

A Swiss hitter

Daniel Silva's 'Assassin' targets Switzerland's secret war history

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Daniel Silva is exhausted. He's just spent hours doing satellite radio tours — trying to be interesting while talking to disc jockeys who haven't even read his book. ("Who are you?" drawled one Southern deejay before their interview.)

That's the price you pay when graduating from being a writer of thrillers that sneak onto the best-seller lists for a week or two to a brand-name author — one of those people like Tom Clancy who can launch book after book onto the charts.

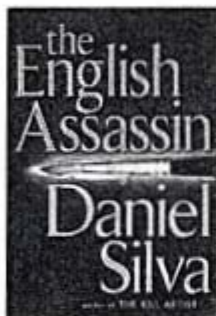
Silva's fifth novel and breakthrough thriller is "The English Assassin." It features the return of art restorer/Israeli assassin Gabriel Allon, who grapples with his Palestinian nemesis, Tariq; a moody classical musician, Anna Rolfe; and the dirty secrets of Switzerland.

One distinctive feature of the 40-year-old Silva's writing is the journalistic passion that animates his stories. Newt Gingrich, for one, thought Silva's last book, "The Kill Artist," captured the tumult of the Middle East and the perspective of both Israelis and Palestinians better than most news stories.

"This novel is complex, compelling and kept me enthralled," Gingrich wrote in an online review.

That passion comes alive when Silva talks about the priceless artworks stripped from the Jews during World War II.

"As awful as the Holocaust was, as unthinkable as it was, [the idea that] people then



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scooped up the belongings of these people and traded in them or maybe hung them on their walls and looked at them, I just ... I don't understand that," said the author.

Switzerland is "clearly the villain of the novel," says Silva, who researched the book in that country and thanks in the acknowledgments Swiss officials who helped

him understand the machinations of the government.

"There are people in Switzerland who want to clean up this secret banking business and bring all the mistakes of the past into the light of day, and there are people who want to keep it secret," he said.

Silva knows about covering turmoil and uncovering the truth. He left graduate school to work for United Press International, ending up as a correspondent in the Middle East, where he met his wife, NBC reporter Jamie Gangel. Silva returned to the U.S. and worked for CNN as a producer until leaving in '97 to pursue writing full time. The couple now live in Georgetown with their 7-year-old twins.

While his stories have an underpinning of fact, they're first and foremost entertainment. The English assassin of the book's title is a colorful creation who lives in Spain and goes to a gypsy to have his sins purged after every job; and Allon himself works for a drunken, hapless art dealer named Julian who falls in love with the paintings he buys and ends up in debt.

But then you get to the secret Swiss cabal, the Council of Rutli,



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a mysterious group plotting Allon's elimination, that seems to be the power behind the government. That's when Silva's gift for the made-up story line that reveals a greater truth comes to the fore again.

"The Council of Rutli is a fictional group, obviously, but I believe there is cooperation between the banking industry and the government to keep things secret," said Silva. "I don't think it's terribly far-fetched. I don't accuse the Swiss government of engaging in murder or anything. But there have been cases where they've engaged in intimidation

of people who have dared to criticize the system."

Is he concerned about returning to Switzerland and finding himself singled out for strip searches at the airport?

"They have a lot more to worry about than the rantings of some novelist," laughed Silva.

Besides, the next stop for the author is Italy in June, where he'll be researching the next Gabriel Allon adventure. Silva reluctantly admits it will deal with another institution currently rocked by the past: the Vatican.

"Gabriel is gonna tangle with them," said Silva. "They need it."