



Enigma

Robert Harris

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Bletchley Park: the top-secret landmark of World War Two, where a group of young people were fighting to defeat Hitler, and win the war. March 1943, the Second World War hangs in the balance, and at Bletchley Park a brilliant young codebreaker is facing a double nightmare. The Germans have unaccountably changed their U-boat Enigma code, threatening a massive Allied defeat. And as suspicion grows that there may be a spy inside Bletchley, Jericho's girlfriend, the beautiful and mysterious Claire Romilly suddenly disappears.

Enigma Details

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Genia Lukin says

The basic idea of this story, like so many of others Harris wrote, is; 'take an interesting historical period, throw in some Noir, mix, add fascinating and beautiful femme fatales to flavour'.

It's a recipe that usually works, but, just like your basic meat-and-potatoes, it's not something you'd serve for a gourmet meal unless you're a really genuinely good chef. Harris is rather more my mother throwing together a nice but not terribly inspiring dinner than the three-star restaurant serving a steak, but, hey, I don't go out to restaurants every day of my life, and my literary cuisine can use an occasional homemade plain meal.

The basic story focuses on the WWII decryption of the Germans' Enigma code; a feat which both helped win the war - perhaps singlehandedly won it - and was the root of yours truly's review sitting out here today, and you being profoundly bored by it. The time and place where electronic computing first came into being, though Harris doesn't put much emphasis on that. The protagonist is Tom Jericho, a brilliant mathematician and cryptanalyst with large amounts of hormones. He falls in love with a seemingly vapid, but admittedly gorgeous, blonde named Claire, has a nervous breakdown, breaks the Germans' code, goes away, comes back, and gets into trouble. All in about four chapters. Then things get really tangled.

Part of my problem with this book was that I'd just recently read through Collins's *Woman in White*, and reading *Enigma* rather reminded me of that mystery classic. There you had Laudanum, here you have Germans and U-Boats. Much of the rest of the plot seems like a reflection of that other book, told more succinctly, and with less appeal to diaries.

So my problems with *The Woman in White*, which I actually found an excellent book by and large, were neatly reflected here, as well. Of course, whereas the former was written by a well-known Victorian misogynist, Mr. Harris has no such excuse. I hope he realizes just how tired the average female reader grows of reading about the intelligent but plain woman who busily aids in the investigation being shuffled off as a potential love interest for the sake of the beautiful and feminine damsel in distress. Honestly, I get quite bored. One would think a mathematician, a person to whom his profession is everything, would be inclined to seek out a mate he could actually talk to, rather than one simply to look at. I mean, if he really needs perfect beauty to admire, he could buy a painting, right?

But no, we must follow up with the cliché. After all, if we put too much pepper in the potatoes, some bland and banal palate might not appreciate it.

And no adding any sort of odd sauce to the dish, either. The bleak, noir world of Bletchley Park - which happened to be criticized by people who were there - is the perfect grim and grimy setting for a crime; the character is a sort of traumatized and disillusioned noir detective, maths style, dismissed and later re-evoked for his brilliance. There's a scene of him losing his badge (for the Nth+1 time). The foolish supervisor is there, the obstructing bureaucrat is there, the loyal but uninspiring coworkers are there...

Mind you, the book as a concoction is not at all bad, like my mother's cooking isn't - at least, it's wonderful cooking anywhere within hearing of my mother - and it has its merits. For one, the math and cryptoanalysis is well-researched and explained. The fellow is no Stephenson, I suppose, but so far as I could tell, being a mathematician only by marital proxy rather than by inclination, he wasn't Dan Browning the whole affair.

Also, the book, although it drags at times, is eminently edible - I mean, readable - and digestible by pretty much anyone. I can't really point to a person or demographics and say 'no, don't read this'. It may not enthrall or impress you, but, really, there's very little chance that you'll throw it into the garbage bin after taking a single bite.

Lyn Elliott says

2018

I've just re-read this inadvertently, thought the plot was familiar but then I might have seen a film adaptation, and in any event I'm familiar with the Enigma story.

Again I'd give it 3.5, but it was a perfect quick read in between some solid stuff.

No mental effort required.

2013

It's a while since I read a WWII spy thriller, and this one has a nice twist. I'd give it 3.5 if the half marks were possible. The world at Bletchley is portrayed in a way that leaves vivid images of hectic activity, bleak cold, brilliance and tedium. The plot is a bit creaky but Harris keeps the action moving along.

My next read is a non-fiction book on US/UK scientific collaboration by Stephen Budiansky: 'Blackett's War. The men who defeated the Nazi U boats and brought science to the art of warfare'.
(Still haven't read this by 2018)

Leah says

Masterful storytelling...

It's 1943, and the Allies rely on the shipping convoys from the US to keep their battered countries fed and munitioned. The tide has been flowing in the Allies favour since the German Enigma codes were broken at Bletchley Park in the South of England. But now the Germans have changed the U-boat code, threatening not only individual convoys but the entire defeat of the Allied forces. Tom Jericho, hailed as one of the most brilliant codebreakers, is on a break, suffering from a combination of stress, overwork and a broken heart over a girl named Claire. But with this new threat, despite his fragile health, he's urgently needed back in Bletchley. And when he gets there, he discovers Claire is missing...

What a joy, after a series of less than stellar reads, to find myself in the safe hands of a master storyteller once again! This is a masterclass in how to write a book. The writing is so good it hooks instantly. Harris recreates wartime Britain with what feels like total authenticity; and specifically the world of these men, recruited for their brilliant minds, their maths and puzzle solving skills, on whose youthful shoulders it sometimes feels the whole weight of the war rests. Throughout the book, Harris feeds out his extensive research into Bletchley and codebreaking at the right moments and in the right quantities, as a natural part of the story so that it never feels like an info dump. He carefully creates his characters to feel real and then ensures their actions remain true to that characterisation. And oh, bliss! The book has an actual plot – a proper story, that remains credible throughout and holds the reader's attention right to the end! The pleasure

of reading this well-crafted, expertly-paced story highlighted to me what a rarity that has become in contemporary fiction.

The book starts in Cambridge University, where Jericho has been sent to recuperate. The whole feeling of the ancient university in wartime is beautifully created, setting the tone for the rest of the book. The old staircases and shabby rooms, the ancient traditions; the dullness of an institution empty of so many of the young men and women who would normally have been there, but who are instead part of the war effort; the gossiping staff with too much time on their hands, speculating about the arrival of this young man and then his sudden departure; the difficult position of young men not in uniform, but whose work is too secret to be revealed.

On arriving back at Bletchley, Jericho finds that two convoys have left the US and are crossing the Atlantic. The Americans want assurances that the codes will be broken quickly enough to allow for these convoys to be protected, but Jericho sees no hope of that. Instead, he believes that by monitoring the signals of the U-boats that will be aiming towards the convoys, he might gather enough information to break the codes. Harris shows very clearly the ethical dilemmas the young codebreakers must face – they find themselves almost hoping for the convoys to be attacked so that they can get the information they need. Harris also raises the point that it was often necessary not to act on the information gathered from Enigma so that the Germans wouldn't realise the codes had been broken and change them. Thus many Allied lives were sacrificed in the hopes of saving many more by eventually winning the war. He doesn't labour these points in a heavy-handed way, but he uses them to show the almost unbearable levels of stress the codebreakers worked under, coupled with the necessary secrecy of the work which left them somewhat detached from the rest of society, in a little bubble of constant tension.

No wonder then that suspicion was never absent, the fear of spying a real and present threat. So when Jericho discovers something that forces him to question Claire's loyalty, he is torn. His head knows he should make the authorities aware of what he's found, but his heart wants to find her and give her an opportunity to explain. And soon he finds himself teamed up with Claire's old house-mate, Hester, backtracking through Claire's actions in an attempt to find explanations.

The plot gives Harris the opportunity to gradually lead the reader through how the whole set-up worked, from the soldiers and sailors risking their lives to get hold of code books, to the listening stations on the South Coast where the women of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) intercepted the coded German signals, and on to the huts in Bletchley, each responsible for an aspect of the war; Eastern Front, naval manoeuvres, etc. Harris shows how women were restricted to being glorified clerks, regardless of their skills or aptitude, while only men were given the more glamorous job of the actual code-breaking. But his few female characters are excellently drawn, strong and credible within the limitations the system forced upon them. The stuff about the codebreaking is complex, sometimes too complex for me, but the story doesn't get bogged down in it. As with all of the best spy thrillers, there is a growing sense of moral ambiguity throughout, where even the motives of the baddies are equivocal.

A first rate spy thriller, written with all the qualities of literary fiction, this one gets my highest recommendation.

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Debbie says

4.5 stars. This is the second of Harris' novels that I've read, and I've enjoyed both. His writing is smooth & flows naturally, his characters are interesting, the plot lines are realistic and, for the two I've read, had a fictional idea woven into actual events (which I thoroughly enjoy, as it entertains *and* educates me). I was fully engrossed in this story, finding the info on cryptanalysts during WWII amazing (plus I liked the mention of Alan Turing, whose life is quite interesting itself). There were times Harris got more in-depth with describing the decoding, which was completely over my head; however, those were occasional and I was able to follow the story just fine, regardless. This book covered a fascinating topic with a well-delivered mystery running through the heart of it. Very entertaining, in my opinion.

Kim says

It's my fault and not Robert Harris' that I haven't been able to rate this novel more highly. I bought it a few years ago, on sale at the local bookstore, fresh from having read and enjoyed *Imperium*. From memory, having seen the movie adaptation a few years previously also influenced my purchase.

The premise is a good one: it's an espionage story set in Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, which during World War II was the site of the UK's main decryption establishment. This is where ciphers generated by the German Enigma machine were decrypted. There's a fair bit of information about code breaking in the narrative. Unfortunately, I overestimated my ability to understand the process. Harris' presumably simplified version of how it all worked went straight over my head, as did my husband's even more simplified version. Mathematics and my brain are not a good combination, so what is arguably the most interesting aspect of the novel completely escaped me.

What was left was a moderately interesting story with characters I didn't really care about. Towards the end I was skimming and just wanted it to be over so that I could move on to something more engaging. I feel a bit bad about this, because there's nothing wrong with Harris' writing. In fact, his writing is pretty good and I'd be more than happy to read some more of his work. This was just the wrong novel for me. That said, I'm now interested in visiting the museum at Bletchley Park at some point. Maybe if I see an Enigma machine I'll actually understand what encryption and code breaking during WWII was all about.

Lynley says

This isn't the sort of book I'd normally pick for myself, which is why I joined a book club, I suppose.

This was the first spy book I've read, and possibly the last for a good while. My one star review is a reflection of the fact I don't find espionage the slightest bit interesting, nor have I ever understood what people see in cryptic crosswords and sudoku. Each to their own.

All that aside, I was prepared to like a book about wartime spies, except even as a non-specialist of the genre, I could see from reading other crime fiction and watching popular TV series that this writer, like so many others, has relied too much on stock characters. Robert Harris has said that he purposefully prioritises fast-

paced plot over characterisation, and in this he succeeded. I didn't get to know Claire well enough before she disappeared, and was therefore not invested in finding out why she'd buggered off.

I am most fed up with plots which rely on beautiful (blond) women who use their sexuality to manipulate men in power ('Claire'), contrasted with plain, feminist, hard-working lesbian types who always seem to get screwed over (Hester Wallace).

Several things irritated me about the writing style. The character called Logie seemed to say 'old love' after every single thing -- a tic as annoying on the page as it would be in real life.

I got utterly sick of the constant snide jabs at Hester's clothing and appearance, in case the reader hadn't picked up from the initial thumbnail sketch exactly what sort of trope she is. Yet Hester was my favourite character. She saw right through the patriarchal bullshit of wartime: 'Everything interesting is done by men. Women do the rest', yet Jericho's main criticism is that she isn't pretty but could be: 'She could be pretty, he thought, if she put her mind to it.'

Pathetic characterisation aside, I thought the setting was painted adroitly and I almost felt for myself the cold of the night seep into my bones as I read.

Most disappointingly, I didn't identify with Jericho and therefore couldn't care about him either. I actively disliked him, actually, and I think it was from that moment he harassed Hester on her bicycle, refusing to let her go off into the night. Some men who accost women at night, even with good intent, don't seem to realise how terrifying it is for a woman.

I can't comment too much on the plot, except that it failed to hold my attention, but it wasn't lost on me that, once again, we have a story held together by the possibility that a sexually alluring woman has been strangled to death, her blood stained underwear found by the water.

That's what makes an interesting plot, is it? I'm getting mighty sick of that.

Will Byrnes says

This is a fictionalized view of the British WW II code-breaking enterprise that cracked the German code scheme named Enigma. Set in the out-of-the-way English town of Bletchley. Tom Jericho is a whiz code breaker who was a crucial player in breaking the original Enigma code. But the effort cost him. Just recovering from a breakdown and a broken heart, he is brought back into the code-breaking effort. The Germans are making it tough on the Brits, changing aspects of their coding process to keep one step ahead of the codebreakers and their new-fangled computing machines. But there is mystery afoot. Chunks of data have gone missing. Tom's ex girlfriend seems to be making the rounds of all the men on the project. What's up with that? With a major floating convoy about to head from the USA to beleaguered European Allies, offering a wealth of targets for eager German u- boats, it is critical that the latest German code changes be broken. The action heats up when Tom discovers some missing files in an unexpected place. Who can be trusted?

That we know how it all turns out in the end in the larger picture takes something away from potential tension. Harris offers us a more detailed picture of the Enigma project, making it clear that this was not a single code breaking, but a process, an ongoing enterprise. It also looks at some of the very difficult

decisions that had to be made to keep secret the fact that the code had been broken. And we learn a bit about the relationship between the UK and the USA during the war. But while it is an adult and enjoyable, I found it a less than completely satisfying read. I was just never drawn in to the plight of the characters enough to care a whole lot. Still, it offers an interesting look at a crucial aspect of the war and is worth a look for that alone.

Other Robert Harris I have enjoyed

-----Fatherland

-----The Ghost

David Highton says

A mystery story built around the wartime code breaking operation at Bletchley with the brilliant Tom Jericho brought back from a nervous breakdown and seeking to find the girl he had fallen in love with and also breaking down the new Enigma code for U boats attacking North Atlantic convoys. Well written by Robert Harris, deeper and more complex than the film version, with a great twist at the end

StefanieFreigericht says

My Enemy's Enemy – Der Feind meines Feindes

Achtung Erwartungshaltung: Irgendwie ein Thriller, ja, aber mit anspruchsvoller Verschlüsselungs-Thematik statt „normalen“ Morden (deutscher Text unten - German text underneath)

Mind your expectations: Sort of a thriller, but with demanding cryptology-technology instead of “plain“ murder

Which sacrifice is worth it?

At the beginning of 1943, the 4th winter of war, Great Britain. To encode their radio communications, Nazi-Germany uses the so-called „ENIGMA“ – a type-writer-like device with rotors, each with the 26 letters of the standard alphabet. Simplified: Inputting one letter of your original text into ENIGMA results in the output of its coded counterpart, achieved by the turning of the rotors and some presets. At Bletchley Park, a mixed group of specialists try to break the code. In the past, they succeeded using a trick. They had obtained a partial code book concerning weather-related encoding, and used that as an entry point, the so-called “crib“. But this entry code has recently been changed.

This is the non-fiction starting point to Harris' fictional approach. Tom Jericho is the brilliant mathematician who recently suffered from a nervous breakdown and is now transferred back to Bletchley. The situation is pressing, as large convoy of ships from the US are on their way – and a hord of Germany U-Boats are waiting. Adding up to this, Tom's love interest has dissappeared and politics does interfere. But Tom finds an unexpected ally and more to solve than just how to break the code.

Enigma is about spys, and codes, and cryptology. Unless you know all about the latter, this is no book to read in passing. I looked up a number of Wikipedia articles and I DO enjoy certain types of puzzle

magazines – the first chapter still took me quite a while to sort out.

Easy version? Encode “otto“ to be “nssn“ – each letter is always encoded by the same representative. Here: each by the logic of $b=a$, $c=b$, ... $o=n$ etc.

A code like that may be solved by mere trial and error, knowing for instance that an a or e should appear more often than a y or x. And you will look for representatives for “the“ or “a“ as they should show up pretty often. Go at it with computers, you will be even faster.

With enigma, there were rotors, each with the 26 letters of the (standard) alphabet. Ingenious about it was the rotation, so that the letter would next time be encoded by another representative: “otto“ might be “ralp“ and next time be “song“. The more rotors, the more complex the encryption (times 26 for each). What was known is that ENIGMA never ever converts one letter to itself. So, you may pick a lengthy word and move it from crypt section to crypt section, until you find one where never one letter would have been transformed into itself. One possible starting point found. See more on Wikipedia.

This is the book to read when standard mysteries/thrillers are just too shallow for you AND you are good at certain puzzles and quizzes, mathematical ones, best. It will give you a clue of what cryptology is like, another clue on real wartime Bletchley. Most of the rest is fictional loosely based on facts, cf.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enigma_... (rather AFTER the book to not spoil it). The Katyn massacre

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katyn_m... happened for real, but there is no proof it was handled as in the book (nor that it wasn't ;-)

Dislike? Some of the German language used is slightly off - sometime "Umlaute" (ä,ü,ö) missing, capitals wrong and other stuff, but still readable.

There is also a great movie made from this – I like both, but be aware of some changes to how the story ends. Like? Well, yes, 5 stars.

Welches Opfer ist es wert?

Großbritannien, 1943, der vierte Kriegswinter. Um ihren Funkverkehr zu verschlüsseln, nutzt Nazi-Deutschland die "ENIGMA", ein Schreibmaschine-ähnliches Gerät mit Walzen mit je den 26 Buchstaben des normalen Alphabets. Vereinfacht: Die Eingabe eines Buchstabens der Originalnachricht führt zur Ausgabe des verschlüsselten Buchstabens durch das Drehen der Walzen und einige Voreinstellungen. In Bletchley Park versucht eine zusammengewürfelte Gruppe von Spezialisten, diesen Code zu knacken. In der Vergangenheit gelang dies durch einen Trick. Sie hatten ein Code-Buch in den Griff bekommen mit einer Verschlüsselung von Wetter-Daten, die sie als Einstieg nutzen konnten, mit sogenannten "Cribs" (wahrscheinlichen Wörtern). Doch dieser Wetter-Code wurde kürzlich geändert.

Dieses ist der nicht-fiktionale Einstieg in Harris' fiktiven Ansatz. Tom Jericho ist der brillante Mathematiker, der nach einem kürzlich erlittenen Nervenzusammenbruch wieder zurück nach Bletchley gebracht wird. Der Druck ist groß, da ein enormer Flottenverband aus den USA auf dem Weg ist, während eine Gruppe deutscher U-Boote diesen erwartet. Außerdem ist Toms Schwarm Claire verschwunden und die große Politik mischt sich ein. Aber Tom findet unerwartete Unterstützung und muss noch mehr Rätsel lösen als nur den Code.

Enigma handelt von Spionen, Codes und Kryptologie. Falls man nicht alles über letzteres weiß, ist das kein Buch für nebenbei. Ich habe einiges in Wikipedia nachgeschlagen und mag auch bestimmte mathematische Rätsel - dennoch musste ich mich etwas länger mit dem ersten Kapitel auseinandersetzen.

In Kürze? Man kann "Otto" verschlüsseln als "nssn" - jeder Buchstabe wird durch je den gleichen ersetzt, hier b=a, c=b,...o=n usw. Solch ein Code kann durch Probieren gelöst werden, da man zum Beispiel die Buchstaben a und öfter erwarten dürfte als x oder y. Außerdem wird man nach häufigen kurzen Wörtern suchen wie "ein" oder "das". Mit dem Computer geht diese Suche nochmals schneller.

Die Enigma hat nun diese Walzen mit ihren je 26 Buchstaben. Genial ist die Rotation, durch die ein Buchstabe bei der nächsten Verwendung durch einen anderen Buchstaben verschlüsselt wird als bei der vorigen: "Otto" ist mal "ralp", dann "song". Je mehr Walzen, desto komplexer die Verschlüsselung: 26 Mal mehr Optionen. Was man wusste, war jedoch, dass ENIGMA niemals einen Buchstaben als ihn selbst verschlüsselte. Also nahm man ein Wort, das ziemlich sicher im Text vorkommen musste, und schob es solange unter den verschlüsselten Zeichen hin und her, bis kein Buchstabe sich selbst entsprach. Damit ist ein möglicher Einstieg gefunden. Vergleiche Wikipedia.

DAS Buch für jene, denen normale Krimis/Thriller zu seicht sind UND die bestimmte, eher mathematisch/logische Rätsel mögen. Es vermittelt einen Einblick in die Kryptologie wie in die Kriegszeit in Bletchley. Der Rest ist meist locker an Fakten angelehnt, vergleiche <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enigma...> (am besten erst NACH dem Buch). Das Massaker von Katyn gab es <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massake...>, jedoch gibt es keinen Nachweis für die Ereignisse im Buch (aber auch keinen dagegen ;-)

Ebenso existiert ein toller Film zum Buch - ich mag beide, weise jedoch hin auf einige Unterschiede, besonders zum Ende. Mögen? Ja, 5 Sterne

Lady Clementina ffinch-ffarowmore says

History (World War II), mathematics and cryptography, and the enigma machine?these themes that this story is set around is what attracted my attention when I saw the book as I hadn't read anything by Robert Harris before. Our hero, the fictional Thomas Jerrico, is a student of Alan Turing himself (Turing makes a brief appearance in the book) and trained and recruited to Bletchley Park on the naval side of things as one of those working to break the Enigma. He achieves a major breakthrough with a particularly difficult code but soon after suffers a breakdown?a result of overwork and a broken heart. He is sent back to Cambridge to recover but only a few weeks in, two men from Bletchley arrive to take him back for the success they achieved has been undone with a new code in operation. On his return, he tries to meet the girl he loved?the beautiful Claire Romilly ?but she mysteriously disappears after he only gets a brief glimpse of her. He tries to find her but ends up finding what looks like evidence that she just might have been a spy, responsible for the setback they have suffered. But was she really one? He starts to investigate aided by Claire's housemate, and friend of sorts, Hester Wallace. Alongside, he must also try to find an answer to the new code set in a short time, something that seems even to him pretty much impossible.

This was a very enjoyable read for me both as a mystery/thriller and as historical fiction. The book is well researched and I thought the author really makes one feel the atmosphere of Bletchley?the tireless hours of work, the immense and indeed intense pressure on the cryptologists, the talented women who are not employed in tasks that recognise their work, and the countless others, day after day performing almost mechanical tasks for hours each day, some just wanting reassurance that what they're doing is worthwhile, and of some value. The mystery itself?not quite a whodunit?was also interesting and enjoyable though it,

may be, picked up more pace in the second half. However, it was overall a gripping read with some surprises right until the very end. Four and a half stars.

SAM says

A solid effort from Robert Harris as he once again gives us an insight into historical events. I couldn't give anymore than two stars because it didn't blow me away like *Fatherland* did. It was just good. My only gripe is the amount of info dumping he fits into some of his chapters. Sometimes it's code breaking language overload!

Jamie Collins says

I like the Kate Winslet movie, so I went looking for the book it's based on. The movie added a bit more action and romance, but otherwise it's very close to Harris's story. In fact, I rather wish the book had been longer and more detailed. I had assumed that the mystery was simplified for the movie, but it turns out that's how it's written.

The author says that while the characters are fictional, the book is set "against the background of an actual historical event" and "the German naval signals quoted in the text are all authentic".

It's set at Bletchley Park in 1943, just as the Germans have changed their weather codebook, meaning the British cryptanalysts can no longer decipher the encrypted U-boat communications. A convoy of ships is headed across the Atlantic from America, and the allies don't know where the U-boats are.

Jericho, the mathematician who was instrumental in breaking the German U-boat Enigma code originally, is resting at Cambridge following a nervous breakdown caused by stress and fatigue and relationship issues with a beautiful, mysterious girl called Claire.

Jericho is summoned back to Bletchley, he finds that Claire has gone missing under suspicious circumstances, and he teams up with her roommate Hester to figure out what she was up to.

I enjoyed the book very much, although as I said, I was expecting the plot to be more complicated. There is some nice tension, and even a couple of car chases, but for the most part Jericho and Hester have little trouble gathering the bits of data they need to solve the mystery. The secondary characters are not very well fleshed out, which surprised me. I expected that we would get more background on several of them, including the guilty party.

Still, this was an engaging read. It offers a nice glimpse of wartime England: shortages, blackouts, and especially bad food - every meal Jericho eats sounds terrible. I'm fascinated by all the "girls" who worked at Bletchley.

David says

This was great...as is everything Harris writes. I'd seen this movie years ago, and I loved the book. Great writing, characters, suspense. Excellent!

Lewis Weinstein says

An excellent historical novel based on the incredible actual story of Bletchley Park and the decrypting of the Enigma codes used by the Germans before and during WWII. This was of particular interest to me because we visited Bletchley this past summer and could appreciate the well described horrible physical conditions under which so much valuable work was carried out. Also, the breaking of the Enigma codes by Polish mathematicians, acknowledged only decades later by the Brits, is an important plot element in the sequel to A FLOOD OF EVIL which I am currently writing ... A Flood of Evil

MaryG2E says

It took me quite a long time to get into this book. I think I had two obstacles that I eventually overcame. Firstly, I expected the story to be focussed on the grand tale of the breaking of the Enigma machine, something like the fairly recent movie starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Alan Turing. It turns out that the Enigma codes and Bletchley Park form the context for the story, which is actually a spy novel with its main focus on personal relationships. My mistake. Second thing that curbed my early enthusiasm was the author's rather abrupt jumping back and forward in time, particularly in the opening chapters. I found it disjointed and confusing.

By Chapter 4 the story began to settle and a couple of things at that stage grabbed my attention, and kept me reading. It felt familiar, and at some point I realised I was reading a spy story very much in the tradition of John le Carré. It is quintessentially English - socially inept single academics with odd habits and dubious hygiene; military officers whose status is more the result of their family and school ties than their intelligence and expertise; shadowy Intelligence officers from the bowels of Whitehall; brash, duplicitous Americans...the only person missing was George Smiley!!

A quirky young mathematician, Thomas Jericho, a former colleague of Turing, returns from Kings College Cambridge to Bletchley Park, where the German Enigma cryptography system was decoded, after a nervous collapse sidelined him. He was the key individual in the breaking of the most complex and secret of the Enigma codes, and the effort damaged his physical and mental health. His convalescence has been cut short, as his brilliant mind is needed back at Bletchley when the German signals suddenly cannot be deciphered - the codes, which took so long to break, have been changed abruptly. Three huge convoys of ships have recently left New York, carrying vital supplies and nearly 10,000 people, and the German U-boats are lining up in the North Atlantic, torpedoes primed...

One of the reasons for Jericho's mental fatigue is the fate of his budding romance with the beautiful, clever Claire Romilly, a clerk in a minor role at Bletchley. Their relationship is at a hiatus after a lovers' tiff, but he is desperate to reunite with her after returning from Cambridge. However, she remains elusive. Her housemate, the rather dour Hester Wallace, is initially unhelpful, but in time becomes his ally in trying to discover Claire's whereabouts. These two 'odd bods' take some daring risks to trace Claire in secret,

providing much of the suspense in this novel. I found it very hard to like the wishy-washy Thomas at first, but by the time he teamed up with Hester, he became more appealing.

The action of the novel takes place against a background of real events. I'm not sure how historically accurate Harris's depictions of the war might be, but there is a strong feeling of authenticity. It is in the minor details that the reader gets a true sense of those difficult times. The shabbily-built buildings in which thousands work on the monitoring of enemy signals are cold, dark and damp. The food is positively vomitous - cold comfort for those bright intellects on whom Churchill and his generals are relying to help them win the war. In Jericho's dingy digs at The Commercial Guesthouse, run by the formidable Mrs Armstrong, the fare is little better. It symbolises the countless petty deprivations imposed on the citizenry when England's entire national focus lay elsewhere.

Early on, I was frustrated by the seemingly slow pace of the narrative. By the end I realised the author took his time to peel away various layers of secrets. The reward for my patience was an intriguing set of disclosures, followed by more revelations, and some unexpected twists in the tale...Meanwhile, the race to re-crack the Enigma codes continues as the secondary plot line, with the ominous threat of destruction of the shipping in the Atlantic.

Overall, this book is a pleasing mystery, but hardly a nail-biting thriller. Nor is it a happy, funny story. A slow burner, it rewards the patient reader with effective closure of the plot lines, and a surprising ending.

3.5★s

James says

Robert Harris followed up his brilliant debut novel 'Fatherland' with 'Enigma' set during WWII in Britain with Bletchley Park (as then top secret) code breaking facility as its backdrop and named after the German mechanical cipher (Enigma) machines.

Whilst not perhaps quite as strong or consistent as 'Fatherland' this is nevertheless an excellent historical thriller, very evocative of the era and creating a great sense of authenticity and tension throughout. Robert Harris displays his (by now) usual highly accomplished storytelling skills to great effect here.

Terence M says

I read this book when it was first published as a paperback and the story today, twenty years later, is as interesting as it was then, but the circumstances surrounding the story seem scarier now than they were. The horrors of Hitler and WWII seem magnified by the passing of time and one can only wonder what the world would be like today if the hundreds of dedicated folks at Bletchley Park had not cracked the Enigma Code and, more importantly, had not been able to keep that fact a secret from the Axis powers. The writing is somewhat dry, lacking enough spritz to give it some life despite the "do we have a spy in our midst" and "furtive sex down behind the barracks" efforts of Harris to inject some life into what is a fairly mundane

It took Harris three years to write the book, as little had ever been made public about Bletchley Park and he had to track down former code breakers and personnel who were able to tell him about life there and how the code breakers had actually worked. The naval battle which plays an important part in the story is also real. Harris says he 'tried to pick the single most dramatic short period I could find in Bletchley's history' and chose a week in March 1943 where, briefly, the British were blacked out in reading the Shark Enigma – which was the Enigma key for the German U-boats – just as the biggest two convoys of the war left New York. 'I took the frantic battle to get back into reading the code as the backdrop for the book' he says. The fictional story is about one of the code breakers, Tom Jericho, whose girlfriend – or rather the girl who had a brief affair with him – has disappeared, and in looking for her, he finds another mystery which points to a traitor within. Thus the story falls within the classic boundaries of the spy story genre, with Jericho, the professional intelligence collector, also acting as an amateur spy.

It is also interesting to note the link between events in the book and the recent death of the Polish President Lech Kaczynski in a plane crash when visiting Katyn, the site of a massacre of 20,000 Polish officers by the Russians during World War II, at the time blamed by the Allies on the Germans.

Harris is certainly aware of the need for a good plot. 'My basic advice when writing' he says, 'is to get three things happening every two pages. Keep things moving. Think about the book from beginning to end and see the key moments'. One result, he says is that 'you don't really hang about and develop characters too much. You don't stop for long lyrical passages'. But he goes on 'Having said that, there is no reason why a story shouldn't carry a lot more freight with it. You can get at a truth as a novelist in a way that you can't as an historian. I think you can bring things alive, the sense of fear, prickly fear, the sweat, the smell of the place and so on'. The sense of reality comes from a subtle perception of how and why things might 'really' have happened.

There are elements of both 'bang bang bang' and 'kiss kiss' in Enigma. But they satisfy a different need from the sensationalism of the Bond stories. Harris relies on creating a sense of realism in which ordinary people do the best they can against real dangers, rather than relying on gadgetry and unlikely heroics against an equally unlikely fiendish enemy. It's a different kind of spy story.

Enigma is one of those rare cases where the film (2001) is as good as the book. It was directed by Michael Apted, and stars Dougray Scott and Kate Winslet.

In his novel, Ghost, which came out in 2007, Harris turned to much more recent history. The main character is a ghost writer who is called in at short notice to tidy up the memoirs of a recently retired British Prime Minister after the ex PM's original ghost writer is found drowned. The Prime Minister in question, named Adam Lang, is easily recognizable – Harris said he half expected a writ against him when the book was published. And of course, all is not as it seems. The book has been turned into a film by Roman Polanski under the title The Ghost Writer, starring Ewan McGregor. It premiered early in 2010.

Following Ghost, Harris has returned to the Rome of the first century BC for the second of a trilogy about Cicero. Lustrum was published in 2009. Why is ancient Rome of interest to us today? Well you never know; its decline and fall may just have some lessons for us.

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