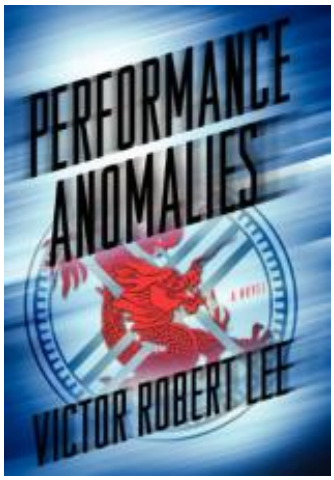
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Performance Anomalies

by Victor Robert Lee



About the Book

Cono is a startling young man of mixed and haunting heritage who has been gifted --- or cursed --- with an accelerated nervous system. An orphan and a loner, he acts as a freelance spy, happy to use his strange talents in the service of dubious organizations and governments --- until, in Kazakhstan, on a personal mission to rescue a former lover, he is sucked into a deadly maelstrom of betrayal that forces him to question all notions of friendship and allegiance.

Relevant to our times, PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES explores the expansion of Beijing?s imperial reach into Central Asia, and the takeover of Kazakhstan. Cono?s main adversary is a brutal Beijing agent whose personality has been twisted by the Cultural Revolution?s devastation of his family. Victor Robert Lee?s topical depiction of a Beijing government pursuing territorial expansion resonates with current tensions over China?s claims on the entire South China Sea.

PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES travels from Brazil and Stanford to Almaty and the Tian Shan mountains, covering a tumultuous emotional landscape along the way. The fate of an oil-rich nation the size of Western Europe is at stake. So, too, is a hidden stockpile of weapons-grade uranium. The Beijing agent craves Cono's suffering; a jihadi cell wants him dead. As the human cost of his mission escalates, Cono realizes that he must turn his strange talents toward higher deeds in the future --- if by his guile he can survive the explosive present.

Discussion Guide

1. Cono is in the intriguing situation of being a ?freelance spy.? He has no allegiance to any particular country, but he?s not exactly a mercenary either, given that money is not his motivation. What would you say his motivation is? Is it simply, as he muses, that he is ?addicted to being the pivot point,? to being the essential component of the solution to a harrowing problem? Or is it something else?

2. Cono is portrayed as a free spirit, in contrast to other characters in the novel who are trying to attain a freedom that appears to be out of their reach. Is Cono any freer than anyone else? If so, how much is this made possible because he does not belong anywhere or to anything? Are there other reasons for his perceived freedom?

3. There are a surprising number of strong women in the novel; spy stories are usually populated largely by men. Xiao Li (pronounced SHAO LEE), the prickly Chinese lady whom Cono adores and tries to save; Dimira, the Kazak schoolteacher who lends her assistance at great risk to herself; Katerina, the shrewd Ukrainian CIA asset who is friend and maybe foe. Even the main jihadi terrorist is a fierce woman. What do each of their characters uniquely lend to the story? Is it accurate to categorize PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES as a spy novel?

4. Cono?s haunting past is gradually revealed through his dream sequences. Are you surprised or unsurprised by their culmination? Does this unveiled history adequately explain Cono?s personality, or must there be other important underpinnings?

5. Cono is gifted with rare human PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES. What would the future be like if more people with PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES were identified, and how would this be exploited?

6. Xiao Li speaks of a child she has with Cono. Why does she invent this child and what does this belief represent? Cono explains to Dimira, ?Maybe the idea of a child kept her going, gave her something solid. Without that idea, she was all alone.? Is this a valid explanation? Is it possible that Xiao Li is speaking the truth?

7. Cono has a hard time figuring out what makes Katerina tick. What do you think motivates her, and what is she really after?

8. Bulat says: ?So you think you are a man. You are very happy. You think you are now a citizen of a free country. And then ? it all repeats. The local bosses of the ex-Soviet empire take over, the KGB gets a new name, the Bureau, but the faces stay the same, and the Politburo is now replaced by a few clans who think they own you and that all the riches of the country are theirs. You are a beetle again.? What is the author suggesting about life in the post-Soviet countries? Does it apply to other countries that have been ?liberated?? Why do the old control systems re-assert themselves?

9. In his first conversation with Cono, Bulat says, in reference to having a homeland, "A kite only flies if it's tethered." Is Cono proof that Bulat's comment isn't always true?

10. Timur used to be like a brother to Cono. In those earlier days of close friendship, did they simply not see each other clearly, or have they truly changed in the intervening years, so much so that they are now beyond any possible friendship? Who has changed the most?

11. The Beijing agent Mr. Zheng (pronounce JUNG) is a brutal enforcer and the vehicle for Beijing?s takeover ambitions, but he also has a terrible family history. How does that figure into the story?

12. Likewise, Zheng is a product of the Chinese Communist Party, which has shaped and formed his character and beliefs, a party described in the novel as ?a web of corruption.? Why is Zheng so intent on destroying Cono and Xiao Li? Regarding Zheng?s encounter with the young Chinese man at the Internet café, is there a metaphor here for modern China?s predicament?

13. Dimira is a beacon of hope throughout the novel, and despite the tragedy she has endured, she has not been corrupted. At the end of the novel she appears fearless and refers to staying in her homeland. What dimensions does Dimira?s character add to the story?

14. Cono is a highly unusual protagonist. He?s a good guy, the guy we?re supposed to root for, but his morals and allegiances are sometimes disturbing. In one scene [spoiler alert!] he violently deals with a man in a way some readers might find overly punitive. What can you say about Cono?s morals? Is he a moral man, even though he lies, steals, and kills for his missions? Is there some question or boundary that the author is trying to explore here?

15. To some readers, China will come across as a power-grabbing nation that is strategically many steps ahead of the United States and other Western countries. A battle for control of Kazakhstan hasn?t been in the headlines, but certainly we are reading almost daily about Beijing?s assertive moves for control in the South and East China Seas. On this topic of ?Beijing imperialism,? is the novel realistic or purely inventive?

16. Commentators on the novel have suggested that PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES is the first of many Cono missions, and have alluded to elements of the novel that pay homage to the first appearance of an earlier espionage hero. Who is that earlier spy, and what are the traces in PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES of an homage to that earlier novel?

17. PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES --- the phrase obviously refers to abilities that derive from Cono's accelerated nervous system. But what other types of PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES are alluded to or occur in the novel? How do they affect the outcome?

18. Victor Robert Lee, the debut author of PERFORMANCE ANOMALIES, writes under a pseudonym. Of all the reasons for authors using a pen name, what is your guess as to the reason(s) in this case?

19. There is a constant theme of change, movement and reversal within the novel. This is summed up in the last line: ?You never know when this tree or that tree will turn its colors. But come spring ?? Does this reference leave us with a picture of hope for the future, or a continuing cycle of tragedy?

20. The Author?s Note at the end of the book refers to several real-life sources that informed the composition of the novel. Do these real-life touchstones influence your interpretation of the novel, or are they irrelevant because it is a work of fiction?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"A thoroughly original work of fiction"

? Mark Schreiber,*The Japan Times*

"A great adventure and the beginning of a new hero."

? Ed Jones, KBEM

"A tremendous first novel."

? Steve Hexom, KBUR Morning Show

"Move over James Bond and Mr. Bourne, make room for Cono."

? Penny Seibert, KOGA Midwest Opinions

"Absolutely intriguing. A great, great book?Cono just really grabs you."

? Nolan Crowell, KWYK

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