

The Handler: The Norwood Nanny Chronicles, Book Two

Monica McGurk

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Involving dual plotlines, complex historical and political contexts, and intricate spy missions, The Handler is a suspenseful young adult thriller.

The second installment in the Norwood Nanny Chronicles, Monica McGurk's young adult thriller *The Handler* dives deeper into the world of espionage and political strife as one spy works to uncover her family history.

After a failed mission that resulted in the kidnapping of the children under her care, Bree learns that her mother, Meg, was also a Norwood agent. But Meg died in a car crash, along with Bree's father and sister. Bree begins to dig for information about her mother's past with the help of her friend Dash.

Attempting to avoid Norwood's prying eyes, Dash and Bree trace the details of a past mission and uncover connections to their current entanglements. Bree also hopes to right the wrongs from her first mission. And in alternating chapters, Meg's story is told from her own perspective: she discovered a family connection to the IRA; she met Bree's father on a mission.

Involving dual plotlines, complex historical and political contexts, and intricate spy missions, the novel juggles its multiple pieces well. Sometimes, though, these aspects of the story come at the expense of character development. Indeed, Bree spends most of the novel in a state of confusion about her family's past; her expressions of hurt, anger, and joy are mere flashes amid the book's activity. Characters' relationships are also underexplored: details about Meg's missions are prioritized over her love story with Bree's father.

Further, the book's opening is bogged down by heavy exposition used to summarize the events of the previous book. Most of this summary comes in the course of unnatural conversations, too. Once the action picks up, the book becomes fast, tense, and exciting, though, with several plot twists and surprise reveals. At one point or another, Bree questions the loyalty of each of her friends, her parents, and the Norwood Academy, not knowing who to trust. Some of the developments strain credulity: Bree and Dash have only a year of Norwood training under their belts, but with one handgun between them, they are able to best two professional spies. Still, by the end, the book's various threads are made to connect in a skillful manner.

The Handler is a complex young adult spy novel in which a girl's family history reflects larger historical and political contexts.

JULIA DILLMAN (January 5, 2024)

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