

# 'Company' man

## CIA spy scribe comes in from the Cold (War)

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**A**claimed thriller writer Robert Littell starts his new novel, "The Company," with a shocker: It begins in 1978 with the assassination of Pope John Paul, then works its way back to the beginnings of the CIA after World War II.

Ultimately, this massively ambitious page-turner covers the entire Cold War through several generations of CIA agents and what amounts to the greatest hits (and failures) of the Company.

Littell has a lot of experience working his way backward toward the truth. He's been doing it since he was a 10-year-old boy in New York City and first fell in love with books.

"My father taught chemistry and physics at Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn," remembered Littell, calling from his home in France where he lives with his wife.

"He was a bit worried that I wasn't reading and he started bringing books back from the school library. The first one I ever read was 'Treasure Island' and I remember what I did: I read the last chapter

and I liked it well enough to read the chapter before the last and then I read the one before that and I read the book backwards."

Such a personal reminiscence is a rare moment for Littell. Like a trained agent, the 67-year-old author is sparing with revealing details. He mentions where he met his wife, whose name he keeps to himself, but then asks that it not be included. He talks about his two sons, but doesn't want their careers named.

But Littell will have to get used to personal questions. After publishing 13 books, he's poised for the biggest success of his career.

It's a gamble by the boutique publishing house Overlook that has the entire book industry watching: a small imprint hoping to turn a critically acclaimed author into a best-seller.

"I think in all honesty, the bigger gamble is Overlook's," said Littell, who spent almost four years working on the book after receiving an advance of between \$50,000 and \$100,000 — the most in Overlook's history.

"[Overlook's founder] Peter Mayer has really put himself and his company on the line for this."



Robert Littell's hefty new tome, "The Company," is a humanizing history of the Cold War.

That's not all that's at risk. Mayer — a three-pack-a-day smoker — has promised to quit if "The Company" hits the bestseller list. "We're 32 years old and we've never had a bestseller," said Mayer. "I'm not a very cocky guy but we're working very hard to get me to stop smoking."

Mayer just might have to

start loading up on nicotine gum. The book jacket is graced with praise by Tom Clancy and Clive Cussler and comparisons to John LeCarre, early reviews have been strong, and Overlook has just gone back to press, bringing the total copies in print to a hefty 100,000.

Such success has been a long time in coming. After twice leaving college and serving four years in the Navy, Littell landed a job at a tiny New Jersey paper which was impressed by his college degree.

That led to work for UPI, Newsday and Newsweek. Littell finally quit journalism and moved to France, in 1970, where he wrote his first novel, "The Defection of A. J. LeWinter."

"I sent it to my agent in New York. He read it and fired me. I sent it to a cousin who was the editor in chief of [a publishing imprint] and he told me to go back to journalism."

"Then I gave the book to Ben Barzman, a blacklisted screenwriter who was a neighbor of mine. Within a week, he'd found me a French publisher who offered me 2,500 francs and a contract."

Now he's set to gain the wide audience so many have predicted for him over the years. And he's doing it with a doorstopper of a book that tells the history of the Cold War, while humanizing the agents who fought it. An early review by Publishers Weekly said it "brings back vividly a time when [the Russians] seemed a real threat."

The downplaying of that dangerous time, says Littell, proves how quickly people forget what the Cold War was about. "That's very funny to me," he said. "The Cold War really existed and it was very menacing and very serious. Communism was a very evil system — that's the one thing Reagan got right. I don't know how [the Russians] lasted as long as they did."



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