



## A Lily of the Field

*John Lawton*

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## **A Lily of the Field** John Lawton

**Vienna, 1934.** Ten-year-old cello prodigy Méret Voytek becomes a pupil of concert pianist Viktor Rosen, a Jew in exile from Germany.

**The Isle of Man, 1940.** An interned Hungarian physicist is recruited for the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, building the atom bomb for the Americans.

**Auschwitz, 1944.** Méret is imprisoned but is saved from certain death to play the cello in the camp orchestra. She is playing for her life.

**London, 1948.** Viktor Rosen wants to relinquish his Communist Party membership after thirty years. His comrade and friend reminds him that he committed for life...These seemingly unconnected strands all collide forcefully with a brazen murder on a London Underground platform, revealing an intricate web of secrecy and deception.

The ensuing events have personal significance for Scotland Yard Detective Frederick Troy. He finds himself pursuing a case with deadly and far-reaching consequences that ultimately threaten the balance of power in Europe.

## **A Lily of the Field Details**

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Author : John Lawton

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## From Reader Review A Lily of the Field for online ebook

### Tracyk says

Like some other books in this series, A Lily of the Field covers a span of years. It starts in 1934, leading up to World War II, covers some events during World War II, and picks up again after the war is over. The first portion of the book is called "Audacity" and features Méret Voytek, a talented young cellist living in Vienna, who is not Jewish but ends up in Auschwitz; her teacher and friend, Viktor Rosen, who ends up interned in England on the Isle of Man; and Dr. Karel Szabo, a Hungarian physicist, who is involved in the development of the atomic bomb.

The second part of the book, "Austerity," is set in 1948 London, and brings in Frederick Troy and his brother Rod, who was also interned on the Isle of Man due to issues with his citizenship. [Coincidentally, London was the host city for the Olympics in 1948. That does not figure much in the story, but it is mentioned.]

This is a longish book, and seems almost like two books, although there are definite links between the two stories. The crime in this book is the murder of a Polish painter, shot on an Underground platform with a very unusual gun. It doesn't occur until towards the middle, in the second part. As in many of Lawton's books, the resolution of the crime is less important than the overall story and the picture of Britain during these years.

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### Nooilforpacifists says

The best John Lawton "Inspector Troy" book I've read to date--perhaps because Troy's offstage for most of the first half. It's a gripping historical thriller, written in two converging segments.

With some spoilers, the first half focuses on a (non Jewish) young girl named Méret Voytek in Vienna beginning in the late 1920. She's a gifted Cellist, taking lessons and doing duets from THE Central European teacher of the day, Victor Rosen. Rosen is Jewish and flees (we know early on he survives, because of scenes in English internment camps, locked up with the best German and Eastern European Jewish physics brains). Voytek is incorporated into the main Nazi youth orchestra at Anschluss (when she's about 18 years old). She survives the Nazis and war by withdrawing into herself. Yet, in 1944 she quasi-randomly is sent to Auschwitz, where she winds up playing in the camp orchestra and for the Commandant. Back in England, the internees are released, many to work in Los Alamos. Because of her privileged position in the Auschwitz orchestra, Voytek, half starved, but cello intact, barely survives the camp.

The second half begins with the murder of a Polish emerge on the London Underground. It quickly seems like a job for MI5, especially after a band of Czech goons come calling. But the spooks don't want the case, so it's assigned to Sargent Troy, the Toff, whose Socialist MP brother was born in Vienna, and thus also was in the same internment camp. Troy doesn't think the deceased was Polish, and when the next dead body arrives, it both starts a breakdown among the internment group, including Troy's brother, and -- more importantly -- a major security leak that could humiliate the Brits in front of the Americans.

Plugging the leak is easy; surviving the Czechs is harder. But, who killed the Man in the Tube, and why?

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### **Jim says**

The best of the series. The characters, although in large part historical, are believable. There are twists and turns everywhere and even though Inspector Troy neither gets shot nor sex in this one, there is plenty of action.

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### **Corny says**

I loved this book for the first 150 pages as it follows the lives of several different people through World War II. The rest of the story takes place mostly in London and simply runs out of gas. Obviously a lot of research has been done in order to make this period piece authentic and for that reason I finished it. However, the plot resolution completely lacks credibility and the characters are wooden and equally unbelievable. Without spoiling the plot, I can say with certainty that the ending held little in the way of surprises. Also, the last 150 pages are badly overwritten, bogging down the story with encounters that seem totally superfluous. Unless you are a Lawton fan, and I gather that he has written several of these books with the same hero, or a lover of postwar novels simply for the ambiance, I would give this a pass.

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### **Shawn says**

Well-written and convincing. I'll be starting with #1 in the series very soon.

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### **Bianca says**

De titel en de cover van het boek triggerden me om het mee te nemen uit de bibliotheek. Eenmaal thuis had ik door dat het boek onderdeel is van de serie over inspecteur Troy bij Scotland Yard. Het boek is zelfstandig goed te lezen, gaandeweg wordt het verhaal rondom inspecteur Troy iets scherper, iets wat ongetwijfeld duidelijker zou zijn geweest als ik de serie vanaf het begin zou hebben gelezen. Het verhaal zelf vind ik mooi; de setting van getalenteerd celliste, de Tweede Wereldoorlog, Auschwitz, en het leven na bevrijd te zijn. En de dreiging van de koude oorlog. De schrijver heeft met zijn verhaal me aangenaam verrast. Dat ik in het midden van het verhaal iets wat indutte, dat kwam door hele verhandelingen over inspecteur Troy, maar het begin en het eind is ijzersterk. Zo goed dat ik me over dat middengedeelte kan zetten. Ik ben zo benieuwd naar de eerdere en latere delen van de serie. Ik ga maar eens kijken of de bibliotheek ook deel één heeft. Dat lijkt me een goede start.

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### **Beth says**

A LILY OF THE FIELD – John Lawton

The prologue is set in a park in London, either in February or March, 1948. Two men meet to discuss the future of one. "It had not been the hardest winter....War. Winter. He had thought he might not live through either. He had....This winter would not kill him. The last would. And all the others that had preceded it." Viktor Rosen had come to tell Andre Skolnik, someone he had known for much of his life, that he had to stop. It is an audacious statement. Andre Skolnik responds, bringing Viktor back to their real world, "You cannot just stop. You cannot simply quit. What was it you think you joined all those years ago?....the Communist Party of the Soviet Union simply does not work that way."

The first section of the book is termed "Audacity". It is February, 1934 and in Vienna those who have been paying attention are preparing for the change that is inevitable. Hitler has taken over Germany and it is only a matter of time before he claims Austria, especially Vienna, as part of his Thousand-Year Reich. Some German Jews have come to Vienna thinking there would be safety and for a few years, it seemed this would be so. Viktor Rosen is one of the most famous pianists in Europe. Imre Voytek arranges for Rosen to give his ten-year old daughter, Meret, music lessons. Meret is a prodigy, a cellist whose second instrument is the piano. Viktor is a pianist whose second instrument is the cello. The music lessons will impact their lives.

Three years later, Viktor flees to England before the Germans march into Austria. Meret's life has centered around her lessons with Viktor but very soon after the Anschluss, she realizes just how prescient Viktor was. The youth orchestra becomes part of the Hitler Youth and Meret willingly goes along with the rules until, one day, a chance encounter with a boy from the orchestra pulls her into the Nazi machine. Meret is transported to Auschwitz where her talent saves her life. She becomes the cellist for the Ladies' Orchestra of Auschwitz. When the Russians advance on the camp at the end of the war, Meret is protected because even the Russians know who she is.

The second section of the book is "Austerity". Meret is re-united with Viktor in England after she has spent time in Paris. Her talent and Viktor's combine to bring them the same adulation they had received in Vienna. But, although the victors in the war, England is a difficult place to live. Everything is still rationed and life is not easy but Meret and Viktor are established as part of that class of people those talents set them apart from, and above, their new countrymen.

It is in England that Freddie and Rod Troy come into the book. Freddie is called to investigate the murder of a painter, Andre Skolnik. There are no clues, no witnesses so Freddie asks his brother, Rod, if anyone in the ex-pat community knows who he is. When Skolnik is identified, the Troy brothers find their lives becoming more complicated.

The lives of Viktor and Meret run on a parallel path with that of Karel Szabo, an Hungarian physicist, who was interred on the Isle of Man with Rod Troy. Szabo is taken to Canada and then to the United States to work on the Manhattan Project. At the end of the war, he, too, comes to London with a head full of secrets that both sides in the new Cold War want desperately.

As with **SECOND VIOLIN, A LILY OF THE FIELD** has a chronology that makes it easy to follow the many characters as they move from pre-Nazi Vienna to post-war London. Quentin Crisp is a real person who plays a role in the book that is very close to his real life in England after the war.

Meret and Viktor are the principal characters with Inspector Troy as a close third. The title of the book is spoken by Meret, at the end of the book when she says she will be "...a lily of the field, a beautiful but useless adornment...." The term is first introduced on the page before Chapter One: "I would love to be like the lilies of the field. someone who managed to read this age correctly would surely have learned just this: to be like a lily in the field." **ETTY HILLESUM**, diary entry September 22, 1943. She died at Auschwitz,

November 30, 1943. Meret saves herself by being a beautiful adornment, not a beautiful human being.

The cover of the book is striking. It is primarily a sepia photograph of a street in Vienna in the late 1930's. The "O" in the title encircles a swastika. Among the people on the street is a young blond girl carrying a cello case. She is wearing a red coat. She is the only bit of color superimposed on the photograph. She is a lily of the field, her cello case a statement about her ability to adorn the world.

She is also a reminder of the child in "Schindler's List". Spielberg shot the movie in black and white. The only color is a little girl in a bright red coat, walking alone. Schindler sees her from a distance, the only sign of joy in a world that is black and white. Later, in one of the camps, he sees her again, joy destroyed. The cover of the book is such a visceral reminder of the movie that it seems that a comparison is intended. Beauty and joy are not always cherished.

If anyone has not yet read any of the books in the Inspector Troy series, please start with SECOND VIOLIN, then BLUFFING MR CHURCHILL, BLACK OUT, A LILY OF THE FIELD, OLD FLAMES, FLESH WOUNDS, and, finally, A LITTLE WHITE DEATH. I recently read SECOND VIOLIN so I am going to start re-reading the series with BLUFFING MR CHURCHILL.

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### **Trilby says**

It's been a few years since I've had the pleasure of reading a Lawton novel, and this one blew me away. After you've gone through a number of works by lesser talents, coming upon the work of a master is like experiencing a '69 Borollo after swilling cheap Merlot. Lawton is without peer in seamlessly combining the genres of historical fiction and the thriller.

The first part is largely from the point of view of a young Viennese cellist who winds up a prisoner in Auschwitz; the second part switches to Inspector Frederick Troy of Scotland Yard, the protagonist in many of Lawton's other novels. Almost all of the other mystery series I have read are in exact chronological order. It amazes me that in the Troy series, Lawton can jump around from decade to decade, completely scrambling the chronology, yet make the plots coherent and produce characters that are vivid, developed, and memorable. This novel takes place at the more recent end, and a number of characters, like Troy's brother Rod and boss Onions, are carried over from previous stories.

The scene moves from Vienna, to Auschwitz, to Los Alamos, to Paris, to London, yet the story is not hard to follow. Lawton well captures the horrors of the rise of the Nazis on the Continent, and the unspeakable horrors facing those herded into the camps. Yet he keeps an even tone, never resorting to caricature or sentimentality. The background research is impressive, from such diverse subjects as theater in 1930's Vienna to the development of the A-bomb to postwar London with its shortages and smog.

"A Lily of the Field" is another masterwork by the American master of the English detective/spy thriller. I can hardly wait for the next in the Troy series.

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### **Mark says**

I did not realise until well into this book that it was part of a series, but the main character of Inspector Troy

was not someone who I found intriguing enough to read another entry.

The beginning of the book was interesting, and or the first half I was engrossed. However, after that midway point the story fizzled out for me and I lost interest.

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### **Rob Kitchin says**

A Lily of the Field consists of two distinct parts. The first part charts the various strands of Meret, Victor and Szabo from 1934 to 1948, putting in place the contextual back story. The second covers Troy's investigation into the underground station murder. There's a distinct contrast in styles between the two parts. The first is light, quick, short scenes that provide insight into key moments and give good, strong pen pictures of the characters. The writing is expressive and Lawton delivers an expansive story, covering a number of characters, places and times, in a relatively short amount of space. The material is also historically rich, detailing key events over a 14 year period without it seeming as if things were skipped over or them dominating the narrative. It is a really skilful and engaging piece of writing. Really top-draw stuff. The second half, the pace drops and the writing becomes a little more leaden, and characters from the first half all but disappear for extended passages. At times, it is seems to become more about Troy and his family than the story. It's still very good, but it lacks the sparkle and dash of the first part. Even so, the plotting is excellent and there is a satisfying resolution to the story. Overall, a shame that the second half did not have the verve of the first, but nonetheless a well crafted and very enjoyable read that is a cut above normal fare.

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### **MisterLiberry Head says**

Covering the years 1934 to 1948, the novel follows the parallel stories of two main characters: Méret Voytek, a gifted young Viennese cellist, and Dr. Karel Szabo, an émigré Hungarian physicist. The story includes Rodyon Troy as a minor character, re-visiting and building upon some incidents from *SECOND VIOLIN*. Scotland Yard Murder Squad sleuth Frederick Troy doesn't dominate the narrative until the second half of the book, when he's 33 years old--as always, tying everything together in a solution that satisfies his sense of justice, but isn't typical of ordinary police procedures. Still single and secretive, Troy is rightly accused of being "useless at socio-sexual preamble" (p252). As a shootist, Troy also has become somewhat like a Dirty Harry of Scotland Yard.

Voytek is a fascinating character, reminding me of "Nell Breakheart" in *THEN WE TAKE BERLIN* (2013), which I read before this one. Lawton does a fine job of conveying the detached, war-weary world views of the "Mitteleuropa" nationals. As physicist Szabo says: "Once I'm behind barbed wire ... it's just another camp" (p109). In fact, to many of these broken characters--tangled in a web of "spookery"--the whole post-war world is a camp.

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### **Ann Tonks says**

This is the first Inspector Troy novel I've read and perhaps I should have read the others first. But I suspect that's not really my problem. I just don't believe Inspector Troy as a character. He doesn't make any sense as a person with an immigrant European history in England - let alone a really rich one. And I also don't believe

in the psychology of one of the pivotal points in the book. And unlike some writers of historical fiction, I felt lectured to. Putting all those quibbles to one side, I did keep reading it to the end just to see how all the multiple threads could be tied together.

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### **Sam Reaves says**

A number of writers are doing interesting things with historical espionage fiction set against the background of the epic catastrophe that was the middle decades of the twentieth century. (Philip Kerr, Joseph Kanon, Alan Furst) John Lawton may be the best of these. He has written stand-alones as well as this series about a London detective inspector named Frederick Troy. The novels are literary, complex, and full of historical and cultural references. They are also pretty good yarns, with satisfying doses of tradecraft and eruptions of violence.

A Lily of the Field is the story of how a Viennese girl, a musical prodigy, sees her life destroyed by the Nazi Anschluss and miraculously survives Auschwitz (harrowingly depicted) to be recruited by Soviet intelligence. Deeply wounded, she winds up in London with her old teacher, a renowned pianist, who has his own secret life. Their story intersects with Troy's as he investigates the killing of a Polish exile on the Underground, revealing Soviet skulduggery in the effort to get the Bomb.

The novel hauntingly illustrates the tragedy of the collapse of European civilization that culminated in the Second World War and the Cold War. John Lawton is doing what good novelists do, illuminating history through compelling human stories.

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### **David Carr says**

Lawton's novels are masterpieces of time and place, and they are irresistible to me. The Troy series is set in London at various times in the WWII era -- before, after, and during -- involving layers of culture and society, the business of murder detection, and international strands. Characters are vivid and captivating, from the local prostitute to the aristocracy. This novel begins in Vienna, moves to Poland (Auschwitz), Canada, New Mexico and London.

Musicians and physicists are at the center of the events in this book, and all of them are given complex moral dimensions, histories, and motives, grounded on historic events. The character of no one is a certainty, except for Troy, and his occasionally compromised, vividly sexual nature. The war, before the war, after the war -- these are times of fear, uncertainty, resentment, social politics, and slow recovery. Without the excavations in novels of this kind, details of feeling would disappear and generations would be misremembered.

This series has not been published in chronological order, but it is not difficult to piece the sequence together. (Second Violin, Bluffing Mr. Churchill, Black Out, A Lily of the Field, Old Flames, Flesh Wounds, A Little White Death) As a companion to this work, Any Human Heart by William Boyd (just seen in a British series) is not to be missed; I have a small but growing shelf of London war books assembled nearby as well. First among them is the Connie Willis pair. Of the seven Lawton books published, I have read six; he cannot write them fast enough for me, so I have to keep a few alternates on hand.

When reading about Britain in the Second World War, especially during the early years of the bombings, it is

important to remember this: they did not know who would win, how it would work out, what would happen. Ambiguity and danger: places where the heartfelt moral life matters most.

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### **Yvonne says**

Two stories are unfolding and weaving into each other—that of cellist Meret Voytek and that of Karel Szabo, a Hungarian physicist, with cameos by Viktor Rosen, a world-famous pianist. While the stories are chock full of WWII and personal drama, this is not until page 155, out of 375, that Inspector Frederick Troy, the protagonist, makes his full appearance (was seen at a dinner party before) and the book's plot begins to unfold. I found this mildly irritating because it felt like a 155-page preamble.

However, I do enjoy Mr. Lawton's writing and Inspector Troy, so I will read any he types out.

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