

#74 – Murderer's Row, Donald Hamilton BOOK REVIEW

Krauser PUA | 8 September, 2018 | by krauserpua

Have you ever wondered if spies and assassins go through troublesome periods of weak inner game? Daygame can be pretty tough, as we all know. There is so much to learn, technically, that it can feel like juggling ten balls in the air simultaneously and if just one ball goes wrong, you drop them all.



I've been coaching a residential this week, so the sheer weight of information that must be assimilated is foremost in my mind: Get your vibe right, and project some street presence. Then focus your eyes out onto the middle distance and begin scanning the streets to pick out appropriate sets. Sort your pre-approach tactics and then make a snap decision on whether to open. Throw in the buffer phrases, be sure to project the correct energy, and then come up with an opener.

Read the girl's reaction, figure out where she's at psychologically and then..... ah, fuck it. Just tell her she looks French, make some chit-chat, and ask for a number. I can understand why so many people can't be arsed to learn real daygame so they just do the sick **Cargo Cult** parody of it instead. It's easier *[1]*

Difficult as daygame is, we are merely competing against other normal men (or players *[2]*) and the prize for victory is banging a hottie and the penalty for messing up is frustration. Spies and assassins are up against tougher competition and play for higher stakes. So, I wonder how their inner game is.

Movie and book spies have a grand old time. Fast cars, beautiful women, winning big hands at a Monte Carlo casino, and high-speed ski chases down Swiss mountainsides. It sounds great. Unless, of course, you're one of the spies who gets poisoned, shot, or crashes a burning helicopter into a mountainside.

If I was a spy I wouldn't be one of those. I'd be one of the winners.



He thinks he's winning

Anyway, I digress. There must be some inner game issues to deal with and, to my knowledge, no-one has ever written a **Spygame Mastery** or **Spygame Infinite** to help out with that. I've noticed with these Matt Helm books, of which *Murderer's Row* is the next in my queue, that writer Donald Hamilton does indeed focus quite a lot on the inner game.

This book begins when Helm is called over to headquarters in DC to be told his month-long vacation is cancelled and he actually has to go down to Chesapeake bay and beat the shit out of a female agent, Jean, so as to make her fake defection to the Russians more convincing. Hamilton has us focus on Helm being rather uneasy about the job and most of the first few chapters are about his questioning his mettle and then battling to suppress the remorse he feels when she unexpectedly dies mid-way through a carefully organised beating (that she'd agreed to in advance).

Helm refuses to return to HQ for a debrief and instead disobeys direct orders and goes rogue, to atone for his error. He soon gets embroiled with a rich local family at each other's throats as he attempts to re-establish Jean's Russian connection so as to locate their safe house and the nuclear scientist being held there before being smuggled to the Soviet Union. Like the other Helm books, all the action takes place on friendly (i.e. non-Soviet) territory and most characters are either friendlies or simple criminals. Russian agents tend not to make an appearance until halfway through the books.

Helm's mission is to ensure the knowledge inside the scientist's head never makes it to the Soviet Union so he's expecting to assassinate rather than rescue the poor egghead. His inner game is complicated

further when the scientist's young daughter shows up searching for her dad and engages Helm to help. Thus he realises he's likely going to not just kill the boffin, but do so in front of his daughter.

And you thought getting your kiss-close rejected could be frustrating.

These Helm books tend not to have the rip-roaring action of a James Bond or Mack Bolan book. Whereas those lads are jet-setting around the world and riding ICBMs bareback into mountain ranges or jumping a sports car across a castle moat, Helm mostly sleeps in a grotty motel room and spends the whole book in a single podunk small town in the US. Hamilton is very deliberately making spycraft grimy, squalid, and unappealing. Quite the opposite of Jason Bourne.

Like the others in the Matt Helm series, this book was well-written and the pages turned themselves. Also like the others, not a single woman can be trusted. All three female characters in this book betray Helm at least once. His male enemies are considerably more overt in their opposition to him. So far, I'm liking this series and see no reason to stop.

If you are getting tired of book reviews and would rather read about game, [then you ought to look at my books here](#). No-one has ever written so much, in such detail, with such polish. When you've finished with those, you'll be all gamed out.

[1] But doesn't work. I may post on Cargo Cult daygame sometime.

[2] Who are super-normal, abnormal, or sub-normal. But never normal.

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