

Spy Story

Idealism, realism and skewed loyalties.

CLEVER GIRL: ELIZABETH BENTLEY, THE SPY WHO USHERED IN THE MCCARTHY ERA by Lauren Kessler. Harper Collins, 2003. Hardcover, \$26.95.

"Clever Girl" was the code name the Soviets gave American spy Elizabeth Bentley in cablegrams sent from Russian embassies in the U.S. back to Mother Russia before and during WWII. U.S. Army intelligence cracked the top-secret Venona codes in the early 1940s, although the project did not become publicly known until the mid-1990s. Beginning in 1945, the FBI used information gleaned from the decoded cables to verify Bentley's testimony concerning the two large, Communist espionage networks she ran. Much to its surprise, the FBI learned through Venona that Bentley was telling the truth.

In far-reaching, voluntary testimony, Bentley named 80 American citizens, some in highly placed governmental positions, who were active in her spy rings. She testified about individuals with Communist affiliations before congressional committees and grand juries well into the 1950s, even though she was much too good a spy to have kept any of the documents they passed her. True, her testimony led to the excesses of the McCarthy era, but Bentley's role was pivotal in explaining how the collection and distribution of classified documents worked.

Eugene author and UO journalism Prof. Lauren Kessler tells Bentley's dramatic story in the light of Venona's evidence that the Soviets were spying on the U.S. government throughout the 1930s and '40s. There was a Communist conspiracy. There were actual spies in the government sending sensitive papers through U.S.S.R. operatives to Moscow. Venona, in turn, has also been corroborated by the post-Cold War release in Moscow of some document archives.

Throughout Bentley's career as a former spy, she maintained the fiction that she was misled, taken advantage of by her older, well-connected lover, a senior Russian agent, and those he worked for. However, Kessler brings forward strong support for a different conclusion: Bentley was a devoted, idealistic Communist, who knew what she was doing when she came forward

on her own to volunteer as a spy. After her lover's death, the KGB people Bentley reported to took away the networks and contacts he had left in her care. In fear of the KGB — she was actually on an assassination list at one time — Bentley called the FBI and spilled the beans. As Kessler writes:

"... her story is more complicated — and far more interesting — than the sum of her personal imperfections. It is a story of good intentions gone bad, of skewed loyalties, of a past that could not be outrun no matter how long the race. It is the story of a woman who lived a life much bigger than the one to which she was born — and who paid the price."

Bentley's story is fascinating because she came from a New England family that all but guaranteed her membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution had she not turned out to be a notorious "Red Spy Queen." Liberally educated at Vassar to teach at elite private schools, Bentley spent 1933 in Italy, where both her sexuality and political awareness caught fire. Strongly influenced by the effects of Mussolini's fascism on ordinary Italians, Bentley was further distressed by her return to New York in 1934, when the Great Depression was in full swing. Unable to find work and without family to support her, Bentley fell enthusiastically into the arms of the American Communist Party, where she had many friends and lovers, for the only time in her life.

Kessler shows the gradual unbending of this upright Puritan patrician into a woman whose superficial appearance belied the intense, secret life she led. Through her party activities, Bentley met powerful men, some of whom tried to recruit her as a spy. But she became active when an older man she knew only as Yasha, one of the movement's top men, told her to cut off her other friends, move to a different apartment, give up her party meetings and report solely to him. When they fell in love, Yasha recognized that Bentley had the energy he was lacking.



Lauren Kessler

He taught her to spy. This was all highly unprofessional and dangerous for him as a Soviet operative. As Kessler writes:

"By being together, they were not just breaking society's code but also party regulations and espionage tradecraft. It was a heady combination. She was drunk on it. ... They were living, as someone later put it, in bourgeois sin and Leninist bliss." Because Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, J. Edgar Hoover and Richard Nixon were such rabid anticommunist right-wingers, I find it startling to learn that allegations of Communists in the government spying for the Russians were not all bogus. In a recent interview, Kessler said some of the Communists Bentley named were not trying to undermine the U.S. government, per se. Some of them "saw that Great Britain was getting all this intelligence from the U.S., but the U.S.S.R., our World War II ally, was not."

Kessler makes clear the multilayered context in which the fevered McCarthy Era thrived. She reports the exploits of the most powerful woman operative in the KGB but also shows Bentley as a flawed, lonely woman whose passions ran deep but whose survival depended on calm, calculated self-

denial. *Clever Girl* is a brilliant portrait of this complicated personality.

Kessler's complex understanding is based on extensive, careful research. She read from files available in a special FBI reading room in D.C. that holds a vast amount of data. She also collected as much oral history as she could, she said in a recent interview with *EW*. "I found almost everyone involved in Bentley's case who's still alive," she said, noting that some of the FBI guys "are pretty long-lived." Hearings at which Bentley testified are public records Kessler accessed through the UO.

"There was lots of press coverage — *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*," Kessler said. "She was on 'Meet the Press' on radio, so I could hear her voice, and she was the first female guest on 'Meet the Press' on live television, before videotape."

Something tragic clings to this woman who fell into history and shaped events that have come to define an entire American era. As Kessler said, "There were many consequences for Elizabeth Bentley of trying to lead a meaningful life."

Kessler has written 10 books, including the *Los Angeles Times* bestseller, *The Happy Bottom Riding Club: The Life and Times of Pancho Barnes*. She directs the UO literary nonfiction graduate program. Kessler reads and signs *Clever Girl* at 7 pm Tuesday, Aug. 12 at the UO Browsing room. Kessler is Alan Siporin's guest on KLCC's "Critical mass" on Sunday, August 10. **EW**

BOOK NOTES Aug. 7 - Sept. 28: Dean Van Leuven (*Life Without Anger*) reads and signs books at 7 pm. Aug. 7 at Barnes & Noble. ...**Safiya Bukhari** (*Lest We Forget; Soul of the BLA*) and **Ward Churchill** (*A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas*) speak at 8 pm Aug. 8 at the United Lutheran Church. For info, (541) 520-5401. ...Poets **Matthew Dickman, Michael Dickman, David Elsey** and **Nico Alvarado Greenwood** read at 7 pm Aug. 10 at Mountain Writers Center, Portland, \$3. (503) 236-4854. ...Twenty-nine local authors discuss and sign books at the **Oregon Authors Table** at the Lane County Fair Aug. 12-17. ...**Elizabeth Engstrom** reads from *Black Leather* and talks about writing the erotic thriller at 7 pm Aug. 14 at Barnes & Noble. ...**Suzanne Hansen** (*You'll Never Nanny in this Town Again!*) reads at 7 pm Aug. 27 at Barnes & Noble. ...Seattle author **Dolly Mae** reads from *Choosing Joy in the Midst of Crisis* at 7 pm Aug. 28 at Barnes & Noble. ...Portland Arts and Lectures Series upcoming events include Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist **Jeffrey Eugenides** Sept 30; novelist **Sandra Cisneros** Oct. 28; memoirist, novelist and short-story writer **Tobias Wolff** Dec. 2; U.S. Poet Laureate **Billy Collins** Jan. 14, 2004; cartoonists **Matt Groening** and **Lynda Barry** Mar. 18; and British novelist and screenwriter **Ian McEwan** April 1. All events at 7:30 pm in the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall. Tickets: (503) 227-2583.

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