

Frederick Forsyth's
THE DAY OF THE JACKAL (1971)

F. Paul Wilson

Born in Ashford, Kent, England, Frederick Forsyth (1938–) was educated at Tonbridge school, and later Granada University, Spain. After serving in the RAF from 1956 to 1958, he worked as a reporter for the Eastern Daily Press in Norfolk, before joining Reuters in 1961. In 1965, he began working for the BBC. There, he covered the Biafran side of the Biafra-Nigeria war. In 1968, he left the BBC to return to Biafra, where he reported on the war, first as a freelancer and later for the *Daily Express* and *Time* magazine. In 1970, he decided to write a book using the research skills and methods he had developed as a reporter. That book, *The Day of the Jackal*, became an international bestseller and spawned two feature films. Subsequent novels include *The Odessa File*, *The Fourth Protocol*, *The Dogs of War*, and *The Afghan*.

Frederick Forsyth's first novel (that last bit bears repeating: *first* novel) put a new twist on a number of spy-thriller conventions. Although not a true spy novel, it's structured as one: Its titular character, a professional assassin, functions very much like a spy—forging new identities, moving secretly from country to country, dealing with traitors. It's also very much a procedural, leading the reader in great detail through the intricate measures the Jackal takes to avoid detection and all the methods his pursuers employ to track him down.

Set in 1963, the novel also takes the unprecedented step of making Charles de Gaulle the assassin's target.

Excuse me? Charles de Gaulle was not assassinated; he died of natural causes the year before the novel was published. So unless this takes place in an alternate universe, the Jackal is doomed to failure. How can you possibly build suspense—let alone maintain it for the length of an entire novel—when the reader knows from the get go that the plot is going to fail?

In the hands of Frederick Forsyth, it doesn't matter. He makes it work.

The Day of the Jackal was inspired by the real-life assassination attempt on de Gaulle in 1962 after he endorsed independence for Algeria. A group of French militants calling itself the OAS waged a campaign of terror against it. A fellow named Jean Bastien-Thiry was executed for masterminding the plot.

The novel opens with Bastien-Thiry's execution and a recap of the failed attempt on de Gaulle. Shortly thereafter, a remnant of the OAS hires a professional assassin known only as the Jackal to finish the job. Wisely, the Jackal tells his employers nothing about his plans, and just as wisely, Forsyth tells the reader nothing as well. Instead, he does what all good storytellers do: He *shows*. We follow the Jackal, whose true identity we never know, through England, France, and Belgium as he researches de Gaulle, sets up false identities, and purchases the weapon he'll use for the assassination. Slowly, piece by piece, we see the plan begin to take shape.

On the other side, the French police realize that the former OAS reprobates are up to something. They capture a bodyguard named Kowalski and brutally interrogate him (believe me, he'd pray for waterboarding instead of the electric wires attached to sensitive parts of his anatomy) to extract what he knows, which isn't much beyond the name "chacal" (French for jackal). Eventually, a doggedly persistent French cop, Inspector Claude Lebel, is set on the trail of this nameless, faceless killer. He traces the Jackal to an apartment in England occupied by a man named Charles Calthrop (note what the first three letters of those two names spell) but misses him.

Now the cat-and-mouse game begins in earnest, with the Jackal receiving tips from an OAS contact in the French government that help him stay one step—sometimes less than that—ahead of Lebel.

In contrast to Robert Ludlum, who published his own first novel, *The Scarlatti Inheritance*, that same year, there's little passion in Forsyth's prose. The affect is generally flat, with the Jackal showing scant or no emotion. He isn't a radical firebrand; there's no pleasure for him here (other than, perhaps, the satisfaction in bringing off this nearly impossible feat), no emotional or ideological stake. It's simply a job—a challenging one, yes, but still a job.

Forsyth writes in what I call movie mode. We witness the action from outside; rarely are we allowed into the hearts and minds of the characters. This should make for an uninvolved read, but in Forsyth's hands it's curiously compelling. The torture scene is a perfect example. Its matter-of-fact presentation is utterly chilling.

Unlike the characters in James Bond-style novels, the Jackal is no *bon vivant*. He doesn't high roll in casinos or dally in five-star hotels. He's more at home in the underworld, the demimonde of gunrunners and forgers. He even has an interlude in a gay bar.

Whether we're following the Jackal or the police, Forsyth renders the locations in exquisite detail. Never do we question that the author has spent time in these places. And it is perhaps this attention to detail that empowers the Herculean suspension of disbelief necessary to overlook the historical contradiction so central to the plot. Everything is so real, the Jackal is so skilled, so expert at his profession that, yes, never mind what history says, this man just might be able to assassinate de Gaulle.

And as we read on (perhaps to our dismay, perhaps not), we find ourselves rooting for the Jackal. He may be a cold-blooded killer, but his foes are equally ruthless. And he's the underdog, a man on a high wire with no safety net, single-handedly facing down the combined police forces and intelligence networks of Western Europe. Every time the authorities start closing in, we can't help hoping he outwits them . . . again.

In the end the story comes down to a battle of wits between the Jackal and Lebel, and along the way the two men develop a grudging mutual respect. The final scene between the pair is delivered in Forsyth's typical affectless style:

Lebel stared into the eyes of the other man...

"Chacal," he said. The other man said simply, "Lebel."

After that it's a matter of who can shoot first.

Born and raised in New Jersey, F. Paul Wilson misspent his youth playing with matches, poring over Uncle Scrooge and E.C. comics, reading Lovecraft, Matheson, Bradbury, and Heinlein, listening to Chuck Berry and Alan Freed on the radio, and watching *Soupy Sales* and *Shock Theatre*. He is the author of more than forty books: science fiction (including the novels *Healer*, *Wheels within Wheels*, and *An Enemy of the State*), horror thrillers (among them *The Keep*, *The Touch*, and *Reborn*), contemporary thrillers (*The Select*, *Implant*, *Deep as the Marrow*), novels that defy categorization (*The Fifth Harmonic* and *Virgin*) and several collaborations. In 1998 he resurrected his popular antihero, Repairman Jack (who first appeared in the 1984's *The Tomb*). The thirteenth installment in the series, *Ground Zero*, was published in 2009. Much of his short fiction is collected in *Soft and Others*, *The Barrens and Others*, and *Aftershock and Others*. He edited two anthologies (*Freak Show* and *Diagnosis: Terminal*) and has also written for stage, screen, and interactive media.