

STASI WOLF by David Young

Published by Zaffre

I first discovered David Young's Karin Müller series quite by chance when attending the book launch of another novel. At the time, David was interviewing the book's author, and as '*Stasi Child*' – the first in the series – was also available, I bought a copy. I'm glad I did, because after reading it I could not wait to read the next instalment. Therefore, when the book's sequel, '*Stasi Wolf*' was published, it became high on my list of books to read and review.

THE PLOT

East Germany, 1975: Following the outcome of a previous case, *Oberleutnant* Karin Müller has been relieved of her position at the Mitte Murder Commission. Transferred to Keibelstraße police headquarters, she now spends her days dealing with low end troublemakers and minor incidents. Therefore, when *Oberst* Reiniger, the People's Police Colonel, asks Karin to head up an investigation into the disappearance of baby twins from a maternity ward in Halle-Neustadt – one of whom has been found murdered – she jumps at the chance to get away.

Halle-Neustadt is a new town and, being the pride of the Communist State, the Ministry for State Security (the Stasi) is keen not to see its flawless reputation tarnished. As a result, when Karin and her colleagues start to ask questions, they find their investigation hampered by the Stasi. On top of this, the local police force – resentful at having the case taken away from them and handed to an outsider – are also less than enthusiastic about Karin's presence. Therefore, she is confronted with hostility on two fronts.

While Karin tries to find ways to circumvent the obstacles placed in her path by the Stasi, another baby is reported missing. When new evidence comes to light of similar cases, Karin is forced to consider the possibility they are dealing with a child snatcher. With Stasi interference intensifying, the investigation takes a terrifyingly personal turn for Karin when her own newly born twins are also kidnapped.

MY REVIEW

Set in East Germany, in 1975 – fourteen years before the fall of the Berlin Wall – '*Stasi Wolf*' is an exciting cold war thriller that commands attention from start to finish. The second book in the series, it is not only a crime novel, but also an historical portrayal of life under the yoke of a totalitarian state, with its power ruthlessly underpinned by the omnipresent Ministry for State Security... the Stasi.

The main protagonist, Karin Müller, is a First Lieutenant in the People's Police – known colloquially as VoPo. She is ambitious and feisty, inhabiting a profession largely dominated by men... a sort of German equivalent of *Prime Suspect*'s Jane Tennison. However, although frequently in conflict with orders from above and failing to adhere to accepted orthodoxy in her quest for the truth, she nevertheless manages to reluctantly earn respect from key superiors – as well as total support from

her team. In a world where public surveillance is commonplace and the Stasi manages a complex web of informers and intelligence gathering, it is hard to know whom to trust – even for a police officer. Therefore, Karin’s perpetual harassment from the Stasi means she is forced to continually watch her back.

In contrast to her professional life, Karin’s private one is a mess. With no man in her life since her ex husband defected to the West, all she has left is her work... which is why she is so keen to return to the Murder Commission. This situation is compounded when her supposed mother drops the bombshell that she was adopted at birth. As if this was not bad enough, after starting a new relationship with Emil Wollenburg – a doctor at the local hospital – she discovers, to her initial dismay, that she is pregnant.

With all kinds of intrigue happening in the background, I particularly enjoyed the interaction between Karin and her deputy, Werner Tilsner. Theirs is a complicated relationship. Having had a brief extramarital affair with Werner in the past, Karin still regards him as a friend, although she suspects he is in league with the Stasi... a suspicion fuelled by the expensive watch he always wears. However, despite this, when he eventually joins her in Halle-Neustadt – after recovering from a gunshot wound he received during their last case – Werner proves to be the one person she can rely on.

When her new boyfriend, Emil, suggests she hands over the investigation to Werner and concentrate on her approaching childbirth, the conflict of emotions Karin feels is palpable. Not realising the strength of Karin’s passion for her job – and expecting her to give up her career for motherhood – Emil is therefore shocked when she chooses to ignore his wishes and carry on working. However, after her own newborn twins become the latest victims of abduction, it is Karin’s strength of character that comes to the fore while Emil is emotionally paralysed.

Throughout the novel, the plot itself has many twists and turns, constantly changing the course of the investigation. As Karin and her team attempt to piece together all available information, every line of enquiry seems to get blocked by the Stasi, until she begins to suspect they are protecting someone of importance. She then finds herself not only combatting the criminals but this sinister and all-pervading enemy within.

Being of an age when I can remember the wall still dividing Berlin, I felt ‘*Stasi Wolf*’ carried an air of authenticity. Although a work of fiction, David Young has managed to capture the oppression of life under the Stasi’s ‘Big Brother’ regime, where people resorted to all kinds of inventive methods to escape to the West, often with tragic outcomes. When it seems nobody is above informing on others to protect themselves – whether they are friends, family or neighbours – trust is the first casualty. This toxic atmosphere is perfectly reflected in the novel. Add to this the author’s vivid description of the Eastern bloc’s stark and Brutalist architecture – still evident today – and the result is an exciting crime thriller wrapped up in a chilling slice of recent history.

David Young is a masterful storyteller, and by setting ‘*Stasi Wolf*’ against a factual backdrop of political and social history, he manages to create an enjoyable reading experience that both entertains and informs in equal measure.

Although it is the second book in the Karin Müller series, it stands alone as a novel in its own right, as enough background information is provided to fill in any gaps. However, if you have not already read the first book, *'Stasi Child'*, I recommend you do. I think it would be a shame not to as, like *'Stasi Wolf'*, it is a damn good book.

THE AUTHOR

David Young was born near Hull and – after dropping out of a Bristol University science degree – studied Humanities at Bristol Polytechnic. Temporary jobs cleaning ferry toilets and driving a butcher's van were followed by a career in journalism with provincial newspapers, a London news agency, and international radio and TV newsrooms. He now writes in his garden shed and in his spare time supports Hull City AFC. You can follow him on Twitter: @djy_writer

'Stasi Wolf' is published by Zaffre and is available to buy in eBook and paperback format. It can be purchased from Amazon, Waterstones, W H Smith and other leading bookshops.