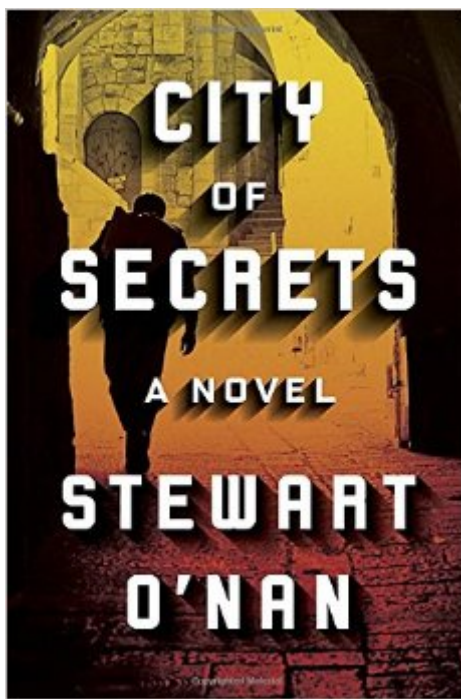


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City Of Secrets: A Novel



Synopsis

Stewart O'Nan's *City of Secrets* will keep you up all night reading "what a beautifully crafted novel." — Alan Furst, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Mission to Paris*

From master storyteller Stewart O'Nan, a timely moral thriller of the Jewish underground resistance in Jerusalem after the Second World War. In 1945, with no homes to return to, Jewish refugees by the tens of thousands set out for Palestine. Those who made it were hunted as illegals by the British mandatory authorities there and relied on the underground to shelter them; taking fake names, they blended with the population, joining the wildly different factions fighting for the independence of Israel. *City of Secrets* follows one survivor, Brand, as he tries to regain himself after losing everyone he's ever loved. Now driving a taxi provided "like his new identity" by the underground, he navigates the twisting streets of Jerusalem as well as the overlapping, sometimes deadly loyalties of the resistance. Alone, haunted by memories, he tries to become again the man he was before the war "honest, strong, capable of moral choice. He falls in love with Eva, a fellow survivor and member of his cell, reclaims his faith, and commits himself to the revolution, accepting secret missions that grow more and more dangerous even as he begins to suspect he's being used by their cell's dashing leader, Asher. By the time Brand understands the truth, it's too late, and the tragedy that ensues changes history. A noirish, deeply felt novel of intrigue and identity written in O'Nan's trademark lucent style, *City of Secrets* asks how both despair and faith can lead us astray, and what happens when, with the noblest intentions, we join movements beyond our control.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

City of Secrets is a taut, slimmed down novel (under 200 pages) depicting the post-WW II roil of Jerusalem as Jewish refugees fight the Mandate in an attempt to create an independent Israel nation. At the center of O'Nan's tale is a camp survivor named Brand, a taxi driver who is part of an underground cell and who also loves a fellow cell member/survivor Eva. Despite the several dangerous missions Brand goes on, O'Nan's focus is really on the character study of Brand rather than the sweep of historical action. And as anyone who has read O'Nan previously could predict, he pretty much nails it. Brand is a wonderful construct, a man lost to himself (I love that reality contrasted with his job "knowing exactly how to get from A to B in the maze of streets) because his earlier self was destroyed by war and his experience in the camps. We don't get a lot of details "as mentioned this is a very tight novel" but we get more than enough with regard to his family, his wife, and his own camp experience, to feel for him and understand his sense of displacement, his desire to find an ethical/moral center in himself, in those around him, in the world. The way his past haunts him is nicely mirrored in various elements "blood that sticks, his constant feeling of cold. In fact, echoes of the war and everything else that happened in the prior decades constantly crop up. Sometimes O'Nan draws our attention to them via Brand's monologue, his own recognition of the echo; other times O'Nan is willing to trust the reader to get it, as during an arrest/imprisonment scene. The novel being as slim as it is, these are often brief glimpses of the past repeating itself, just as frequently the characterization is delivered via single, sharp lines, such as when he wonders, "How after everything was he still proud? There were worse things than second best, or it was always a shock to think that a Jew could be brutal, He wasn't weak enough to kill himself, but wasn't strong enough to stop wanting to. Other times we get a few short scenes, memories of the past that last maybe a paragraph or a half-page of dialogue, but that are so perfectly conveyed that they carry an entire story's worth of poignancy. Other characters have their own bit of telling detail, though less of it, mostly for plot reasons "just like Brand, the reader is meant to be unsure of just which of these people, if any, can be trusted. In fact, the main plot focus is less the larger picture of Israeli resistance/independence than a much smaller, much more intimate focus on this particular cell. O'Nan still offers up some compelling suspense, just on a smaller scale, and it takes a secondary focus to one man's (and to a lesser extent, other men and women) attempt to find a center, to draw a line, to remake his life. This is much more less an action/suspense novel than it is a tragedy, but with an agonizing thread of hope somehow running through it all. As usual, O'Nan's prose is fluid, precise, and oh so effective; there's nary a wasted

word here. And some lines will simply shiver your heart as you read them. A new Steward O'Nan novel is always greatly anticipated, and *City of Secrets* does not disappoint. Highly recommended.

Bring out your history books and look up post-World War II Israel when the British adhered to careful quotas of how many Jews would be allowed to enter Israel. It would also be helpful to know about the Irgun and other militant Jewish groups that fought against British control. I found myself wishing that I had done this prior to reading 'City of Secrets' which is rife with history that the author presents in context but is not necessarily known by the general public. Brand, the protagonist of this novel, is a man spinning from the after-effects of losing his beloved family in the holocaust. A cab driver in Israel, he finds that he is forced to put on a false front on many levels, even to the extent of changing his name, having a forged passport, and pretending that he is simple-minded. He reels from the past but is not fully alive in the present. He loves Eva, a woman many years his senior who is a member of the Irgun and a well-heeled prostitute with a penchant for dancing and drinking through the night. His love, however, must remain silent or he risks losing Eva. Though Eva will not replace his wife Katya who died in the camps, she is what gets him through his days and nights, his only connection to someone he believes is real. Those around him, involved in politics and militancy, go by names he is not sure are truly theirs. Brand attempts to look inside himself and better understand the choices he made in the past. Faced with huge disappointment in himself, he tries to be braver and act more legitimately in a world that requires secrecy and falsehoods. As he tries to make sense of a seemingly senseless world, the reader is privy to his moral stumblings and ethical dilemmas. O'nan has taken on an important subject in an important time of history. I found, however, that I was not able to connect with the characters. Brand's sense of futility and confusion became mine as I struggled to piece together a collage of his character. I got as lost as Brand did when he attempted to understand those around him, even Eva. I have enjoyed O'Nan's previous books but this one just did not speak to me in the way it was intended to.

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