

A Conversation with
Daniel Silva
Author of
THE DEFECTOR

1. In 2008, you released #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Moscow Rules*, a book everyone was talking about. Now you've written the much-anticipated sequel. Tell us a little about *The Defector*.

The Defector is my twelfth novel and the ninth to feature my hero, the enigmatic art restorer and Israeli assassin Gabriel Allon. As you might expect, a writer forms an attachment to all his books—in a way, they're a bit like children—but I'm especially excited about *The Defector* because it's not only a thriller but a love story. Just to bring readers up to date, in the last installment of the series, Gabriel brought down one of the world's most dangerous men: the ruthless Russian oligarch and arms dealer Ivan Kharkov. But even the great Gabriel Allon makes mistakes once in a while, and in the case of Ivan, his mistake was leaving him alive. There's a wonderful quotation from Machiavelli that I use as the epigram for the novel: "If an injury has to be done to a man, it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared." Gabriel would have been wise to heed that advice. He didn't, of course. And in *The Defector*, Ivan Kharkov is out for revenge.

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2. Did I hear you correctly? A man who's been described as one of the top American spy novelists of all time has written a love story?

It's true. A heart-stopping, edge-of-your-seat, and sometimes extremely violent love story, but a love story nonetheless. I feel as if I've developed a real bond with my readers, and I've learned something extremely valuable from them. While they're captivated by Gabriel's adventures, they also follow his personal trials and misfortunes very carefully—especially my female readers. Gabriel has had a complicated history with women, to say the least, but I've discovered that many of my female readers have a bit of a crush on him. Frankly, I'm a bit surprised by this. He's moody, clinically shy, and prone to periods of melancholia. But he's also a very intriguing and attractive character.

3. In fact, Gabriel's personal life plays an important role in the way *The Defector* unfolds.

It really does. As the story opens, he's returned to an isolated villa in the hills of Umbria to resume his honeymoon with Chiara and to restore a seventeenth-century altarpiece for the Vatican. But his world is once again thrown into turmoil when he learns that Grigori Bulganov, the defector and former Russian intelligence officer who saved his life in Moscow, has vanished without a trace from a busy street in London. British intelligence is convinced Grigori was a double agent all along, but Gabriel's masters in Tel Aviv have another opinion. They suspect Bulganov has been abducted by Ivan Kharkov. And they're convinced Gabriel is next on Ivan's list. Gabriel is confronted by a stark choice. He can return to Israel and go into hiding, or he can try to keep a promise he made to Grigori the night of their dramatic escape from Russia. He chooses the second option—after all, he *is* Gabriel Allon—and, as you might imagine, Chiara isn't terribly pleased. Without giving away too much of the plot, the decision will prove to be the most fateful of Gabriel's long career, and his life will never be the same again.

4. As you mentioned, women like Gabriel Allon, and Daniel Silva clearly likes writing female characters. In fact, the storyline is dominated by a series of very intriguing, very compelling women.

That's true. And each of the remarkable women portrayed in the novel have a huge impact on the way the story is finally resolved. In real life I'm surrounded by strong women—anyone who's met my wife knows that—so it's only natural for me to cast women in heroic roles.

5. As with all your books, *The Defector* moves briskly across a broad canvas: Moscow, Geneva, Paris, Lake Como, Saint-Tropez, and a place you poetically refer to as “the Russian city sometimes referred to as London.” Why is London so central to your story?

In short, because London now finds itself on the front lines of this new Cold War between Russia and the West. You might find this surprising, but some two hundred thousand Russians make their home in metropolitan London these days. Those Russians include exiled billionaires and dissidents along with several hundred Russian intelligence agents. By all accounts, MI5, the

British Security Service, was caught flatfooted by the recent surge of Russian espionage activity in London. And with good reason. For the past several years, the overwhelming majority of MI5's resources have been focused on the fight against Islamic terrorism. Now they've had to redirect many of those assets toward the Russians. I'm afraid they have little choice. The murder of a real-life defector and dissident named Alexander Litvinenko proved that the Kremlin is willing to use violence when it wants to make a point.

6. Your books have a very sharp sense of setting and place. Do you actually go to all the places you write about?

In the case of *The Defector*, I really have: a chess club in Bloomsbury, a quiet mews in Maida Vale, a dingy, dilapidated terraced house in Oxford, an isolated villa in the Haute-Savoie region of France. I've even been inside the headquarters of the FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service, what is known as today's KGB). I think it's important to walk the streets that Gabriel walks. I'm not just using sexy datelines. I've been to these places and for the most part rendered them accurately—although, occasionally, I take a bit of literary license. For example, the members of the real chess club in Bloomsbury are a much more princely lot than the ones who appear on the pages of *The Defector*.

7. The critics have called you “the gold standard” of thriller writers because your books are not only addictive page-turners but sophisticated stories told with beautiful prose. What is your writing process like? And has it become easier over the years?

I wish I could say it's become easier, but, in reality, the opposite is true. I always thought that once I had a few books under my belt, I would discover some magic secret to writing one. But the truth is, there is no magic secret. Each book is a unique and surprising journey, and when I get to the end of it, I'm always a bit surprised I actually made it.

8. Do you outline your stories first?

I tried to write an outline once, but it really didn't work for me. In fact, when I finished the book and looked back at the original outline, they had very little in common other than the broad themes and the title. Basically, I like to map out the first third of the story. Once I've brought it to life on the page, I try to stand aside and let the characters take over. As for my writing schedule, it's fairly intense. Most people think a writer's life is idyllic—don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining—but in reality there's nothing romantic about it. I publish a book a year, which means I have about six months to research and write. I'm at my desk at six in the morning, and I work seven days a week. I also put tremendous pressure on myself. It may sound odd, but when someone tells me they loved my last book, or that it was my best yet, all I can think is, “Now I have to write a better one.”

9. Critics have hailed Gabriel Allon as one of the most fascinating characters on the literary landscape today. But he's not the typical hero, is he?

Not at all. First of all, there's the issue of his nationality. He can pass as an Italian or a German, but in reality Gabriel Allon is an Israeli. He started his career for Israeli intelligence when he was very young. In fact, he was still in art school when he was recruited to hunt down and kill the perpetrators of the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre. But what makes Gabriel unique—and what makes him so attractive to many different kinds of readers—is his cover job. Gabriel is truly one of the finest art restorers in the world. He uses restoration not only as his cover but as a way to heal himself after difficult operations.

10. Your villains stand out because they are never one-dimensional. And I suppose it was no accident that the antagonist of *The Defector* was named Ivan, as in Ivan the Terrible?

None whatsoever. Good thrillers need good villains, and Ivan Kharkov certainly falls into that category. For the record, he is a wholly fictitious character, but he may remind some people of the Russian oligarchs we're always reading about in the newspaper. The ones who fly around the world on private jets and own mansions in London and the south of France. There is a legitimate side to Ivan's business operations—a very profitable one actually—but he makes most of his money selling Russian weapons to very dangerous people. In fact, Ivan Kharkov is without question the biggest private arms dealer in the world. He's shrewd, intelligent, and prone to extreme violence. He also has the Kremlin in his back pocket along with the backing of the Russian intelligence services. And that makes him a global menace.

11. A moment ago, you mentioned Alexander Litvinenko, the former FSB officer and the defector who was murdered in London in November 2006 with a dose of radioactive polonium-210. I suppose the echoes of Litvinenko's death in your story are intentional?

Absolutely. Litvinenko's death was a watershed moment. Consider it in these terms: for five years before his death, the United States and its allies had been locked in a global struggle against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. And yet Russia, our supposed ally, staged what amounted to an act of nuclear terrorism in the heart of London. I've always been fascinated by the man accused by the British of actually carrying out the attack: Andrei Lugovoi. He denies any role, of course, and the Russian government has rejected a request to extradite him to Britain. But what makes Lugovoi so interesting to me is that he actually became something of a national hero in Russia and even served in parliament. As one of my characters, Olga Sukhova, likes to say, "Only in Russia."

12. There's a Russian term used in the book that really becomes the spine of the story: *vyshaya mera*.

In Russian, it means "the highest measure of punishment." I first read about it in a wonderful book published not long ago called *Comrade J* by Pete Earley. It tells the real-life story of a Russian spy who defected to the United States in 2000. *Vyshaya mera* was the term he used to describe the punishment meted out to those who betray Russia's intelligence services: "He would

be taken into a room, made to kneel, then shot in the back of the head with a high-caliber handgun so his face would become unrecognizable because of the blast. His body would be dumped in an unmarked grave. His relatives would not be told where.” That passage haunted me for a long time. It is so quintessentially Russian. In many respects it is the inspiration for the story of *The Defector*.

13. You always do exhaustive research for your books, and in your Author’s Note you say the story was inspired by a visit you made to a place called Butovo. Tell us about it.

Butovo was one of the killing sites used by Stalin’s henchmen during the Great Terror. The victims were brought there late at night after the proverbial “knock at the door” and shot to death in a small building. Then they were buried in long mass graves. Recently the Russian Orthodox Church turned Butovo into a memorial, a shrine, to Stalin’s victims. In fact, my family and I were among the first Americans to visit. It was an incredibly moving and sad experience. What’s more, it’s one of only a handful of places where ordinary Russians can pay tribute to Communism’s victims.

14. Why are there so few places like Butovo in Russia?

I think it’s quite obvious. The leaders of the New Russia aren’t terribly interested in exposing the sins of the Soviet past. On the contrary, they are engaged in a carefully orchestrated endeavor to airbrush away its most repulsive aspects while celebrating its achievements. I suppose one can understand why. The NKVD, which carried out the Great Terror at Stalin’s behest, was the forerunner of the KGB. And former officers of the KGB, including Vladimir Putin himself, are now running Russia. During a visit to Germany in 2007, Putin famously remarked that “problematic pages in our history exist.” It seems to me the systematic murder of a million people is more than just “problematic.” And those are just the ones who were shot to death in the Great Terror. Millions more died from Stalin-induced famines.

15. And yet Stalin remains incredibly popular in Russia to this day.

I think the most recent poll found he was the third most popular leader in Russian history, behind only Peter the Great and Vladimir Putin. In fact, when you visit tourist flea markets in Russia these days, it is startling to see that one of the most popular items are small bronze busts of Stalin. Imagine if the city were Berlin instead of Moscow and one could buy statues of Hitler. There would be outrage across Europe. And rightly so.

16. Do you think this sort of historical myopia is dangerous?

The obvious danger is that it might happen again. In far smaller and more subtle ways, it already is. Look at poor Stanislav Markelov, the crusading human rights lawyer and social justice activist who was gunned down on a central Moscow street in January 2009. His assassins shot him twice in the head and then managed to escape in broad daylight. In my opinion, Markelov’s murder

was in its own way *vyshaya mera* and Great Terror, right on the streets of Moscow. There's a lawlessness in Russia that is truly terrifying. And I believe the Kremlin bears much of the responsibility. What is your average Russian killer to think when he hears Vladimir Putin describe Anna Politkovskaya—a crusading journalist, author, and human rights activist—as a person of “marginal significance” not long after she's gunned down in the elevator of her apartment building? It was an incredibly callous thing to say. But I think it also left the impression that the Kremlin wouldn't mind it much if troublesome journalists and other critics of the regime were taken out.

17. What do you want readers to get out of this book?

First and foremost, I want them to be entertained. I want them to be swept away in a fast-paced story with moments of great human drama and excitement. At the same time, it is a cautionary tale. I want them to understand that the more things change, the more they stay the same, and that we'll need to keep one eye focused on Russia as we move forward in the years ahead.

18. So what's next for Gabriel Allon?

Perhaps a bit of rest, but not for too long. It's a dangerous world. And I have no doubt someone is going to require his services in the very near future. After all, he *is* Gabriel Allon.

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