



Nov 18, 2011 - Umberto Eco has never heard of Q.R. Markham. The “author” of *Assassin of Secrets*, Markham’s been much-discussed in literary circles since it was discovered his thriller was almost entirely stitched together, like a quilt, from the works of such authors as Robert Ludlum, Charles McCarray and even the James Bond novels of John Gardner.

In the bar of his Toronto hotel on Wednesday afternoon, I explain the Markham fiasco to Eco, who has been too busy touring his new novel to keep up with literary gossip. The timing of our conversation is interesting considering the man at the centre of *The Prague Cemetery* steals work in a similar fashion. The author leans forward, listening intensely, but shakes his head in disagreement when I compare Markham to *The Prague Cemetery*’s anti-hero, a talented forger named Simone Simonini. To Eco, the plagiarist is a thief while the forger is an unappreciated artist.

“There’s a difference between forgery and plagiarism,” he says in his gravelly voice, a cigarillo hanging from his lips. “Sometimes the forgery is absolutely the original.” Eco mentions the example of the Donation of Constantine, one of the most famous forgeries in the history of mankind, in which Emperor Constantine I supposedly gave Italy to the Vatican. “It was fake, certainly, but it was not a case of plagiarism. On the contrary, it was an absolutely brilliant invention.”

Well, if a forger is an inventor of fiction, then couldn’t one draw parallels between that and the work of a novelist?

“No! There is a sharp distinction,” he says. “A novelist tells something which is not real, but he informs you immediately that he’s pretending that it was, and you’re participating in the game.

You pretend. When I tell you, ‘Once upon a time there was a girl called Little Red Riding Hood,’ I have already given you the signals of fictionality. ... If I tell you the story of Anna Karenina, you cry, but when you close the book, OK, you forget the [characters] and you say ‘Ha! Very smart this Tolstoy who was able to make me cry even though Anna Karenina did not exist.’ On the contrary, a forger wants to persuade you that what it produced is true. That’s the difference between fiction and lies.”

Note to self: Never argue with one of the world’s foremost semioticians.

The lines between fiction and lies are blurred in *The Prague Cemetery*, which tells the story of Simonini, a “master of recycling,” disloyal spy and mercurial double agent living in Paris at the turn of the 19th century. His memory is failing, however, and he wakes up some mornings only to find entire days have passed, and that someone else — the mysterious Abbé Dalla Piccola — has written in his diary. They narrate the book in alternating entries, with Piccola filling in the blanks where Simonini forgets — or chooses to forget — his past.

Simonini is not a likeable character. In a letter I received with an advance copy of the novel, Eco writes that he “tried to make him the most cynical and disagreeable [character] in all the history of literature.” He’s exaggerating, of course, but Simonini is a terrible person. He hates Germans (“the lowest conceivable level of humanity”), the French (“lazy, swindling, resentful, jealous”), Italians (“untrustworthy, lying, contemptible”), priests (“they are idle and belong to a class as dangerous as thieves and vagrants”), Jesuits (“worst of all, without a doubt”), Masons (“like the Jesuits, only more confused”) and women (“I hate women, from what little I know of them”).

Most of all Simonini hates the Jews, and spends most of the novel crafting his magnum opus, a document which, after it leaves his hands, becomes the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the fictional account of a Jewish plot for world domination.

“As a semiotician, I’ve always been interested in lies, because to lie is one of the principal features of human languages,” he says. Plus, “since nobody knows ... who really wrote the *Protocols*, it was a good occasion to imagine everything.”

Before the book was published in Italy last year, Eco gave it to some Jewish friends to read, including Rome’s chief rabbi. “He said, ‘I love the book, and I found Simonini nice,’ ” Eco recalls.

Written by - Mark Medley -

Thursday, 05 January 2012 22:59 - Last Updated Thursday, 05 January 2012 23:17

Yet, he also expressed some reservations: “ ‘I am afraid certain naive readers can take [this] seriously.’ My answer was that those naive readers, if they push a button on the Internet, can find all of this, completely, every day.”

Eco says he felt a “moral impulse” to address the Protocols, since the ideas still circulate. “It’s important to spell them out, to remind people that they are there.” Indeed, although the Protocols, which were first published in the early 20th century, were soon proven to be fake, they are considered one of the driving forces of the Holocaust, and are still considered genuine in some parts of the world. “It seems to me impossible that somebody can read them and take them seriously,” he says. “They are continuously contradicting themselves.” Eco calls them “a composite, a patchwork,” largely stolen from other anti-Semitic authors such as Maurice Joly and Hermann Goedsche, both of whom appear in the novel. In fact, Simonini is the only fictional character in the entire book.

Readers of *The Prague Cemetery*, his sixth novel, or those familiar with Eco’s previous work, such as *The Name of the Rose* or *Foucault’s Pendulum*, may peg him as a conspiracy theorist, but while he understands the fascination (“People have the need to believe in the extraordinary and to refuse the easy explanation”) he is drawn by something else.

“I don’t enjoy conspiracies, but I am attracted by stupidity,” he says. “I am fascinated by stupidity because it’s infinite. The normal person believes that 2 and 2 make 4 and that’s all. There is no other possibility. The stupid one has infinite numbers at his disposal. And being fascinated by stupidity, I am, on one side, always irritated and indignant when I [see] those things — the 9/11 plot — on the other side, [I’m] fascinated by the existence of these [people]. Look at all the readers of Dan Brown who are presently going to Saint-Sulpice!” He laughs.

National Post.Com: Fascinated by stupidity: Umberto Eco conspires in The Prague Cemetery

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