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Of Swastikas, T-Shirts, and Texas: How Three Icons Astonished the Mystery Publishing Business

Paul Goode

This is a story of how three icons - symbol, a store, and a state – combined to create a small publishing sensation in Seattle, Washington.

Sixty-five years after the end of World War II, the swastika retains its power to enthrall. It's more than the emblem of absolute evil. As conservatives never tire of pointing out, more people died in the purges of Stalin's Russia and Mao's China than in the genocide perpetrated by Adolf Hitler's Germany. Nonetheless, the hammer-and-sickle never supplanted the swastika as the ultimate icon of horror. Undoubtedly this is in part because of the veil of secrecy behind the party purges, which were not discovered until years after the fact. Perhaps this is also because communism for all of its failures of application somehow still stands for something egalitarian, whereas Naziism epitomizes the application of brute power for its own sake.

But an even more critical distinction is that – unlike Russia and China – Germany is a developed, first-world western nation -- *i.e.*, one of us. In that light, the swastika represents the undiluted depravity into which anyone and any nation can descend. It both fascinates and repels; for this reason, that which is unacceptable on a flag dangling from a front-porch compels the reader to instinctively reach for the book that has a swastika on its spine. When I reached for a mystery with a swastika on its spine, I didn't know that I was setting off a phenomenon in the mystery publishing industry. Such is the power of icons.

The book was a mystery by Robert Wilson called *A Small Death In Lisbon*, published in 1999. Its plot concerns the connection between a present-day murder and events in World War II Portugal. Early in the war, a cynical German agent infiltrates the mining country of Portugal in search of a source of wolfram (tungsten), an element vital to the German war effort. Once in Portugal, he underestimates the ruthlessness of his contact, crosses figurative swords with him, and is eventually imprisoned. The contact goes on to form a leading Portuguese bank from the loot gained through the trade of wolfram to the Nazis. – the Corleone family gone legit.

Meanwhile, in a 1990's Portugal still emerging from the fascist dictatorship that dominated its politics for nearly 50 years, Inspector Ze Coehlo has been assigned to investigate the vicious murder and rape of a Lisbon teenager. In the most intricate and tightly plotted mystery I have read, he discovers a link between the murder and Portugal's past, eventually uncovering a connection between the murder, the bank, and the smuggling of wolfram to Nazi Germany.

Coelho is in many ways a stock character, the loner detective who won't let go of the case no matter what simply because his personal code urges him on. In *A Small Death In Lisbon*, this resonates more than usual because of the sociopolitical backdrop. In the 1990's, Portugal was in the early throes of shaking off a corrupt fascist past known as the Estado Novo and establishing democratic institutions. The incorruptible Coelho's persistence is as much a political act as an expression of his personal code.

At the novel's close, his success in pursuing the case permits Coelho to reward himself with the purchase of a new car, which inadvertently leads to tying up the final loose end. Wilson achieves three-point landing of mysteries in that this occurs on the final line of the novel.

A Small Death In Lisbon is a *tour de force*, in no small part because it successfully combines elements of the historical mystery, the police procedural, and the tough guy investigator with a diabolically intricate plot that has the reader constantly checking back and monitoring even the most seemingly insignificant occurrence. Moreover, its historical aspect concerns a relatively unknown backwater of *the* cataclysmic event of 20th Century history, which by itself adds to the air of mystery.

Suffice to say that I liked the book.

About a year later, in the spring of 2005, two additional icons came into play. The Elliott Bay Book Company is the *grande dame* of Seattle book stores and the symbol of Seattle's typically high ranking among the United States' most literate cities.ⁱ EBBC's broad and deep selection and knowledgeable staff have allowed it to ward off the incursions of chains. It's not an exaggeration to claim that people will go out of their way to shop at EBBC, such is its reputation. I certainly do, which is why I was there when I noticed that one of the staff wearing a t-shirt from Gilley's, the famed nightclub in East Texas and setting for much of the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy*,

I inquired about the shirt, and it turned out that staff member hailed from Conroe, also in East Texas. I've wondered since that were the situation reversed – were I shopping at, say, Austin's Book People and noticed as staff member wearing a shirt advertising a club in Spokane – would I have struck up a conversation? Spokane is 300 miles from Seattle, and I grew up 250 miles from Gilley's. I keep concluding that I likely would not have: Washington state, for all of its beauty and appeal, does not have the iconic status of Texas and its institutions. It simply doesn't.

As we talked and exchanged book recommendations, the staff member mentioned that she had been reading mysteries set during World War II. The confluence of three icons presented itself: The swastika, the bookstore, and the state of Texas prompted my suggestion that she read *A Small Death In Lisbon*. It turned out that – compelled to by the swastika on the spine – she had picked up the novel a while back but had never read it. I urged her to give it a second chance, and she did.

She liked *A Small Death In Lisbon* enough to write a staff recommendation and append it to the book's store shelf. Unlike chain bookstores, which sell staff recommendations to publishers, staff recommendations at independent bookstore mean that the staff member

has actually read the book and liked it enough to recommend it. They are a key marketing strategy for independent booksellers because they augment the service edge provided by independents. At the same time, the reputation of the store is at stake, so staff members must recommend a title that they like and that they believe customers will like. The recommendation was direct:

For fans of World War II-era mysteries, I strongly recommend 'A Small Death in Lisbon.' Like Alan Furst, Robert Wilson masterfully creates period details and great characters. And, more than Alan Furst, Robert Wilson crafts page-turning plots. This mystery has it all.

And Elliott Bay Book Company customers did like *A Small Death In Lisbon*. The seller's recommendation helped move enough copies that the book received prominent shelf space in locations around the store, something almost unheard for a six-year old trade paperback. Nor does the story end there. I walked in one afternoon to find that the book was EBBC's number two selling title. The following month it was number one, and stayed there for a year.

A Small Death's publisher, Berkley Books, took notice and immediately promoted the phenomenon in industry media outlets. The internet newsletter *Shelf Awareness* passed the word onto its 6,000 subscribers and Berkley Books urged its sales reps to promote the six-year title anew. As a result, sales increased 44% from March to April 2006.ⁱⁱ Robert Wilson was, of course, pleased:

I've been delighted by this story, not only because it relies on coincidences, which are NOT allowed in crime novels, but which happen all the time in everyday life, but also because this is what every writer craves: word of mouth.ⁱⁱⁱ

The staff member has been wined and dined by publisher reps hoping for another recommendation that will catch lightning in a bottle. I don't see it happening, though. After all, just how many times do the likes of Adolf Hitler, the Elliott Bay Book Company, John Travolta, and two transplanted Texans collect in the same place?

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i Live Science (<http://www.livescience.com/culture/081229-literacy-cities.html>)

ii *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, "Texas T-Shirt revitalizes sales of WW II mystery," John Marshall, 8/1/06

iii *Ibid.*