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Interview: Daniel Silva, author of 'The English Spy'



Author Daniel Silva

BY CONNIE OGLE

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Daniel Silva has spent time in the Middle East. He writes an espionage series about an Israeli intelligence officer, after all, and before that he worked as United Press International's Middle Eastern correspondent in Cairo. In his 18 novels, he delves into the region's dark side, writing of terrorist threats and the dangers of Iranian nuclear capabilities.

But he will tell you that the scariest place he has ever been is Northern Ireland.

"I was there in 1998, the year of the Omagh bombing," says Silva, who appears June 10 at the Freedom Tower at Miami Dade College. "I actually saw the scene of a bombing a few hours after it happened in Portadown. They destroyed the high street with one of these 500-pound car bombs. ... Belfast was just so sad and tense and horrible during the war. The communities were at each other's throats. If you walked down the wrong street, you could get killed. It was rough."

Fallout from the bombing in Omagh — which killed 29 people and injured 220, the highest death toll during Ireland's "Troubles" — plays a pivotal role in Silva's riveting new novel. In *The English Spy*, legendary spy, assassin and sometime art-restorer Gabriel Allon takes on a former Irish Republican Army bombmaker-turned-mercenary, with the help of former British commando Christopher Keller, who has his own bloody past with the violent militia.

Silva's reading is the first in the Freedom Tower since The Center for Writing and Literature moved its offices there, and program director Lissette Mendez says the choice was deliberate.

"This is particularly appropriate," she says. "It's a museum, an historic building, with a beautiful ballroom that has had the beautiful murals restored. We thought it fit with the kind of books that Daniel Silva writes, with his main character being in the art world."

Gabriel Allon truly loves art; in Silva's last book, *The Heist*, he searched for a missing Caravaggio. But he doesn't get much chance to spend time with his beloved masterpieces in the fast-paced *The English Spy*.

"I wanted to write a good old-fashioned bang-bang book," Silva says. "When I start to think about a book, it's helpful to try and say exactly what kind of book I'm writing. They do fall into categories. Sometimes Gabriel acts as a private detective. Sometimes he's an operational agent. In this case, the story was just about a straight-up manhunt."

In *The English Spy*, the Irish terrorist on the lam turns out to be linked to some of Israel's worst enemies (he also once tried and failed to kill Keller, who has emerged as one of Silva's most intriguing characters). As usual, Silva took a page from history for inspiration.

"The link between Northern Ireland and the modern world is very real," Silva says. "After the war, members of the I.R.A. did go out into the world, and they worked for some really bad people. They sold bombmaking techniques to the Iranians. A delegation went to Tehran and helped them develop anti-tank weapons to give to Hamas and Hezbollah. ... Remember that the ability to make high-quality bombs is what separates hotheads from a really effective terrorist army."

Silva is comfortable discussing international intrigue and the future of world relations (he had Allon tangling with the Russians long before Vladimir Putin's recent antics). Hard, then, to believe that after he wrote the first Gabriel Allon novel he had to be persuaded to write the second.

"I didn't think it was a good idea to have an Israeli continuing character because I thought there was too much anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment in the world," he says.

He admits he has been proven wrong but adds that now, "There is a growing anti-Israeli sentiment rising in Europe in particular and even in America. ... Some people are so angry at Israel they might not pick up a book about an Israeli character. The flip side is that gives me an atmosphere for the novel of this besieged country, and an edge like that I like. It's easier to write. There aren't many great books written about happy relationships. You need drama and conflict. ... for better or worse, there's no shortage of conflict in the Middle East."

Working on such a series means spending a lot of time researching dark material (Silva confesses that he relaxes by watching cooking shows at night: "I love *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* — that's my guilty pleasure"). But he's not ready to give up on Allon and *The Office* — Israel's intelligence agency — just yet.

"I will never see 50 again, but I don't see myself as nearing the end of my career," he says, adding that he does not rule out writing a novel about Christopher Keller, who at the end of *The English Spy* embarks on an intriguing new career. "I hope that at a certain point I will write about something other than Gabriel Allon. ... He's still fun for me to write.

"I remind my family when they accuse me of being absent-minded or not paying attention that I spend more time in his world than I do in the real one," says Silva, who's married to journalist Jamie Gangel; they have two children. "I don't mean to sound like a crazy person! I set scenes in places where friends of mine live. I borrow

traits from people I know. When I talk about them with my wife, when I'm working through something, I refer to them as though they're friends. I talk about their lives as though they're real."

MEET THE AUTHOR

Who: Daniel Silva

When: 6:30 p.m. June 10

Where: Freedom Tower, Miami Dade College, 600 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

Parking: Free parking available at Building 7, 500 NE Second Ave.

Cost: Voucher required; purchase one copy of 'The English Spy' at Books & Books locations and get a voucher for two.

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