'The Spy's Son' review: A father leads his son into betrayal

the spy's son

Special to The Oregonian By Special to The Oregonian

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THE SPY'S SON

Bryan Denson

Atlantic Monthly Press, $26

365 pages

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

In June 1997, Judge James Cacheris sentenced Harold James Nicholson, the highest-ranking CIA officer ever convicted of espionage, to 23 years and seven months in prison. The judge recommended that Nicholson be assigned to a prison in Oregon where, in the bosom of his family, he might make good on the declaration he made to the court at the end of his trial: "I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to offer some positive example to my children before I die."

A few years later, Nicholson recruited Nathan, his youngest son, to carry messages to his Russian contacts and bring home the tens of thousands of dollars they paid him.

In "The Spy's Son: The True Story of the Highest-Ranking CIA Officer Ever Convicted of Espionage and the Son He Trained to Spy for Russia," Bryan Denson, a reporter for The Oregonian, draws on FBI reports, court documents, military records, personal correspondence and hundreds of hours of interviews (with Nathan) to tell the Nicholsons' story. The book grew out of a series of articles Denson wrote for the newspaper.

The book is filled with fascinating details of the cloak-and-dagger techniques of KGB and CIA operatives, double agents, and spy catchers. To throw off polygraph machines, Denson indicates, agents learn to take deep breaths, hold them, and elevate their heart rates. If their computers suddenly slow, they often suspect that they are under surveillance. And hardened inmates counsel first-timers to avoid going into a prison shower with bare feet.

At bottom, however, "The Spy's Son" is a poignant and painful tale of family love, loyalty, manipulation and betrayal. Denson writes about how Jim Nicholson, who possessed in abundance the qualities of a successful spy (charm, grandiosity, and a knack for extracting from others what he needed), used Christianity to deepen his bond with Nathan, a naïve twentysomething, subject to depression, who was thrilled at the prospect of a clandestine career in which he would be Robin to his father's Batman. Only subsequently, Denson writes, did the young man realize, pouring "so much anguish into one word" that he had "absolutely" betrayed his country, and had been "like
a lobster in a pot, heated slowly until it was too late."

And so when Jim Nicholson, his voice tightening and his eyes glistening, proclaims he'd do anything for his children, Denson invites his readers to join Scott Jensen, the modest FBI investigator who identifies himself as "the Special Agent in Charge of Pendleton," when he fumes, "Yeah, like turn your kid into a Russian spy."

Concluding that in this case, at least, journalistic objectivity and detachment is "a lot of crap," Denson wants us to join him as well in wishing Nathan, who has recently graduated from Oregon State University and gotten married, good luck and godspeed in his steadfast determination to "rebuild his life, brick by brick, and restore the Nicholson name."

**Readings:** Denson reads from "The Spy's Son" at 7 p.m. May 14 at **O'Connor's**, 7850 S.W. Capitol Hwy., and at 7:30 p.m. June 18 at Powell's City of Books.

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