economic changes that drove the transformation of the state’s politics and shaped the political Vir-
ginia of today. Countering the common narrative that Virginia’s shifting poli-
tics are a recent phenom-
menon driven by population growth in the urban cor-
ridor, the contributors in this volume consider the antecedents to the rise of Virginia as a two-party competitive state in the six critical elections of the 20th century they profile.

FICTION

THE PEACOCK AND THE SPARROW
Debut Spy Thriller by Former CIA Officer
I.S. BERRY (ILANA BERRY ’03) \ Schuster/Alfred A. Knopf

As Ilana Berry’s UVA Law classmates were kicking off their lucrative law firm careers, Berry hunkered in a flimsy trailer as mortars pelted her Baghdad “Green Zone” compound and the U.S. was reckoning with smoldering Iraq’s post-invasion chasm.

“It was worse than I thought it would be,” said Berry, who was 28 and single when she agreed to a yearlong intelligence-gathering assignment during the Iraq War. “I don’t know if I would have volunteered had I known how bad it would be and how few precautions we had when we were over there.

“There were times I would go to bed just hoping I would wake up in the morning.”

Berry’s six years undercover as a CIA operative— including experiences she chronicled in a memoir still too personal and painful to publish—form the frames of her debut spy thriller, “The Peacock and the Sparrow,” written under the name I.S. Berry. But before she could pursue her long-envisioned career as a writer, Berry had to, in spy parlance, “come in from the cold.”

“It means you’re done spying,” she said. “It was when I had my cover lifted. And that’s pretty final. It’s like you know you’re not going back.”

But that doesn’t mean the CIA has released its grip on the former agent. Nearly everything she writes—fact or fiction—requires agency approval.

Those restrictions also meant she couldn’t send draft chapters to literary agents or publishers. She had to finish “The Peacock and the Sparrow” and get it cleared by the government before anyone could peek at a page.

“It was such a lovely process,” Berry said. “There were times where I thought this could be the absolute worst book on the planet.”

Fortunately, publisher Simon & Schuster didn’t think so and released “The Peacock and the Sparrow” in May. The New Yorker has since featured it as one of its 10 best books of 2023.

The title comes from an Arabic parable. A sparrow becomes terrific and then sees a man laying traps. The peacock tells the sparrow not to worry, but the sparrow takes them as precautions to avoid capture. One day the sparrow witnesses two birds quarreling, drops his guard and swoops in to intervene. The man ensnare all three. Berry’s character, an agent who spied named Shane Collins, rambles along something akin to the sparrow’s path.

Berry’s own career path was at times as fraught as the sparrow’s. She had already applied to the CIA when terrorists struck New York and the Pen-
tagon on Sept. 11, 2001. The attacks steered her resolve. CIA spy training then was still largely based on Cold War techniques: Go to a cocktail party, make some con-
nections, develop those relationships. But there were no noisiers in Baghdad. Berry spent most of her time assessing the files of Iraqis who were hoping to trade sketchy information for money.

“Most of it was just worthless,” she said. “We struggled because there were too few serious sources that were really valu-
able.”

She did find one source who led her to a suspected terrorist. At the time, “that was such a huge coup, because we just weren’t getting information like that.”

Now, many years on, Berry and some of her colleagues wonder if they got the right guy after all. She’s never learned the suspect’s fate—an experience she still carries and that inspired her to put the story in her head on paper.

“So I always wanted to be a writer. I just hadn’t found the right story,” she said. “My protagonist makes decisions that affect the course of the Arab Spring, and they are not necessarily the right ones. But you don’t know you’re in the thick of it, you just don’t know. It’s the murk of espionage.”

—Mike Mather