

"Not just a taut, highly intelligent spy thriller but also a brilliant historical portrait and a captivating love story to boot."—Lyndsay Faye



# JACK OF

# SPIES

A NOVEL

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# DAVID

# DOWNING





Jack of Spies  
by  
David Downing



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## SOHO CRIME PRIORITY TITLE

# JACK OF SPIES

DAVID DOWNING

*"It would already be enough that *Jack of Spies* is a taut, highly intelligent spy thriller without it being a brilliant historical portrait and a captivating love story to boot. A remarkably engaging world tour of pre-World War One espionage featuring an honorable protagonist begging for a long series."*

—Lyndsay Faye, author of *The Gods of Gotham*

**The critically acclaimed "Station Series" may be over, but David Downing's complex and thrilling new novel takes us back to the beginning—to the eve of the First World War and the birth of the modern spy.**

It is 1913 at the beginning of *Jack of Spies* (Soho Crime | May, 2014) and a globe-trotting luxury automobile salesman named Jack McColl is putting his military background and ear for languages to work for the fledgling Royal Navy intelligence services. The world is on the brink of calamity, as the UK, Germany, and Europe inch closer to the First World War and Jack is about to find himself a player on the biggest of stages.

It starts out simple enough. While in China showing the spectacular bottle green Maya automobile to the wealth of empires, Jack takes strolls around the harbor to note the coming and going of ships, snaps the occasional photo, and even pays prostitutes to tell him the pillow talk of the German navy. The Royal Navy's pay isn't enough to retire on, but it is extra, and Jack is living out a lifelong fantasy as an agent of the British Empire.

But Jack's sporting interest in spy-craft soon leads him deep into a deadly game of cat and mouse with profound strategic implications for the Empire. It hasn't always been about god and country for Jack and as the stakes get higher, his Majesty's service is asking increasingly questionable things of him. His passionate love affair with an American suffragette and journalist named Caitlin Hanley is sincere, yet Jack can't help but realize that at some point he may have to betray her confidence. Caitlin is from a long line of Irish independence activists, and her journalism often shows signs of sympathy to Irish and Indian revolutionary causes—two political movements the Germans are willing to exploit to further destabilize the British Empire. They're also two causes that Jack is not without his own sympathies for.

**Set across oceans and continents, steamliners and cross-country trains, *Jack of Spies* always fascinates as David Downing once again proves an ideal tour guide to the folly of empires and the birth of that most fascinating of 20th century characters—the spy.**

# Getting to know David Downing



I grew up in north-west London, in what was then the white middle-class suburb of Harrow. My parents, both dead now, were emotionally distant but otherwise benign, and I was blessed with a younger brother who is still one of the nicest people I know. Growing up, I developed passions for soccer, railways, rock music and politics which have stayed with me ever since. The only subjects which interested me at school were geography and history, and one teacher of the latter, in showing me that the past was something to interpret and argue over, rather than something to ‘learn,’ has proved a life-long inspiration. Rather inauspiciously for a future writer, I failed the Use of English exam. Indeed, my pre-university reading rarely rose above the level of *The Saint* and James Bond.

I was interviewed at Sussex University for a place to study Geography, and after arguing the rights and wrongs of the Vietnam War with my interviewers, was persuaded to switch to International Relations. Six years of free higher education followed, in which I gained a BA and MA, and failed to complete a PhD on Che Guevara’s economic ideology. By this time I was much more interested in reading serious fiction, writing Dylan-esque poetry and listening to music than pursuing academic studies.

My first writing jobs were as a rock critic; my first book was on visions

of the future in rock music. The second was a military history of the Second World War, which I followed a few years later with a fictional account of a war that might have been. Over the succeeding forty years I have explored and sometimes interwoven these three themes of contemporary culture, twentieth century history and fiction.

In 1974 I traveled overland to India (and back) via Iran and Afghanistan, and felt at the time that the trip was some sort of rite of passage. It certainly gave me a taste for that kind of traveling—buses, trains and cheap hotels—and I would later enjoy long journeys through South America and Mexico.

For most of the '70s and '80s I lived in inner north London, much of that time with my first long-time partner. After we parted company I spent several years in northeast London, then moved to Boston, Massachusetts, to be with my current wife, Nancy. We returned to Britain five years later, and have lived outside London ever since. She is a practicing acupuncturist and a student of the history of Chinese medicine.

Through the 1990s and 2000s my work followed its usually erratic course. My first real novel, *The Red Eagles*, had been published in the US in 1987, but no one was interested in the three I wrote thereafter. A biography of Neil Young was followed by umpteen special forces thrillers written under a pseudonym, three books on football history, and over forty history books for children, before *Soho* in the US and *Old Street* in the UK took a chance on what would be the first of six 'Station' thrillers set before, during and after the Second World War. I am now writing what I hope will be an equally long series set around the First.

Over the last decade, Nancy and I have slowly renovated a ruined cottage in France, and we now plan to spend more of our time there, growing vegetables, drinking wine, and enjoying books and films which have so far eluded us.



# An interview with David Downing by his Soho editor Juliet Grames



**Juliet:** *The John Russell/‘Station’ series, which you just concluded this year, is set in the middle of the 20th century, during and around World War II. What inspired you to dial back the clock to the eve of World War I for Jack of Spies?*

**David Downing:** The Second World War was more horrendous than the First in many ways—most notably in the number of civilians killed—but I’ve always felt that the latter was more of game-changer, and I wanted to write a series that reflected the move away from conflicts between established nation states, and the increasing importance of the class, gender and colonial conflicts raging inside them.

I wanted a protagonist who would find these changes hard to cope with, but struggle to do so nevertheless. In the ‘Station’ series John Russell was always politically-motivated, and his views at the end have hardly changed at all, but in the new series British agent Jack McColl is more of a blank slate, politically-speaking. The events he witnesses and the people he meets will confront him with many uncomfortable choices.

**Juliet:** *Spoiling the plot for the reader as little as possible (I hope): Jack of Spies features some fascinating and important political events that, I think, are often forgotten or overshadowed by World War I: the Irish Republican movement; the Indian independence movement; the Paterson strikes and workers’ rights; the Tampico Affair. How did you decide to include these episodes in the plot?*

**David Downing:** Well obviously I needed somewhere to send my hero, and in 1914 there was no shortage of places where the British Empire was being threatened in one way or another. In *Jack of Spies* he turns up in China, the US, Mexico and Ireland, but it could have been any number of exotic destinations. And my female protagonist, Caitlin, a radical New York journalist, would have been all too aware of the Paterson strike and its aftermath in 1913-14.

**Juliet:** *One of my favorite editing stories from working with you on this book: I flagged your use of a Chinese language phrase in the text because I was afraid the dialect might not be right for the city Jack was in when he heard it. But as usual you were one step ahead of me and explained the phrase came from a British tourist handbook published in 1911—even if it wasn’t the correct Chinese dialect for that city, it would have been the phrase a British tourist would most likely have known. This incident is one of many when I was reminded how thorough your historical research is. Would you be able to tell us a little bit about your process for harnessing these kinds of details and creating such a vivid world for the reader?*

**David Downing:** There's no secret—I just use all the contemporary sources I can find. These days it's easy to find old photos on the net, and I learn a lot just from looking at old maps. There are guide books and novels written at the time, and no matter how bad the latter are, they're bound to give you a sense—and much detail—of how life was lived day-to-day in any particular time and place.

**Juliet:** *In the words of John Le Carré, 'Love is whatever you can still betray.' In part, the character Jack McColl is so eager to be a spy because he doesn't have anything tying him down. Falling in love with Caitlin Hanley compromises not only Jack's ability to be a spy but his loyalty to the same country he had so recently been willing to sacrifice it all for. What are your thoughts on the perfect spy, David? Can he or she have love in their life?*

**David Downing:** Jack McColl is not so much a spy as an intelligence agent whose job involves some spying, and over the series he'll spend more time foiling plots than collecting information. But to answer your question—I think a perfect spy would have to be a very imperfect human being, and in the long run at least, not a great bet as a partner in love.

**Juliet:** *The more Jack spies, the more he comes to question the colonial empire he is protecting by spying for them. Do you think that this spiritual disillusionment with the Cause is common among spies? (It seems to me it must be—the more you know about the dirty inner workings, the less sure of the greater machine you are, right?)*

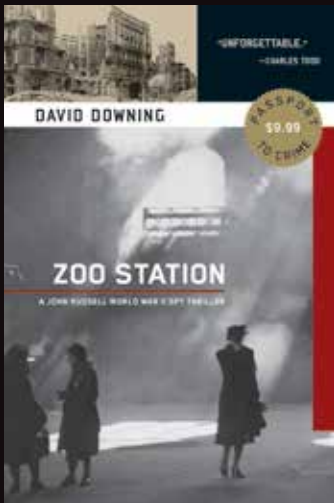
**David Downing:** I really don't know. It probably should be, but most human beings seem wonderfully creative when it comes to convincing themselves that the easy option is also the right one. And I imagine that the inherent excitement of the job would make it easier to put your conscience on the back burner, at least in the beginning.

**Juliet:** *Jack McColl is a fantastic linguist. Do foreign languages come naturally to you, David?*

**David Downing:** I studied Latin, German and French at school, and failed miserably in all of them. My French teacher said I had the worst accent he'd heard in thirty years of schooling, but I think he told quite a few others the same.



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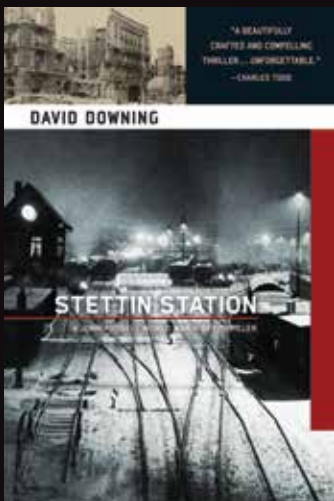
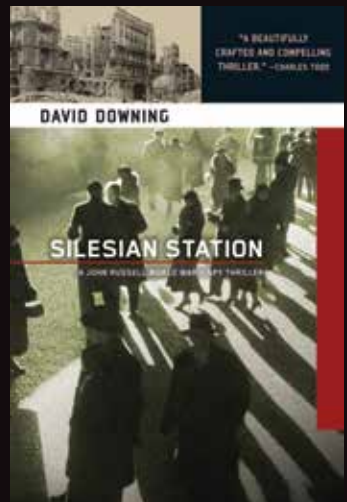
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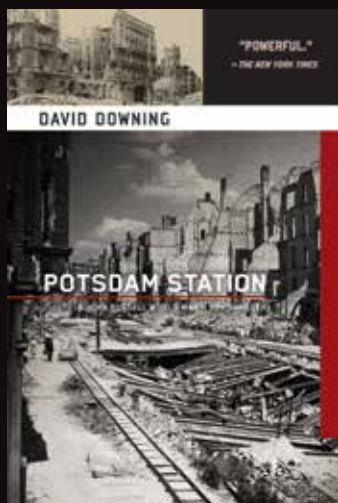
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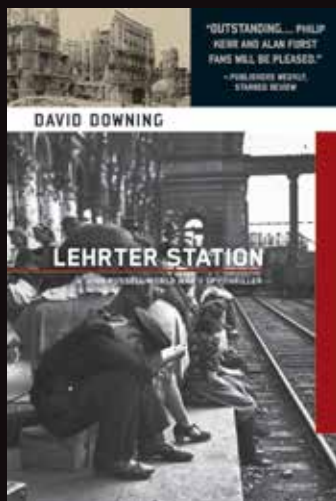
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