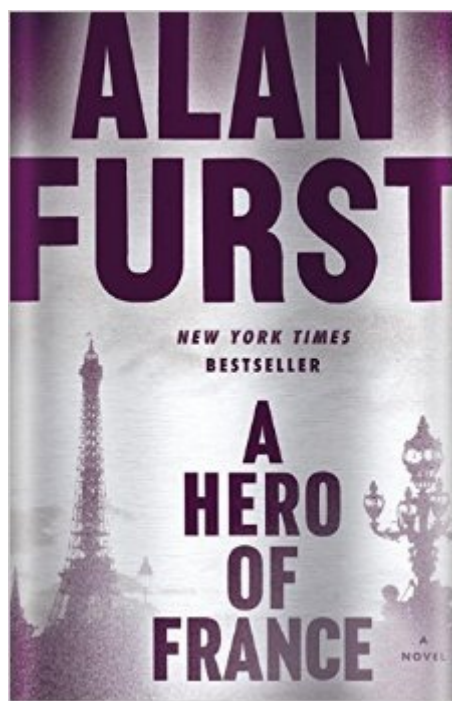


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A Hero Of France: A Novel



Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • From the bestselling master espionage writer, hailed by Vince Flynn as "the best in the business," comes a riveting novel about the French Resistance in Nazi-occupied Paris, 1941. The City of Light is dark and silent at night. But in Paris and in the farmhouses, barns, and churches of the French countryside, small groups of ordinary men and women are determined to take down the occupying forces of Adolf Hitler. Mathieu, a leader of the French Resistance, leads one such cell, helping downed British airmen escape back to England. Alan Furst's suspenseful, fast-paced thriller captures this dangerous time as no one ever has before. He brings Paris and occupied France to life, along with courageous citizens who outmaneuver collaborators, informers, blackmailers, and spies, risking everything to fulfill perilous clandestine missions. Aiding Mathieu as part of his covert network are Lisette, a seventeen-year-old student and courier; Max de Lyon, an arms dealer turned nightclub owner; Chantal, a woman of class and confidence; Daniel, a Jewish teacher fueled by revenge; Joëlle, who falls in love with Mathieu; and Annemarie, a willful aristocrat with deep roots in France, and a desire to act. As the German military police heighten surveillance, Mathieu and his team face a new threat, dispatched by the Reich to destroy them all. Shot through with the author's trademark fine writing, breathtaking suspense, and intense scenes of seduction and passion, Alan Furst's *A Hero of France* is at once one of the finest novels written about the French Resistance and the most gripping novel yet by the living master of the spy thriller. Praise for Alan Furst: "Furst never stops astounding me." —Tom Hanks "Suspenseful and sophisticated . . . No espionage author, it seems, is better at summoning the shifting moods and emotional atmosphere of Europe before the start of World War II than Alan Furst." —*The Wall Street Journal* "Though set in a specific place and time, Furst's books are like Chopin's nocturnes: timeless, transcendent, universal. One does not so much read them as fall under their spell." —*Los Angeles Times* "[Furst] remains at the top of his game." —*The New York Times* "A grandmaster of the historical espionage genre." —*The Boston Globe*

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Customer Reviews

Anybody who likes espionage fiction has most likely read a lot of books about the French Resistance. There are lots of tales of action and danger, evil Gestapo members and their French collaborators, chases through darkened streets, gangs of armed resistance bands blowing up bridges, and British agents dropped behind enemy lines and making secret radio transmissions as German rovers track them down. Furst tells a different story here. His story is set in 1941, before the Nazis broke their pact with Russia, which means a time when the French Communists weren't yet all that active in the Resistance. It's also a time when the Germans responsible for combating the resistance were not the Gestapo, but the Army's Feldgendarmarie. Because of the time and circumstances of this story's setting, it's less flashy and action-packed than many espionage novels. But that's all to the good. It allows Furst to drill in, to focus on just a very few people in the world of the Resistance; just a handful of resisters and people helping them in large and small ways, a couple of Germans, a few downed British pilots and agents. The strength of this relatively short novel is this narrow focus and smaller scope. It allows the reader to get a better idea of what it felt like to be in occupied France in the early months of the war, as people were making their decisions of how to deal with the new reality, what their consciences would let them do. I recommend this novel, certainly for Alan Furst fans, but also for others who would enjoy a slightly different angle on World War II espionage.

book reviewers can choose one to five stars to rate a book. The five and four star reviews are considered "positive", while the one, two, and three star reviews are considered "Critical". And there's a real problem for reviewers who would like to use a three-stars as "not bad but not good". A three star review should be considered "neutral", but it isn't. There are books that I would like to use that designation but I can't, so I have to write a nuanced-enough 3-star review to state that the book is "okay". I'm rating Alan Furst's new book, "A Hero of France" as three stars, and will try to explain why. "A Hero of France" is set in France, mostly in Paris, but also in other cities and the

countryside. The time is spring and summer 1941, after the German victory over the French and the occupation of most of the country. This time is before the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the Germans have the upper hand in western European countries. The United States hasn't entered the war; that'll happen in December 1941 and things are still pretty bleak for occupied France. There are resistance units operating in France, and it's these brave men and women who carry on the silent war against the Germans. They smuggle out downed Allied fliers to safety and are beginning to sabotage German holdings. Alan Furst's characters in the resistance are given back stories that complement the work they're doing, and a lot of work is certainly being done, but the book never quite gels. The characters are "there" and they're doing things, and they're traveling all over France, and they're hiding from the German occupiers and the French police, but there's just very little substance to the book. The characters - despite their back-stories - remain caricatures. Here's where the 3 star- "neutral" rating comes in. IF you are a Furst fan, his latest book might just satisfy you. There's the requisite visit to the Brasserie Heininger and some other familiar things. IF you are a first time Furst reader, you'll probably find the book lacking in substance. So a three star rating is my averaging of two and four star ratings. It's a book you probably won't remember in a month.

A Hero of France is not as meaty as Alan Furst's best works, but at least he didn't pad the story as do so many best-selling authors. The hero to whom the title refers is Mathieu. He is in the French resistance, working to return British flyers to England after they parachute from crashing bombers. The first two-thirds of the novel introduces a few British aviators who are spirited out of France with Mathieu's help. I formed no attachment to any of those characters because they didn't stay around long enough to warm my heart. Other people who assist Mathieu's operation of the escape line make occasional appearances, but none of them are given great substance. A British official tries to pressure Mathieu to expand his efforts by engaging in espionage, but the Brit plays such a limited role that it is difficult to view him as villainous or to care about him one way or another. That leaves Mathieu, the novel's constant, but we know more about what Mathieu does than who he is. Mathieu's motivation is obvious -- he doesn't like Germans, at least not after they've taken control of his country, and he doesn't like collaborators, including the French government -- but all of that is fairly superficial. It isn't the sort of character development that readers have come to expect from Alan Furst. The early stages of the novel foreshadow trouble for Mathieu and his small band of conspirators. A member of the German military police named Breum spends the last third of the novel trying to catch everyone associated with escape-lines. Breum, who wants to save himself from

the consequences of an unfavorable performance review, is probably the most carefully developed character in the novel. My difficulty investing in the episodic plot and bland characters was enhanced by the detached voice in which the story is written. The narrative is interesting but it lacks passion and drama. On the other hand, the background and setting of *A Hero of France* are up to Furst's typical standard of excellence. The story wraps up neatly, but perhaps too neatly. There are no surprises. I enjoyed the story, such as it is, but this is one of Furst's weaker novels.

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