



Old Boys

Charles McCarry

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In his magnificent new novel, Charles McCarry returns to the world of his legendary character, Paul Christopher, the crack intelligence agent who is as skilled at choosing a fine wine as he is at tradecraft, at once elegant and dangerous, sophisticated and rough-and-ready. As the novel begins, Paul Christopher, now an aging but remarkably fit 70ish, is dining at home with his cousin Horace, also an ex-agent. Dinner is delicious and uneventful. A day later, Paul has vanished.

The months pass, Paul's ashes are delivered by a Chinese official to the American consulate in Beijing and a memorial service is held in Washington. But Horace is not convinced that Paul is dead and, enlisting the support of six other retired colleagues—a sort of all-star backfield of the old Outfit—Horace gets the "Old Boys" back in the game to find Paul Christopher.

They start with a photo found in Paul's study: a woman's hand holding a centuries' old scroll, once in the possession of the Nazis and now sought by the U.S. government and Muslim extremists alike. Harassed by American intelligence, hunted by terrorists, Horace Christopher and the Old Boys travel the globe, from Xinjiang to Brazil, from Rome to Tel Aviv, Budapest to Moscow, in search of Paul and the unspeakably dangerous truth.

Old Boys Details

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From Reader Review Old Boys for online ebook

megan-redwitch says

i almost went with a two but just couldn't. the plot is uninteresting and filled with things i feel like i am supposed to fill in somehow because the author just didn't bother - and the weak side-plot didn't help either. the characters felt so cardboard-cutout i found myself not even bothering to remember their names half the time - i think a first for me. some interesting mystery notes in the start held no real mystery and the end simply ends, falls flat doesn't seem accurate enough. the author doesn't seem like an author for the amount of care that shows in this book. i picked it up not realizing it was part of a series, but have done that before and not had it matter, maybe it did here / maybe other books are better but i may not bother finding out from the amount of interest this failed to spark. would not recommend.

(from other one/two star reviews that i looked at after i finished reading it seems atypical of this author's work so maybe they are right it was rushed or a ghostwriter...and another in the series is worth a try but definitely skip this one either way!)

Richard Epstein says

McCarry is my favorite spy novelist. I suppose le Carré is better, whatever that may mean, exactly, but McCarry affords me greater pleasure. I breathe a sigh of comfort when I encounter Paul Christopher and friends, much the same reaction I have to the appearance of Rumpole.

Checkman says

Charles McCarry has been writing his Paul Christopher novels for forty years. I've read several of the novels over the past twenty-eight years - going back to high school. When I started the series I was a teenager and the Soviet Union still existed. Both are now gone, but Charles McCarry is still writing about his Cold War creation. Interestingly a creation that he has allowed to age and continue into the present. No more Cold War, no more Soviets and a world wide situation that is just as messy, but lacking the comfortable division of East vs. West.

In "Old Boys" McCarry goes with a different perspective. That of Horace Hubbard, Paul's cousin. Paul Christopher goes missing, believed to have died in Western China, though all that is returned is his ashes. Not believing that Paul is dead and having learned of a new terrorist threat to the U.S. ,and possibly the spiritual bedrock of western civilization, Horace gets together a group of retired agents (the Old Boys of the title) and they set off on their own private covert operation.

As stories goes this one lacks the melancholy that pervades throughout most of the other Christopher novels. "Old Boys" is more of an action/adventure novel with a little bit of "The Da Vinci Code" thrown in for fun. The protagonists crisscross the globe getting into one sticky situation after another in various "exotic" locales. The entire story takes place in about a month and for a McCarry novel there is a large amount of daring-do thrown into the plot.

It moves along at a quick pace and it isn't very demanding. There is some usual implausible stuff (requiring some of that old "suspension of disbelief") in which a group of long retired operatives are able to make contact with old sources and former double agents (some barely alive, but still alive) and get all types of intelligence that leads them to the Big Bad as well as answers to a mystery that has plagued Paul Christopher for most of his life. I read it in five to ten minute snippets and never felt like I was lost or had to go back several chapters to figure out who everybody was again. Like I said it's not a typical Paul Christopher novel, but then Paul Christopher is basically a supporting character in this one.

A couple reviewers have speculated that this novel was ghost written, but I would have to disagree. There are moments ,throughout the book, that the old Charles McCarry style can be found. This isn't the first time that McCarry has gone with a different narrative perspective (See "The Miernik Dossier") and in this case the story is a first person narrative by Horace. As Horace himself states at the start of the story he isn't Paul Christopher and that difference makes more a very different feel.

As spy novels go "Old Boys" is okay. More typical of American style espionage fiction and less British than some of the earlier entries, but still not a bad entry into the genre. You'll notice that this one I put on my beach read shelf and there it belongs. For me it's a good novel to read in the mornings when we're at a hotel on trip. I typically wake up several hours before the rest of the family and find myself down in the lobby reading and drinking horrible complimentary coffee. I want a novel that won't make me think (too) much and will help while away the hours until everyone has arisen."Old Boys" fits that requirement.

Carolyn (in SC) C234D says

Excellent thriller, the most recent in a series that I have never read before. Paul Christopher is an old master spy, but what has happened to him? China says he is dead. His cousin Horace doesn't believe it. An old spy himself, he gets some old cohorts together to find Paul.

Harriet says

Love his writing! A little contrived but who cares.

Pris robichaud says

The "Outfit", The Insiders Name For The CIA, 20 Mar 2006

"THE BRITISH ARE generally considered the nonpareils in foreign-intrigue literature. Although they didn't invent the genre, they perfected it, and are credited with the first spy novel that can be considered serious literature, Erskine Childers' still enthralling 1903 classic, *The Riddle of the Sands*." Morton Marcus
The most enthralling spy novels, I think come from the British. This is my first introduction to Charles McCarry. I know not why, he is one of the best, and I read this novel on advice from an "inside" friend.
"McCarry is now a bit of an old boy himself: 75, to be precise. As a young man, 1957 to 1967, he served as a CIA agent, under 'deep cover'. This is not, apparently, quite as exciting or dangerous as it sounds. However, it certainly provided the man with some inside information, which he evidently puts to good use> He tells us

that "the mode is the message", and we would be wise to follow his lead."

Horace Hubbard one of the "Old Boys" has put out word that his cousin, Paul Christopher, is missing and that the network of Old Boys needs to meet and discuss. Paul, also an 'Old Boy' had talked with Horace a year earlier about finding his safe if he were to come up missing. The time is now, the safe has been found, and the Old Boys need to continue Paul's search. Paul is certain that his mother, who went missing when Paul was a wee lad, is alive and has with her an old religious Roman scroll. She was captured by the German Nazis and there had been some sightings but never anything certain. So, starts the search all over the world. Russia, US, China, Budapest, Frankfurt, and the deserts of North Africa, where camels are killed. Yes camels and for a darn good reason. Money is used to bribe everyone and success comes but not without a cost.

McCarry's 1995 novel, "Shelley's Heart," describes the events surrounding the presidential election that would take place five years later. In Mr. McCarry's fictional world, the 2000 elections result in a Senate that is split 50-50 and a disputed outcome that hangs on a few thousand votes in a single state. An impeachment also figures in the tale. The state in question is Illinois, not Florida, but this bit of literary license can be forgiven, considering Illinois' long tradition of voter fraud. The title of the book, by the way, derives from the name of a fictional secret society at Yale that is central to the events surrounding Mr. McCarry's fictional anticipation of the 2000 election--a hint, perhaps, of the all-Skull-&-Bones contest looming in 2004. So, we wonder, does McCarry really forecast the future Will the story in "Old Boys" come true?

This is a fast paced novel that moves quickly and tells the story with fine detail. It could not be put down. These "Old Boys" come close to finding the truth and Paul's mom. I want them on my side. How does a woman get into the "Old Boys" club, or does she?

Highly Recommended. prisrob 3-20-06

Jak60 says

I really came to love Paul Christopher as the hero of the series of novels delivered overtime by Charles McCarry; some of these novels are real masterpieces, like *The Last Supper* and *Tears of Autumn*, able to transcend their genre, others are very solid espionage stories, and a few are a little weaker. *Old Boys* is the final instalment of the series and I'm afraid belongs to the latter cluster; after a promising start, the story meanders around various narrative streams which struggle to fit together. Paul Christopher's presence here is more spiritual than physical as he's supposedly dead or at east AWOL for almost the entire story. So, the first, and apparently main stream is about the search for Paul Christopher, who turns out was in search - again -of his mother, Lori; so a family saga more than an espionage thriller. In fact, the book seems to be conceived to bring home a number of loose ends from all the previous books related to the personal stories of the Christopher family; this is especially Lori's book and it serves the purpose of filling a lot of gaps of her life, which had remained very mysterious so far. Then you have another parallel stream, trying to close the loop on a story also from previous books about an Arab prince, supposedly dead but actually alive and kicking, wanting to nuke the world. As if this was not enough, there is then a third narrative stream around t an ancient scroll telling an alternate version of Jesus Christ's life - and the idea of presenting Jesus Christ as a secret agent for the roman empire and the apostle Paul as his case officer is a looooong shot, bordering the ridiculous letting alone blasphemy. So, you wait for the various streams to connect, except they don't...

Among all this, you have several excruciatingly long digressions (like the lengthy description of how a rare bird called "houbara bustard" is hunted in the Asian deserts) which further dilute and fragment the storytelling.

So, a lot of diverse narrative stuff going on; Old Boys however does not have the power of other books in transcending their genre, so it ends up being a long soup. In essence, not the grandest final act for the series, yet this does not change my overall judgement of the overall saga, which remains very high.

Carrie says

I'm not sure if it's just this book or McCarry's work in general but I found this unusually slow going. This is my third or fourth Paul Christopher novel and a strong contender for my last.

My chief criticism of his novels is the lack of character development. I don't think it's asking too much for words to do something other than sit flat on a page even after they've been read.

This book in particular presented characters so flat they're borderline interchangeable. You'd probably need a razor scraper rather than a spatula to pull off the exchange.

Another thing - I'm a bit mystified by the series topography - the meta plotline or whatever you call the glue that holds a series together as it progresses. McCarry appears to turn the typical construct inside out. I'm accustomed to series using recurring characters & settings to provide the continuity for each series book, each with a stand alone plot.

In PaulChristopherLand though the series seems built on plot rather than background. One or two plot lines, originating in book one teenage trauma - is the series unresolved backdrop, and what's unique about each book is just the detail of a new approach or a new peripheral character. The plot / quest/ central focus doesn't change nor are the main characters infused with enough personality to get up off the page and into one's imagination.

In McCarry's defense re: stick figure personalities, he does let us know through narration that each key character has a *reason* for not knowing &/or disclosing their thoughts and feelings. The reasons, at least, are unique. For some it's class culture, for others trauma, etc.. So I can't really say I wasn't warned about the likelihood of one dimensional non-evolving indistinguishable characters.

Whew. Bad mood, what?

False says

Paul Christopher returns in a novel that takes an aging agency and military community we've been introduced to in the past and puts them back into the action for that "one last phone call that says you are needed." I'm reading all of McCarry right now, and I have to say I am in awe at the perfection of his plots and paragraphs. This work doesn't disappoint. I practically read it without putting it down.

Susan says

McCarry was always one of my favorites in the age of the Cold War thriller (in books like *The Last Supper* and *The Tears of Autumn*). This one is maybe not as good as Le Carre's one about "old spies" (*Absolute Friends*) but it's good and I enjoyed it a lot. Basically it's the story of 5 old spies, superannuated from the

CIA, who join forces to find another one of them who's disappeared and been reported dead in Western China. They don't believe it and set out to find him. They're all 60ish or more—one has to reach for his nitro pills when eluding militant Russians who want to kill him as he comes down the stairs from the apartment of an informer—he later takes a brief respite in the US to get a pacemaker installed before proceeding to Kyrgystan and the novel's denouement in the desert.

They're searching for Paul Christopher (spy-hero of earlier novels, like the rest out to pasture at 70). He's off because someone brought word that his mother who was kidnapped by the Nazi commander, Heydrich, in WWII when Paul was a teenager, and then never seen again, has surfaced and is in danger. She's 94. Paul left his friend and cousin, Horace Hubbard, the leader of the old boys, a cryptic letter and a clue to find a hidden safe in his house. There Horace finds a painting (one he's always hated but worth a million on more) he's to sell to finance the romp. Eventually Christopher's daughter Zarah joins the tribe. The enemies are the Chinese secret service (Christopher spend 10 years in a Chinese prison camp in his earlier life), Russian mafia (i.e., ex, KGB), an old Arab millionaire named Ibn Awad who's stolen some dirty bombs from the Russians which he plans to unleash on American cities. Then there's Kevin (with his Ohio accent) whose loyalties no one is ever very sure of, though he's mostly likely an American gray (unacknowledged) force or some variation of Russian freelancer.

There's a subplot that maybe imitates (or covers similar ground as) The Da Vinci Code: the Amphora Scroll, a Roman document hidden in a jar that "proves" that Jesus of Nazareth was an unwitting agent of Roman Intelligence. Lori Christopher (the 94-year old mother) stole it from Heydrich and hid out in the remote reaches of the Taklimakan desert most of her life to keep it away from anyone likely to exploit it. Ibn Awad, he with the dirty bombs, now wants it to discredit Christianity.

The best parts feature the doings of the old boys themselves. Both the Amphora Scroll and the long-lost Lori Christopher plots peter out by the end and the reader doesn't much care.

Matthew says

Overly complicated plot trying to do too much

Chris says

Well, maybe 2 1/2 stars.

This espionage thriller is strong on plot and setting: the story starts with CIA retirees reuniting to search for a comrade who may or may not be dead (and who may also in turn be searching for his mother, who ALSO may or may not be dead). Add to this sundry mercenary killers, a shadowy 'Gray Force' led by 'Kevin' :) the requisite Islamic nutcase with very deadly weapons, and the original manuscript of an apocryphal story from the life of Jesus. And Nazis, too. McCarry keeps this complicated story moving efficiently through several well-described exotic locales (besides his undercover experience in the CIA, he was also a senior editor for National Geographic).

The weak point is characterization: with so many actors (nearly all male), the author has no time to help us learn very much about anyone, except to move the story along. The five old boys that the narrator brings together seemed nearly interchangeable. But a lot happens!

Tripp says

One of life's minor pleasures is reading a book that has been on your shelf for years. I have had Charles McCarry's Old Boys for six or seven years. It's not that I didn't want to read it, but it was the first McCarry I acquired. Having bought it, I realized it was a series book and that I would have to go about purchasing the, then out of print and hard to find, earlier books. I spent some time tracking down used copies and then Overlook Press reprinted his books. So, I've now caught up and could read this one.

Reading these books in order is important. Even more than the Ian Fleming novels, there are important subplots that span the books that will be ruined if you read them out of order. The earlier ones you can probably read out of synch, but you should hold off on Old Boys, until you have read a few of the earlier ones.

McCarry's books are old school spy novels, which makes sense as he was an old school spy. The main characters are not Jack Bauers or even James Bond's, but instead are skilled in subterfuge and ferreting out information by means other than torture. The plots are often elaborate, and this book is no exception. There is so much going on that it might seem a bit much. The plot starts with one retired spy gathering some retired friends to find the missing Paul Christopher, the hero from the first books. Loose nukes, family history, terrorism and the new Russia figure heavily.

What also figures heavily is one of the better subplots from any of his books, and one of the cleverest conspiracy theories I have ever read. In addition to looking for Paul Christopher, the characters are hunting for a text which claims that one of history's great events was actually a covert operation. If you buy the arguments of a certain 18th century British historian, it would make for the biggest case of blowback of all time.

The book is a bit sprawling, but bits like the covert op make it a lot of fun.

Simon says

2.5 stars. I'd never read this author before and I should have started with an earlier work, because I think I missed a lot of connections. There's a promising setup about a missing spy and the colleagues who come out of retirement to find him, but there's so much plot (Islamic terrorism, ww2 espionage, a scroll from Biblical times, falconry) that we lose track of both the emotional journey and the tradecraft. The ending feels like an '80s action movie. Disappointing, but I'll try another by this author.

Tonja Doty says

Great book to read! Keeps you interested in what will happen next!

I was not sure if I would like this series. Charles McCarty is a wonderful writer! If you like to read espionage/spy, I recommend reading this author.
