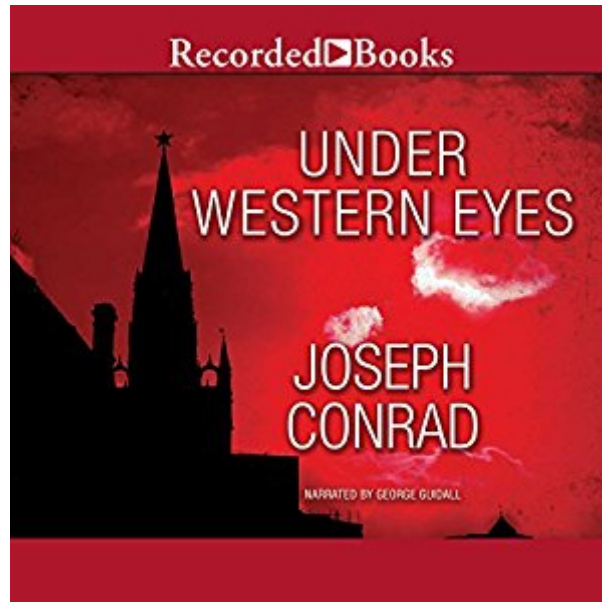




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Under Western Eyes



Synopsis

Under Western Eyes, Conrad's novel of political treachery and oppression, begins with a bomb that kills a hated Russian minister of police along with innocent bystanders. A young student named Razumov hides the perpetrator, then betrays him and becomes a spy among his exiled comrades. He faces a moral dilemma from which there is no escape. This masterwork, published six years before the Russian Revolution, is a chillingly accurate prophecy of what was to come.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Although Conrad was originally from Poland (which was then part of Russia), most of his books give no evidence of this; they are tales of the sea or stories taking place in England or Latin America. But "Under Western Eyes" is about the Russian revolutionary movement just before the Revolution there and takes place entirely in Russia and among Russian emigres in Geneva. Conrad shows great understanding of Russian culture and the great discontent that existed there, indicating often that this is something Westerners cannot understand. As always, he offers remarkable insights into the motivations of the characters. There is also much local color regarding life in both St. Petersburg and Geneva. The book bears strong resemblance to Crime and Punishment by Dostoevsky, particularly the crime scenes and the police interrogations. Ultimately this is a book about psychology, not politics. Conrad's prose can be slow going for modern readers at times, but this book is well worth the effort and is one of Conrad's best.

This is one terrific read from the pen of the inimitable Joseph Conrad. It is a novel wrapped in history, the history leading up to the Russian Revolution, which Conrad prophesized correctly would come sooner rather than later. The novel demonstrates how versatile Conrad is in handling complex material and reflects his perspective on political events of the day. The Broadview Edition has interesting additional information about the times in Russia, such as press accounts and writings by the individuals involved in the historical event upon which the novel is based, as well as letters, sometimes humorous and always humble, from the author to his literary contemporaries about the novel. The Broadview edition also has frequent footnotes, conveniently located at the bottom of each page, that I found to be helpful in understanding the significance of various references made in the text of the novel itself. There is also a tad lengthy political essay from Conrad, written at about the same time, that expresses his point of view on Russia and the events of the day vis-a-vis Europe and the "Far East". If you like to really dive into a subject matter, the novel together with the ancillary materials found in the Broadview Edition, are highly recommended.

Very timely topic as it tells the story of a terrorist plot set in czarist Russia. Conrad tells this story in an unusual way, with the English narrator using the diary of the main character (a Russian) as a kind of source material. Hence the title, telling the story of Russian revolutionists through his Western eyes. Amazing that the story was written in the decade before the revolution. Fascinating characters. Almost like Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as a psychological study of the main character's internal struggles with his own integrity.

...of the 20th Century written in English by a Pole! Honestly, you could remove any and all of the prepositional qualifiers from that assertion, and I'd still be willing to defend it. *Under Western Eyes* is a superb novel in every way - in emotional impact, in intelligence, and in narrative art - and it is very specifically a Russian novel as well as a novel about Russia. Anecdotes suggest that Conrad wrote it in response to his reading of Dostoevsky; if so, he exceeded his model in dazzling narrative acrobatics and in intelligence. The central character, Razumov, is the most dislikable anti-hero in all fiction, so it's an amazing feat of empathy by which Conrad brings us to care about his fate. Conrad's genius as a narrator is his ability to place himself and the reader in a realm of detachment, so that every event and every character can be observed from several angles at once. The "unreliable narrator" is child's play for Conrad. I don't want to spoil any of the prismatic effect of Conrad's narrative structure by telling any more of the tale of *Under Western Eyes*, but I will mention that the title is not insignificant. The Russia portrayed in this novel is a land of cynicism and naivete

intertwined - hyper-emotionalism and psychological repression in equal measure - omniscient surveillance and hopeless myopia - ruthless bureaucracy and utter disorganization - a land in short of oxymoronic self-destruction. This is NOT, however, the Russia of Communism! The novel was written in 1911! This is Russia as it existed under the Tsarist autocracy, and everything about it clamors for revolution. It's interesting to compare Conrad's portrayal of the old regime with the nostalgic and idealized version served up by Vladimir Nabokov in his memoir "Invitation of a Beheading." Nabokov wrote far more beautiful sentences, but Conrad saw deeper. The horror for us, post-Stalinist readers, in Conrad's depiction of the pre-revolutionary state-of-things is that we KNOW that change will not change much, that autocratic, arbitrary repression will be replaced by...more of the same. Conrad wrote two novels aground, away from the sea - this one and The Secret Agent. They are among his best. Some readers of today seem to find Conrad's style involuted and dry, and blame it on his status as a 'second-language' writer. To my mind, they are missing the point, the complex lensing of perspective through the minds of Conrad's narrative intermediaries. This is a book to be read slowly and observantly; the effort will be rewarded.

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