

The Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA

By Antonio Mendez. New York City: William Morrow and Company, 1999. 351 pages.

Reviewed by Jim Steinmeyer

Magicians love gimmicks. In fact, I think it is this admiration for contraptions—for tricky pieces of apparatus that do *this* when you push *that*—which often attracts people to the field of conjuring. The best magicians come to understand that these gimmicks are mere tools for the presentation. Illusion, not mere gimmicks, must be present in any real magic performance. The way a great magician comes to understand his or her environment and subtly crafts the illusions is worthy of study. The current trend in magic, which a friend of mine calls “jazz magic,” is a celebration of ability, ingenuity, and improvisation. Decades ago the renowned sleight-of-hand magician Dai Vernon called this “The Trick that Cannot Be Explained,” a thrilling, seat-of-your-pants technique, in which gimmicks were damned and the whims of the spectators, the experience of the performer, coincidences, and opportunities were all smoothly blended into a performance. Jazz indeed—dangerous jazz—but still just a magic trick.

The jazz is never more dangerous, the potential melodies never sweeter, than the operations and deceptions outlined in Antonio Mendez’s remarkable book, *The Master of Disguise*. The master of disguise is, in fact, a master of deception, and Mendez’s true stories of his CIA operations are inspiring lessons in illusion. It should not be a surprise that Mendez is something of an amateur magician. More to the point, he has taken examples from such trickery, and applied the principles like a masterful conjurer.

As a boy, Mendez had a natural fascination with the clandestine. He was, like many a boy, deceitful enough to sell yesterday’s papers to passengers on the train. He was also clever enough to carry one copy of that day’s edition, which made his stack of papers look more authentic and, if caught red-handed, gave him a quick out. In his later career, this would be called “plausible deniability,” but it was based in standard magic. He had studied a 1905 book of do-it-yourself wonders called *The Boy Mechanic*. He was in good company. That book, just a kid’s collection of projects and tricks, was the inspiration for many aspiring magicians and provided the blueprints that were later assembled into the special effects of Walt Disney’s “Haunted Mansion” attraction.

At the CIA, Mendez’s early lessons in surveillance were lessons in deception. The very act of watching closely gives certain opportunities for illusion. Magicians have understood this for many years. That is the basic explanation for generations of phony psychics who have achieved success by fooling the scientists determined to watch them closely. Scientists, of course, have been taught to think in certain ways,

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and deceiving them has been notoriously easy. Similarly, Mendez learned to appreciate each situation, watching for opportunities and learning to think like the mysterious man trailing him. His later mastery of gimmicks—in his case innovative disguises—never replaced his understanding of the bigger picture. Magicians call it presentation. An early co-worker explained it to him: “A disguise is only a tool, Tony. Before you use any tradecraft tool, you have to set up the operation for the deception.” In fact, CIA agents who did not want to fuss with such things often greeted disguises with suspicion. An important part of Mendez’s job was to sell these skills to his co-workers.

Just as a magician must understand his audience, Mendez’s work involved constant balancing of cultures and expectations. An eastern culture would find it difficult to look a misshapen person clearly in the eye. A tin can filled with information—part of a dead drop—was smeared with messy motor oil. Who would want to pick it up? His successful illusions could depend on dozens of these subtle, natural tendencies.

In Moscow, Mendez found the ultimate challenge, the spotlight that magicians dread. Sleight-of-hand artists refer to audiences “burning” their hands by watching so closely that maneuvers are impossible. Moscow’s constant surveillance, listening, watching, and trailing, left barely any room for intelligence gathering. Parts of Mendez’s cloak operations in Moscow were the ultimate examples of understanding the audience. KGB officers were in trouble if they lost track of a CIA operative they were following. By giving the impression that the tail was successful, by “keeping them comfortable,” operatives gained precious moments to accomplish their goals. If the KGB was “burning” Mendez, he had to deceive them into thinking that they were doing their job perfectly—just as a magician concedes, “you got me, buddy,” and then waits for the audience to drop its guard. For Mendez, his diligent work seems to have gotten him into trouble, and he may have been slipped a dose of poison in an exclusive Russian club. He caught the action, avoided the trap, and left the country.

In *The Master of Disguise*, Mendez emphasizes not only the philosophy of his job but also the misconceptions. We may long have suspected that the spy business never involved freewheeling James Bonds, with souped up sports cars, martinis with exploding olives, and swizzle sticks with radio transmitters. That is just in the movies. The reality, however, can be even harder to imagine. Spying can involve being bent over a desk in a steamy room in Indochina for 18 hours a day, day after day, fidgeting and adjusting the latest forged papers.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this firsthand account is its hint at the levels of bureaucracy and politics involved in any operation. It is often easy to forget that even the most gritty operations are tied to the big picture of the CIA, where personnel changes and political trade winds can rattle the case officers in the trenches. *The Master of Disguise* reminds us of how the storms on the surface—the Shah of Iran, Watergate, Aldridge Ames, *perestroika*—could be felt under the layers of bureaucracy. Mendez came to call the political process “Pinball.” “The object of Pinball was to place the ball (your idea) on the table and keep it there as long as possible

to see how high a score you could rack up.... Back at Headquarters, competing for budget, staff, and technical resources was, in fact, a game. If you took it too seriously, you'd tighten up and lose." In films, the master spies do not have to worry about budgets. Mendez reminds us that the real world is quite different.

With experience as an expert at documents, disguises, and procedures under his belt, Mendez acquired the virtuosity to play variations on the theme—jazz. These are clearly the most hair-raising aspects of his CIA adventures. With all the gimmicks in place, the documents prepared, and the parts rehearsed, there were times when it all came down to quick thinking. In Teheran, during one carefully planned exfiltration, the disguised man lost his nerve and hid in the men's room as the plane was boarding. Mendez had a premonition. He boldly maneuvered through the airport, located the man, and gave him the necessary push at the necessary moment. It worked.

Perhaps these insights and skills were best demonstrated in his most famous achievement, sneaking six Americans out of Iran by disguising them as a Hollywood film crew. Even Mendez admitted that it did not make sense. "In the intelligence business, we usually try to match cover legends closely to the actual experience of the person involved. A cover should be bland, as uninteresting as possible, so the casual observer, or the not-so-casual immigration official, doesn't probe too deeply." The situation in Teheran, however, was unusual, and Mendez suggested a surprising deception. The film crew would be flashy and interesting. The ruse would only work because it would be unexpected, and it would be unexpected because the rules of the game had been well established.

Mendez's illusion came down to meticulous detail. He actually established a Hollywood production company, with a script, artwork, job descriptions, and trade ads announcing their upcoming project. This was matched, in detail, by the forged documents and disguises for the six Americans. It was an indulgence that was the dream of any magician. Mendez's improvisation was performed within carefully rehearsed scenes, meticulous paperwork, backstopped stories, and exhaustive research. If the six Americans seemed to saunter effortlessly through the Teheran airport, it was because the stage had been beautifully set and the scene masterfully presented. It was a demonstration of Kellar the Magician's famous boast that, once he had an audience under his spell, he could "march an elephant across the stage and no one would notice."¹

One of my favorite quotes on deception comes from the famous British landscape painter, John Constable. Faced with an elaborate panorama, an example of the 19th century craze for grand-scale, super-realistic paintings, he just shook his head. "The art pleases by reminding, not by deceiving." That is a good analogy for Antonio Mendez. In essence, Mendez began with a watercolor kit as a boy, then treated his forgeries as works of art, later graduated to the subtle colors and adjustments of make-up, and finally retired from the CIA to pursue his lifelong interest in painting.

¹ Harry Kellar was the leading stage magician in the early 1900s

When it comes to creating a deception, the art lies in subtle reassurance, the reminders that everything is right, comforting, and familiar. The goal might not be far from Mendez's "painter's eye." It is about seeing the entire scene and always working to adjust the colors, fill in the picture, and comfort the viewer with a deft brushstroke.

Magicians practice for endless hours to shuffle the cards and give the impression that nothing has happened. Mendez orchestrated scenes in which KGB agents could tail him and later report, confidently, that nothing had happened. Even if the artistry is concealed, in magic we proudly call the best of our work an "art," and it should be no different for this master of disguise.