

Jason Matthews, spy novelist who drew on his experience in the CIA, dies at 69

By **Matt Schudel**

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Jason Matthews, who parlayed his 33 years as a CIA officer into a second career as a best-selling spy novelist, writing scenes so gripping and vivid that some readers thought he was violating the agency's strict secrecy protocols, died April 28 at his home in Rancho Mirage, Calif. He was 69.

The cause was corticobasal degeneration, a degenerative neurological disease, said his wife, Suzanne Matthews.

With the CIA, Mr. Matthews was a practitioner of “human intelligence,” or the one-to-one cultivation of sources who might provide information about hostile countries. During his nine overseas assignments, he often worked behind the lines of enemy countries in what the CIA called “internal operations.”

In outposts across Europe, Asia and the Caribbean, Mr. Matthews recruited agents and used the classic spy techniques of dead drops — leaving a message in a public place to be picked up later — and brush passes, when two people brush against each other in a crowded place and surreptitiously exchange information.

He knew how to walk or drive in circuitous patterns to lose anyone who might be tailing him and could detect tension or deception in the faces of people he was interviewing. He became so adept that the CIA made him an instructor and later the chief of internal operations.

Mr. Matthews, who spoke seven languages, worked abroad under the mantle of the State Department. His wife was also a CIA officer for more than three decades, making them among the agency's few “tandem couples,” or married spies.

For the most part, however, their life of espionage contained little glamour and less action. Mr. Matthews said he spent most of his time in the office, doing research and filing reports. He called his work “clandestine journalism.”

His cables to CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., became known for their graceful writing and precise scene-setting.

“Without bragging or hyperbole,” Mr. Matthews told *Men's Journal* in 2015, “you had to write a very careful, descriptive account of who you saw, what you did and some of the atmospherics.”

After retiring in 2010 — his final post was at an obscure CIA station in Los Angeles — Mr. Matthews followed other intelligence officers, including John le Carré, Graham Greene and Charles McCarry, and began to weave his experiences into fiction.

His first novel, “Red Sparrow,” was published in 2013 and portrayed a Russian ballerina, Dominika Egorova, recruited by her country’s spy service. She was sent for special training to the “Sparrow School” — based on an actual Soviet-era training site — in which women (and some men) learned the arts of seduction, spying and killing. She falls in love with an American CIA officer, and action ensues, from Moscow to Rome to Washington and several bedrooms in between.

Literary scholar Art Taylor, in a review in *The Washington Post*, called “Red Sparrow” a “sublime and sophisticated debut ... a first-rate novel as noteworthy for its superior style as for its gripping depiction of a secretive world.”

Mr. Matthews was praised for his plotting and characterizations, such as this sketch of a Russian spy official: “His eyes were dull and watery, his teeth corrugated and stained, and he slouched with the familiar casual authority honed on the razor strop of decades of Soviet officialdom. His tie was askew, his suit was a washed-out brown that recalled low tide at the beach.”

What most impressed aficionados of spy fiction, however, was the realism Mr. Matthews brought to the methods of spying itself, or tradecraft.

“Lord knows how he got the manuscript of ‘Red Sparrow’ past the redacting committee at Langley,” British spy novelist Charles Cumming wrote in the *New York Times*. He added: “I have rarely encountered a nonfiction title, much less a novel, so rich in what would once have been regarded as classified information.”

Mr. Matthews insisted that the “CIA approved every comma, every semicolon of my book.” The practices described in the books, his wife said in an interview, were no longer in use.

“Red Sparrow” received the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America for best first novel by a U.S. author. It was adapted for a 2018 [film starring Jennifer Lawrence](#), with Mr. Matthews serving as technical adviser.

He published two sequels with the same characters — including scenes featuring Russian President Vladimir Putin. “Palace of Treason,” which examined Iran’s nuclear program, appeared in 2015, followed three years later by “The Kremlin’s Candidate,” in which Putin seeks to install a Russian puppet as CIA director.

In all of his books, Mr. Matthews concluded each chapter with a recipe suggested by the plot.

“I like to cook, and our family certainly enjoyed the various cuisines of the countries we lived in,” he said. “The recipes are elliptical and abbreviated. They’re more like clues than formal recipes.”

James Jason Matthews was born Sept. 17, 1951, in Hartford, Conn. He grew up speaking Greek at home. (His grandfather’s name was changed when he came to the United States.)

Mr. Matthews's father developed a way of making flash-frozen pies and sold the technique to a food company. The family later operated a sailing ship on excursions from Mystic, Conn.

After graduating from the private Mount Hermon school (now Northfield Mount Hermon) in Massachusetts, Mr. Matthews studied Spanish and French at Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Va. He graduated in 1973.

He received a master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri in 1975, then came to Washington, expecting "to be writing brochures for the Forest Service." He had several job interviews, including one in a "nondescript building in Rosslyn, Virginia," he told *Men's Journal* in 2015. "Gray little office. Gray little man."

It turned out to be the CIA, which Mr. Matthews joined in late 1976.

He met his wife, the former Suzanne Moran, who was already in the CIA, on an overseas assignment. They married in 1983.

In addition to his wife, survivors include two daughters, Sophia Baumann of Manhattan Beach, Calif., and Alexandra Matthews of Brooklyn; a brother; and a granddaughter.

Mr. Matthews said he never shot anyone while in the CIA, but he had some close calls.

"Whenever we picked up the phone for 33 years, depending on where we were, we knew it was bugged, we knew it was monitored," he told the *Journal News of White Plains, N.Y.*, in 2015. "And same thing with rooms. We would get up sometimes in our apartment and walk through the living room to get to the kitchen in the morning and there would be a stubbed out cigarette in the ashtray. The entry teams had come in at night and had left just a little sign that they'd been there."

When it came time to retire, he was not sure what to do. He had long been an admirer of the novels of le Carré and McCarry, and one day he sat down at his daughter's computer and began to write.

"Being in the agency is a very experiential career, like being a policeman or a fireman or a jet pilot," Mr. Matthews told the *New York Times* in 2015, "and when it stops, it really stops. There are retiree groups that get together, mostly in Washington, and sit around and swap war stories, but I was living in California, and it was either write something or go fishing."

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