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***Life Undercover: Coming of Age in the CIA.* By Amaryllis Fox. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. ISBN 978-0-523-65497-1. Pp. 230. \$16.95.**

Journalist, writer, TV show host, peace activist, and former CIA Clandestine Service officer are all job titles one might apply to Amaryllis Fox, which is incredibly impressive considering her youth, not to mention the tender age at which she began her pre-CIA globetrotting adventurism. This book primarily chronicles the CIA segment of her life, but with a somewhat vague contextual introduction to what led to it. It begins with a brief rundown of growing up in America and England before a pre-college stint as a refugee camp volunteer worker on the Burmese border. There it seems she was swept up in the sort of youthful idealism that is often seasoned by a healthy dose of naiveté and accompanied by the fearlessness born of innocence. In any event the result was an introduction to journalism by dint of a dangerously unsophisticated effort to obtain an interview with Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's prominent human rights activist and politician who was well on her way to becoming an icon of democracy, and who was also in the midst of enduring six years of house arrest. The resulting recorded interview was delivered by Amaryllis into the hands of the BBC for broadcast in Myanmar. The young half-American, half-British adventurer had made her narrow escape from that country with a much whetted appetite for the mission of furthering social justice.

A degree at Oxford College followed. Her undergrad years there included a summer working with orphans in Bosnia and other world travels. She also claims to have rebuffed an approach from probing British intelligence officers inquiring discretely about her plans for the future. Instead, she returned again to the U. S. to attend graduate school at Georgetown where her thesis landed her a job offer from the CIA. That time she accepted and began working for the Agency even before completing her graduate work. By then it was a post-9/11 world of danger, and she wanted her piece of that action. She began, though, by working as an analyst on the Southeast Asia Desk, where she briefed the President's briefer each morning at half-past three and responded to emergencies at any time of the day or night. She quickly fell into the routine and became addicted to the pace.

Graduation from Georgetown brought another gift. She was requested by the CIA's Clandestine Service, but first had to spend another six-months working at CIA Headquarters, this time on one of the operations desks. While assigned to the Iraq desk in the Counterterrorism Center she discovered to her dismay and consternation that the U.S. Government was mistakenly seizing the wrong people and sending them into a black hole to be interrogated and probably tortured under the loose rules of Extraordinary Rendition. This all occurs seemingly because no one but she cares enough about the impact on those who might have been wrongly accused, or comprehends even the basics of Arab names and what they mean. People are simply being misidentified based on similar sounding common names. She was "authorized to fix it" (86). Clearly this was a task beyond the ability of a first-year trainee. Thus, she never follows through with that story and instead moves on in the narrative, explaining how "slow, hard-won mutual respect" in her interaction with another detainee led to important information being provided. Her overall point is that no torture was necessary to gain the info and that rendition as a practice was wrongheaded. Information could be had in other more humane ways, she asserts, and she held herself above any despicable misdeeds that may have accompanied other practices. But she does not mention that not every detainee is suitable for building mutual respect by discussing Kafka and quoting Malcolm X, which she claims was the basis for her rapport with this particular detainee. She admits of no middle ground, but one can well imagine the blank stares that might result from the mention of a Bohemian writer or an American civil rights activist to a typical detainee who could have been driving a taxi in Saudi Arabia before 9/11. One is left to ponder what the basis for rapport would be with such a person.

One of the major themes of the book, as reinforced by its subtitle about "coming of age," pertains to her personal relationships and the effect the job had on her life in that respect. An early marriage of convenience to a British national was undertaken in an effort to sustain some kind of close relationship during a period when she was separated for long periods of training and unable to divulge much about what she was doing. The relationship did not survive the strained conditions. Thereafter she found it best to confine her love interests to fellow CIA personnel, but even that proved difficult.

Finally, she set off for the CIA's remote Virginia training facility known as the "Farm" for a year of intensive instruction in all the aspects of tradecraft an operative would need. She provides some interesting insights into what the training consisted of, and upon successful completion—never a sure thing—she was selected to work under nonofficial cover status. That was a much coveted and highly selective job. She would not have the security of diplomatic cover or the immunity it provided, nor would she work from an embassy. She was to work on ferreting out possible weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and her cover story was that she was an entrepreneur searching out emerging new artists for a burgeoning world art market. Her success in a particular case of posing as a middleman for entities seeking to purchase WMD technology is described in some detail and provides a good example of how her work bore fruit, although one must logically suspect that the story is a composite of characters and events designed to tie together the narrative and provide context to the personal elements of her many challenges. Eventually she was tasked to set up an Asian office for the cover business of dealing in artwork. That required her long-distance relationship with a fellow CIA agent to come to a decisive point. It must either end or she must once again enter into marriage to sustain it. She chose the latter, and the couple soon found themselves adopting "a kind of muted pragmatism . . . fueled by mutual respect and the unspoken sense that mission trumps emotion" (161-162).

At this point many readers, myself included, might begin to wonder how to sort out just how much of the story is factual and how much is merely a vehicle for telling the difficult tale of life as a young CIA operative. The newlywed couple was soon dispatched to China to establish the Asian branch of the art business that would provide her cover story. They were warned that the Shanghai hotel room they occupy while searching for a more permanent residence was likely wired for audio and visual surveillance in any lighting condition. The same applied to the house they soon inhabited. As westerners they were kept under constant physical and electronic surveillance. They walked on eggshells around their own home and spoke in cryptic codes not only for the benefit of the eavesdroppers but also for their housekeeper who surely reported to the Chinese security service. They continued to travel and run cases—a veritable "normal" family of spies—but one must really begin to ask some questions as to why the CIA would set them up in a cover business in such a hostile environment and expect them to sustain any semblance of an ordinary life

for several years when other less stressful options might have been more reasonable and available.

Adding to her stress was the 2008 birth of a daughter, who eventually became just another part of her cover story. She resumed her hectic operational pace afterwards, supposedly sometimes meeting arms dealers with a baby tucked under her arm. This strains credulity to the limits I'm afraid, and even some former CIA colleagues have expressed skepticism at some of the stories she relates. If it is indeed a blend of fact and fiction—the latter engaged in to make a point and capture the essence of her struggles as a professional woman, a wife, and a mother—some more prominent disclaimer ought to accompany the book itself. Meanwhile, in her telling, the baby becomes a vehicle for self-awareness as well as support for the idea that it is unnecessary to fight terrorism by instilling fear in adversaries. Instead, she concludes from lessons learned of motherhood, it's better to remove the mask and reveal one's humanity. It is the only path to peace in her view.

With another marriage dissolved she decided to resign from the CIA but struggled to regain some sense of reality in her life. She no longer had to pretend to be someone else, but who was she? What was her new reality? "Pretending," her mother counsels, "is a shoddy foundation for things like peace and power" (221). Strength, she must learn, is what will make her real. Soon she musters the courage to speak publicly about the truth she has discovered. For her it is that "all we soldiers and spies, all the belching, booming armored juggernauts of war, all the terror groups and all the rogue states, that we're all just pretending to be fierce because we're all on fire with fear" (223). Only the freedom to be human will create "a slowly growing web of peace" (224). Perhaps the coming of age portion of her tale remains incomplete.

Overall, the book is an interesting light read, but as noted in this review, it should be read with caution. Professionals will recognize the pitfalls of the narrative, but others might be tempted to accept the tale at face value. The story it tells is related far more to her coming of age saga that happens to occur in the context of being a CIA operative. The CIA work is the vehicle for her very personal story, but the work itself is never seriously addressed in a way that would provide useful lessons for the professional.

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