastic bag. Everything else was lost, including all his manuscripts, the many editions and translations of his works, and his trusted portable Adler typewriter. Ross abjured computers.

A few days later he turned up at my house in the Hollywood Hills, looking a bit shell-shocked but not as bad as one would expect for someone who was essentially homeless. Not long after that, he moved into a rental in Point Dume and was back to work full force, as if nothing had happened, while his house was being rebuilt. This unflappability was a trait of his fictional characters, but must have come as well from the obvious strength of his and Rosalie's relationship. Their friendship had begun about 25 years before in D.C. when Rosalie worked as a librarian at the Library of Congress and Ross, already writing full time, would come in to do research. After a short courtship, they married and headed for California, winding up in Malibu after only one day of house hunting and staying there permanently. (Ross wrote some of his most evocative prose, about the pelicans in Paradise Cove, in *Chinaman's Chance*.) They became mainstays in the local Democratic Club. In fact politics and liberalism suffused Ross' persona so deeply that, if he were the average demographic, C-SPAN would have been America's number-one network and *The Nation* its most popular magazine. Sometimes I thought that, for all his superficial cynicism and sardonic wit, he was the most idealistic person I knew. And it was that idealism that fueled his work.

I visited Ross for the last time after he had moved back into the house. His study and the living room were lined with new built-in shelves already being filled with the missing editions sent by fans and even the occasional publisher. Ross was in a good mood. *Ah, Treachery!* was completed, and he was back in his old digs again. But it wasn't to last. He was dead of lung cancer within months. He was 69.

When I returned to the house a few weeks ago to talk with Rosalie, it was basically unchanged. More books were filling those shelves, including new foreign translations of Ross' work. His desk in the study was undisturbed, as if he were about to sit down to work that day, the same framed *New Yorker* cartoon on the wall nearby. It showed an author behind his typewriter, looking out through his window in wan bemusement at ordinary men on their way to work. "Have a nice day," he was saying to them.

"Ross had incredible concentration," Rosalie told me. "He could answer the phone while working. In the morning he'd have coffee, read the paper and say, 'I'm off,' and walk into the next room and shut the door. I'd bring him lunch at his desk at 12. At 2 he would come out and say, 'I can't do any more.'"

"What would he do for the rest of the day?"

"Read. Or go to the movies. Ross always said one of the benefits of a writer's life was you could go to the movies in the afternoon. One time a woman asked me what it was like being married to a writer," Rosalie continued. "I told her, 'Very quiet.'"

I laughed. Then I took a breath and spoke the question that had been on my mind since 1986. "You know . . . there's one thing I'd like to ask, if you don't mind. Was Ross ever . . . a spy?"

Rosalie paused a moment. "Not that he ever told me," she said. And then she smiled.

*Roger L. Simon, author of the Moses Wine detective novels as well as several screenplays, wrote the introduction to the reissue of Ross Thomas' Missionary Stew, due out this fall from St. Martin's Press. Simon will read from his new Moses Wine novel, Director's Cut, at Dutton's Brentwood on Wednesday, July 2, at 7 p.m. For information, call (310) 476-6263.*

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