

Writers House

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Mr. Ken Follett
London

by fax

Dear Ken,

On second and third readings, I was able to see both the virtues and the blemishes in your new outline more clearly. As I said in my previous letter, I think you have some wonderful stuff here, but also there may be some rethinking needed and a fair bit, of course, has yet to be added.

The story's overarching dramatic question is, will or won't the Soviet spies succeed in blowing up the Redstone rocket and ruining the satellite launch? Secondly, it's will or won't the U.S. regain the lead in the space race? The first problem to address, it seems to me, is to find a way to introduce these issues early in the story. As you have it, we don't learn of these crucial matters until almost the end. One possible approach to this, which I'll deal with when I get into Anthony's character, is to bring in his point of view either in the first or second chapter.

For this to become as compelling a thriller as your other major ones, we also need, I think, to make what's happening a matter of life and death; and this too might better be established early on. Luke's death, then, could be ordered at the outset or close to it. For reasons, I'll get into later, Anthony does not wish him to be killed, but for the purposes of suspense, I think we'll need almost constant danger to Luke.

To bring alive for the reader the worldwide issues, the desperation of the cold war opponents on both sides, I suggest that you bring in at least for cameo appearances, one Russian and one high ranking U.S. personality. The Russian could be someone like the then-head of the KGB and the U.S. person could be the Secretary of Defense, to whom you refer more than once in the outline. You did a bit of this in Eye of the Needle, and it was quite effective.

Your use of flashbacks to push the present action works up to a point; but in my view, this needs to be cut back. I'm reminded of the opening scene in Triple which nicely set up the relationship between the characters, but I thought your best use of flashbacks ever was in The

Man From St. Petersburg where you stretched one scene over perhaps three chapters; and that's about as much as I think can be effective, in this type of novel. And I suggest too that you limit these flashbacks to the first third of the book.

I still like the suggestion in my fax of last week that we have Luke's amnesia fade quickly. He should then find out or realize by himself that it has been artificially induced. (Maybe Tara or someone else tells him.) But he also realizes or is told that he must pretend to be amnesiac, or he'll be killed.

With this threat hanging over his head, he would then need to find out who has done this to him and why (although he suspects why), while at the same time trying to continue his vital scientific work, even though he's been barred from the base.

To open him up (and since he is somewhat estranged from his wife), I suggest that you add a disciple-colleague, who is his liaison with Von Braun. We'll also need in your next outline a line or two pinpointing the nature of his work and his particular role in this project.

A first act climax which you might consider is his slipping up on feigning amnesia, and as a result he's almost killed.

Fairly soon after that, I think he should discover the danger to the launch and also begin to suspect Anthony. But when he tries to trap Anthony, I think he needs to fail.

Anthony should then have to face the fact that Luke is on to him, that Luke is a threat, and we can start a cat and mouse action between the two of them along with their colleagues and henchmen.

Luke's character: Instead of Julia Hyde, I think you would give him more stature if he's been having an affair with someone quite lovely. This woman could be in love with him, and she might also know or suspect that there's something fishy about Elspeth. Luke could admire and respect her, but not be in love with her. She may, in fact, be the one to stimulate him to shake off the amnesia.

Alternatively, what frees from the amnesia could be some outside activity. He might have a regular tennis or golf or poker game, or belong to a novel reading group, or be in the midst of negotiations for a professorship at MIT or Cal Tech. Something about one of these (which could then become an ongoing strand through the book) sets off a chain of recollections which put an end to the amnesia.

Anthony, I think, has the potential to become in his own way as wonderful a villain as Faber or Wolff. It's implicit in what you have now that Anthony is devoted to Luke, and I suggest it be made explicit. Luke might be his brother, or the two of them could have been raised together, or Luke might once have saved Anthony's life. However you do it, Anthony does not want to kill or hurt Luke; but events of course conspire to force his hand.

He is the one who seeks out Tara for the amnesia. He desperately needs it to work, at least for a week.

His communism may have begun with anger at his father, but by this time he should be a true believer and have embraced it as completely as someone like Kim Philby.

For him to become richly alive, we'll need more about him than just his involvement in this particular mission. What, for example, are his professional goals, and his personal ones? What will happen to him if he fails? And what if he succeeds? Might he be in line for some prize job in Moscow? Does he long for a reunion with Elspeth? Or some other woman?

A small point, but I wonder if making him CIA may seem a bit of a cliché. It might go down better if he were army or navy intelligence, or perhaps FBI?

It might be interesting, I think, if he had a KGB control with whom he's in continuous disagreement and maybe even conflict. The drama would be heightened, I think, if we could enjoy the differences between what he tells this man or woman and what he's actually doing and thinking. I'd like to see him as duplicitous with his Russian masters as he is with his American ones.

He too might peripherally have some kind of personal life. What if his real passions are chess or bridge; and then matches and tournaments in which he's involved conflict with his mission. He could be torn here too. Maybe he, or he and a partner have a shot at some kind of championship.

As you have it in the outline, you now have an offstage heavy in the person of Bewler. But I think you're going to need such a character onstage. My suggestion is that the guy's real boss be the KGB controller, although ostensibly he works for Anthony. It would be interesting, I think, if Anthony can't stand the guy, but understands and accepts the need for him.

I wonder too if Anthony shouldn't have a wife and kids. My sense is that without them, he'd be suspected by his U.S. bosses as being gay. As you'll see when I get into my suggestions about Tara, I think giving him a family could be neatly worked into the plot. So, if you go with this scenario, it might be better if Elspeth is his sister. Then as you have it, she could love Luke, but share Anthony's political sympathies.

Tara is our third point of view character, and she plays a potentially crucial role, but we still need, I think, to focus on her thrust. First, we need to establish what is ongoing in her life as the story opens, both personally and professionally. We might work in too that it's Anthony's organization which is funding her lab and research, thereby making her feel dependent on him.

But if she still is carrying a torch for Luke after all these years, we may need to establish a way that she's been having a fair bit of contact with him over the years. One thought I had was that both Luke and Tara could be godparents to one or more of Anthony's kids. They might all meet once or maybe twice a year at Anthony's farm or country house in Virginia to celebrate this kids birthday, and they might also have the tradition of coming to his home for Thanksgiving. If Scarlett O'Hara did not live in the same house with Melanie in Atlanta, I doubt that Margaret Mitchell could have made Scarlett's ongoing love for Ashley believable.

Again, dealing with the implicit versus the explicit, I think it ought to be wholly clear that Tara agrees to help because Anthony is desperate and fearful for Luke. And she knows Anthony wouldn't want anything bad to happen to Luke.

But, once there's an attempt on Luke's life, she might start to suspect Anthony, perhaps pretend still to be with him, but secretly become Luke's ally. And she possibly could be a key factor in uncovering or helping to uncover both Anthony and the plot to sabotage the launch.

As you've done in some of your earlier books, she, either on her own or at Luke's urging, might undertake some risky stuff against Anthony. And then Anthony (or his thug) might catch her so that she too could be in jeopardy.

Maybe not in your next outline but certainly in the text, we're going to need the ambiance of this late fifties world. Among the military, for example, the fear of a Russian first strike was widespread; and in fact there were lots of people in those days building bomb shelters in their backyards, hoarding food supplies, etc... So it wasn't only the prestige of staying ahead of the Russians, but there was a lot of real fear. In the course of the story, then, it might make sense for there to be some important new ICBM development reported by the Russians or attributed to them. Something that shakes everybody up from the Secretary of Defense on down.

To take what's best from Los Alamos, I was wondering if it might be a nice move to create an off-base salon at the home of Mrs. Von Braun. She too might try to replicate pre-Hitler European culture, bringing in an occasional string quartet, palm reader, or she might sponsor from time to time a writer or an artist. That might be a nice way to effect the reunion between Luke and Bernie, who could come alone or with a group from Nashville. Maybe he plays modern jazz, and he might be another possibility for jogging Luke's memory out of the amnesia. Bernie at this point could reaffirm his indebtedness and possibly love for Luke, which could motivate his involvement later on in the action.

Ken, after you have a chance to digest all of this, I'd love for you to call so we can dig a bit more deeply and kick around further ideas. And prior to our meeting in New York, we could perhaps also spend a few hours together in Frankfurt the day after your concert. If that suits.

Separately, I'm sending you by Fed Ex your outline with a lot of markings, most of them small points; but the main issues I feel are all addressed in this letter.

Bravo!

Warm Wishes
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