



All the Old Knives

Olen Steinhauer

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Six years ago in Vienna, terrorists took over a hundred hostages, and the rescue attempt went terribly wrong. The CIA's Vienna station was witness to this tragedy, gathering intel from its sources during those tense hours, assimilating facts from the ground and from an agent on the inside. So when it all went wrong, the question had to be asked: Had their agent been compromised, and how?

Two of the CIA's case officers in Vienna, Henry Pelham and Celia Harrison, were lovers at the time, and on the night of the hostage crisis Celia decided she'd had enough. She left the agency, married and had children, and is now living an ordinary life in the idyllic town of Carmel-by-the-Sea. Henry is still a case officer in Vienna, and has traveled to California to see her one more time, to relive the past, maybe, or to put it behind him once and for all.

But neither of them can forget that long-ago question: Had their agent been compromised? If so, how? Each also wonders what role tonight's dinner companion might have played in the way the tragedy unfolded six years ago.

All the Old Knives is *New York Times* bestseller Olen Steinhauer's most intimate, most cerebral, and most shocking novel to date.

All the Old Knives Details


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From Reader Review All the Old Knives for online ebook

Trish says

Steinhauer is a capable author and is not to be blamed, I do not think, for the fact that midway through this cynical story about retired spies closing a case once and for all that I just got really sick of hearing, thinking, caring about spies and their circuitous world. I have begun to think, ever since reading Kai Bird's *The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames*, that we should close the spy agencies and be done with the whole ridiculous deal of trying to find out secrets through a government agency. It makes me a little sick to think we are funding these folks. But I'm not running the world.

Steinhauer does so well in capturing the lifestyle, personality types, even speech patterns of American spies in Europe that it is hard to believe he is not a spy himself. Perhaps he got a little too real: I wanted to be as far from these folks as it is possible to be.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

As we were heading off on vacation, my husband asked me to "pick" an audiobook to listen to. I decided to find a spy novel since some of the television we will both watch has to do with spies. I knew of Olen Steinhauer after my book club read *The Cairo Affair*, and so I picked the shortest of his novels that hadn't been already turned into a film.

This takes place almost entirely in a restaurant during a conversation two former lovers are having about a 2006 terrorist situation in the Vienna airport, with generous amounts of flashbacks to fill in parts of the story. Some elements kept us guessing while some were given away by the author from the beginning (I would almost say don't read the little prelude as it ruined one of the plot points for us.)

What Steinhauer does so well in all his books is visible here - the major event in the novel isn't real, but many of the other situations mentioned as well as people are real, so it feels like a very realistic storyline.

This was the first time I listened to an audiobook with another person and I was itching to turn it up a bit (in speed) but I survived!

Mal Warwick says

Just try to dream up a story linking a terrorist hijacking in Vienna and the CIA with two former lovers at dinner in a gourmet restaurant in Carmel, California. Give up? Well, it's been done.

This curious little book — a novella, really — emerged from the author's long-standing desire to write a book centered on two people at dinner. I don't know about you, but I'm always suspicious (and often disdainful) about fiction that's meant to execute someone's idea about writing style or structure. This sort of thing is usually referred to as "literature," and as far as I'm concerned, it often sucks. However, Olen Steinhauer, a consummately talented writer of espionage novels, has managed to avoid the sinkhole of "literature" and produce an example of heart-pounding suspense. He's done it many times before, and I'm

certain he'll do it again.

It turns out that that dinner for two, while the centerpiece of the story and the scene of the story's climax, takes a back seat to the many flashbacks that explore the years of events leading up to the dinner. And those events — the central one of which is a terrorist hijacking of a civilian aircraft — lend the story its heft.

All the Old Knives unwinds in alternating sections that represent the recollections of the two principal characters, Henry Pelham and Celia Harrison. At the time of the terrorist hijacking in Vienna, both were officers of the CIA there. They were also lovers. Now, years later, Celia has long been retired to a life of luxury in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, one of the wealthiest and most idyllic communities anywhere. Then Henry calls her from Vienna to suggest they get together for dinner during a trip he'll be making to a conference in a nearby town. Celia can't imagine why Henry would propose this, other than that he might still be smitten with her, but we learn from Henry that he's been assigned to follow up the long-unsolved mystery of what happened that fateful night in Vienna, when a CIA agent was one of 120 passengers murdered on the plane. Had their agent been betrayed by someone inside the station? Was one of them involved?

From beginning to end, All the Old Knives is full of suspense. It's surprising to the last drop.

Olen Steinhauer is sometimes hailed as a worthy successor to John Le Carre, Graham Greene, and Eric Ambler. I agree. All the Old Knives is his tenth novel. I've read and loved all the rest, most of them reviewed on this blog.

Linda says

This book was psychological thriller from the get go. Two agents stationed in Austria deal with the high jacking of an airliner with over 100 innocents on board. The terrorists threaten to kill all on board if their demands are not met. Being CIA agents, both Henry & Ceila, work their sources to try and find an life saving solution. Little do they know that there is a traitor in their mist and the conclusion of this terrorist act haunts all involved for years to come.

Henry loves Ceila and she thought she loved him until this event shattered their relationship and sent Ceila running off to the states to put her old life behind her and begin over with a new husband and children. But someone wants to know who the traitor was that exposed their agent on the plane and led to all the deaths.

Henry suspects Ceila and she suspects him. One of them has the proof that will destroy the other, or will they destroy each other?

This plot has twists and turns that will keep you guessing until the very end. And what an ending it is. Enjoy!

Paul says

All The Old Knives – An Interesting Spy Story

Olen Steinhauer is often compared to John Le Carre with his writing, and he is certainly a master of writing

Spy Thrillers and has a prodigious output which is not comparable to many writers. All The Old Knives is a small but punchy spy thriller that is an engagingly well written book without any padding.

All The Old Knives Olen Steinhauer has come up with a plot and a setting in which is unusual in that all the action takes place around a dining table in a restaurant in Carmel, California which is quite ingenious. Henry has flown out to visit his former lover Celia who also happened to be a colleague in the Austrian CIA Station. Henry is still working in the paranoid world of the CIA; Celia has escaped and is married with two children and settled in to a quiet life.

Henry wants to talk to Celia about an event in 2006 that had rocked the CIA station when an Airplane hijack at Vienna Airport went wrong and it looks like the hijackers had some help from within the American Embassy. This event had haunted the Station and the CIA operatives since then.

We see the story of those events slowly revealed from both Celia and Henry's perspective of their time in Vienna as lovers and colleagues. This is a truly mesmerising plot that is slowly revealed from both perspectives and able to see the contradictions as the truth is slowly revealed. Even throughout the meeting you are not sure who really was the person giving information to the hijackers in the end.

Olen Steinhauer has written a truly mesmerising Spy Thriller that will keep you gripped as you work your way through to the truth. One feels all the true paranoia of someone who operates in the Intelligence Community and at the end feel the relief of when the traitor is revealed. A fantastic short spy thriller, really enjoyable that will draw you in and join them at the dinner table.

Col says

Synopsis/blurb.....

Celia used to lie for a living. Henry still does. Can they ever trust each other? Nine years ago, Henry and Celia were lovers and colleagues, both working for the CIA station in Vienna. Until terrorists hijacked a plane at the airport, a rescue attempt, staged from the inside, went terribly wrong and everyone on board was killed. That night has continued to haunt all of those involved; for Henry and Celia, it brought to an end their relationship. Celia decided she'd had enough; she left the agency, married and had children, and is now living an ordinary life in the Californian suburbs.

Henry is still a CIA analyst, and has travelled to the US to see her one more time, to relive the past, maybe, or to put it behind him once and for all. But neither of them can forget that question: had their agent been compromised, and how? And each of them also wonders what role their lunch companion might have played in the way things unfolded...All the Old Knives is Olen Steinhauer's most intense, most thrilling and most unsettling novel to date - from the New York Times bestselling author deemed by many to be John le Carre's heir apparent.

My take.....

If only half the books I read were as interesting and gripping as this one was, I would have little to complain about in my reading life. Nine years after a plane hijacking in Austria ended disastrously, Henry is investigating why it all fell apart. A visit to former lover Celia, who's now left this life behind her, is both anticipated and a little bit feared.

Is Henry still a little bit in love with Celia? Who is the mystery man he's been in touch with ahead of the encounter? Why is the waitress in the restaurant uncomfortable? Will the truth behind the botched operation be uncovered, or do they both already know why it failed and we are merely going through the motions and completing the game of charades?

Quite a short book, but with sufficient depth to feel you know and understand both main characters and their motivations by the end of it. I had my sympathies and favoured Henry over Celia, if I'm honest. Happy ending for both? Read it yourself and see.

Espionage, extremism, love, romance, suspicion, intrigue, lies, loyalty, friendship, family, abandonment..... all feature, before the final dish is served up.

Every box ticked – 5 from 5

Another Net Galley book from an author who is rapidly becoming one of my favourites.

This is the author's 10th full length novel. There's 5 in the Yalta Boulevard loosely connected series. I've read the last 2 back before the blog began. There are 3 in the Milo Weaver series – none of which I have yet gotten to.

The Cairo Affair and the shorter pieces – On the Lisbon Disaster and You Know What's Going On were enjoyed last year.

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04...>

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10...>

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11...>

Olen Steinhauer has his website over here.

<http://www.olensteinhauer.com/>

More from the talented Mr Steinhauer on my blog tomorrow!

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2015/03...>

Nancy says

Olen Steinhauer signals what he's up to at the very beginning of his clever *All the Old Knives* (St. Martins/Minotaur Books, paperback ARC) when CIA agent Henry Pelham discusses the state of contemporary spy fiction with a fellow airline passenger. She's reading an old Len Deighton. "They just don't make stories like this anymore. ... You knew who the bad guys were back then."

Actually, they do still write traditional spy novels -- see Joseph Kanon, above -- and Steinhauer's new book isn't as different as one might suppose, despite its up-to-the-minute terrorist-flavored plot and its unconventional framework. Almost all of it takes place over dinner at a quiet restaurant in Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif., where Henry is meeting former lover and agent Celia Favreau for the first time in five years. Both were stationed in Vienna during the catastrophic takeover of a passenger plane by a radical Islamic group. Celia left within months after the debacle to marry an older man and start a family. Ostensibly, Henry just happens to be in her neck of the woods and Celia is catching him up on her two small children, but much

more is revealed in their conversation and in flashbacks. Henry's involved in an inquiry about the hijacking -- there's lingering suspicion that a mole tipped off the terrorists -- and he wants Celia's version of events. Of course, it's all in the official report. Or is it?

Halfway through the book, Steinhauer switches perspectives from Henry to Celia, and while her memories overlap his, they also differ on crucial points. So, who are you going to believe? Both are well-trained liars and unreliable witnesses. The narrative switches back and forth as dinner progresses. Wine flows. Delicious food consumed. The veal hardly needs a knife, but the talk becomes more pointed. In the end, a good spy tales turns on deceit and betrayal. All the Old Knives is very good indeed.
from On a Clear Day I Can Read Forever

Darwin8u says

"Perhaps it's only those who don't know us at all who are able to see us most clearly."
? Olen Steinhauer, All the Old Knives

First a disclosure. I'm a Steinhauer completist. I love Olen Steinhauer. For many reasons. First, he is one of the few, modern spy novelists that seems interested in writing quality espionage fiction, during a period when spy fiction is evolving as the business of espionage shifts. Second, Steinhauer is pushing, incrementally, towards the long shadow of le Carré. With some novels Steinhauer seems almost a breath away from le Carré. He isn't there yet, but he is close with 'All the Old Knives', and he is far closer than most of his peers.

Spy fiction if it is unserious deals with violence, mystery, sex and an almost pornographic, hyper-nationalism. Great spy fiction deals with history, memory, loss, ambiguity, mistakes, regret, and deception. Steinhauer has written what can best be explained as a locked room spy mystery. It is at heart an interrogation that is highlighted with various forms of flashback. It is the intersection of two lives, two loves, and one dark, shared past, finally unlocked in a Carmel-by-the-Sea restaurant.

This is a short book, but one that moves with a measured precision. This isn't a beach read. It is a book to read while you are waiting in a hospital to see if the lump is benign. A book to read while you wait for your spouse to return from a dangerous drive. It is a book that makes no easy heroes and leaves the final curtain cracked just a bit.

Antigone says

More novella than novel, Steinhauer's *All the Old Knives* is one of those miniature offerings that barely fits in the palm of your hand. In keeping with its toy-like presentation, the author admits this project was somewhat of a lark - a story that came to him upon encountering a *Masterpiece Theater* production starring Alan Rickman and Emma Thompson in which all the action took place at a restaurant table. Could he produce an espionage novel employing the same restriction? This is his attempt.

Henry Pelham and Celia Harrison were CIA case officers in Vienna some years back when a hostage situation developed at the airport. Things went south fast and resolved horrifically, with subtle and undeniable hints of agency collusion. Henry has taken it upon himself to investigate this long-ago incident and has saved Celia's interview for last. Traveling to Carmel-By-The-Sea, where she has retired into marriage and motherhood, he arranges to meet her for dinner at a local restaurant. Will the love he still feels for her carry the day, or will it fall to the wayside in his mission to uncover the truth?

Each character takes a turn at the narrative and, though it's a bit of a cheat to his aim, Steinhauer provides a wealth of flashbacks that serve to flesh out the seedy twists and turns of the incident in question. Henry's secrets are, by and large, easily deduced. Celia's are much trickier and it is she who held the story through to the end for me. While messy at certain stages, I must say it was awfully nice to find a woman's strength used to such advantage in an espionage tale.

This was a quick read, and pleasantly diverting.

Ann says

Clever, clever, clever - a very quiet buildup and a huge wallop of a punch at the end - to the point that I had to go back and 're-listen' (audiobook) to glean clues I must have missed first time around. An Amazon 'best book of the month, March 2015'. A short novel, masquerading as a quiet 'what's the point' book at the beginning, and then you have to wake up and pay attention. The story is about two CIA operatives in Vienna in 2006 (one now retired) - however the total scene takes place in one setting, a seemingly innocent dinner rendezvous between two past lovers in Carmel, California. A very interesting glimmer into the functioning of spy organizations such as the CIA and perhaps the expendability of their operatives. Amazing in how the author was able to incorporate so many seemingly 'by-the-way' clues into a one-scene setting. Recommend.

Jack says

Soon to be a major motion picture, starring Michelle Williams and Christopher Pine. I predict that it will be a good one and I'm looking forward to the tub of popcorn and the big Diet Pepsi.

The upshot: Two "exes", Henry Pelham and Celia Harrison, meet up for a restaurant dinner in Carmel-by-the-Sea, on California's picturesque central coast. But this is no ordinary "Hey, how has life been treating ya?" reunion dinner: Henry is an active CIA agent and Celia is an ex-CIA agent. The purpose of the get-together is to discuss a terrorist attack that was part of their caseload while working on the same Agency team in Vienna, Austria. Through dinner conversation and flashbacks we learn about this act of terrorism, the CIA's response, and why the whole thing still haunts both Henry and Celia. Steinhauer keeps the pace going full-blast ahead, and neatly ties it all up at the end. It's a fast, absorbing read, and, despite the disturbing topic, immensely entertaining.

There's really not much more that I can say without giving away spoilers. So, instead, I'll talk about two things that were sort of "iffy" about the book; taken together, they're what made me award this book four stars instead of five.

First, I won't describe this book as "predictable" -- the dinner table setting is very clever, in fact -- but I will say that I correctly predicted the climax of the story fairly early in the game. This comes as a surprise to me, because my amateur detective skills are negligible. Put it this way: If I were a member of the Scooby Doo gang (for example, as Velma's grad student ex-boyfriend "Jack", from California) I would naturally gravitate toward the refrigerator-raiding Shaggy and Scooby rather than Fred, Velma, and Daphne -- whom we all can agree were the true mystery-solving sleuths of the bunch. But this time, there was a huge glaring clue that tipped me off before Fred, Velma, and Daphne cracked the case.

Second, I thought there was something strange about Celia's dialogue. Sometimes it seemed unnatural, affected. Hard to describe, but it sort of reminded me of Mrs. Howell on "Gilligan's Island", or William F. Buckley, Jr. Whenever I read Celia's spoken passages, I thought to myself, "Wow, I think Steinhauer really slipped into 'writerly' mode here. I wish this book was more like Steinhauer's realistic, hard-edged *The Cairo Affair*, which is one of the best spy thrillers I've read in the past couple of years!"

Final score: Four Scooby Snacks. Oops! I mean...four stars.

Laurie Anderson says

A bit baffled by this one, but it may be a book that is better read with the eyes, and I read it with my ears. Some books don't work quite as well in audio.

Betty says

I definitely had a problem getting through this book even though it is less than 300 pages. The plot line just did not work for me.

Two former spies, once romantically involved, meet over dinner in Carmel, California. Both are still bothered by a terrorist attack several years previously. One of them wants to finally know the truth about the tragedy on which terrorists took over a commercial airliner and used the children onboard as pawns.

The book is slow paced and takes place over only one evening at dinner. However there are numerous flashbacks to the night of the tragedy. The sections bounce around being told from Henry's viewpoint at times and then from Celia's viewpoint. I often had difficulty determining which character's viewpoint I was reading. Even with that distraction, the book is well written. However, I found the story generally pretty dull. There was just that one small thread in the storyline that kept me reading. But by the end I did not feel the story was worth the time invested.

If you are really into spy novels you may enjoy it. It does have a hint of conspiracies and several twists.

aPriL does feral sometimes says

[Shishani was Henry's asset years ago, but Henry was no longer his h

Lori says

For a novel that only took a couple of hours to read it certainly delivered a punch. I'm not a fan of espionage books so in the beginning I wasn't sure this was going to be for me, but about a 1/4 of the way in I was hooked. Really enjoyed.
