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FAITH

By Len Deighton

HarperCollins. 384 pp. \$24.

Venerable suspense master Deighton refuses to make it easy on himself. His initial offering in this third trilogy about British spy Bernard Samson (after *Hook, Line and Sinker* and *Game, Set and Match*) is set in the waning Cold War days of 1987, a temporal low-interest zone too recent for historical fiction and too ancient to reflect contemporary politics.

But Deighton more than compensates for his dated chessboard by setting in the middle of it the affable, battle-worn Samson and his swarm of domestic and professional predicaments. He's married to ambitious Fiona, rapidly climbing the espionage ladder above him and just back from a feigned undercover defection that no one told Samson about. Having just witnessed her sister's murder, Fiona has an excuse for her native coldness, leaving Bernard troubled that he loves the younger woman who cared for him and his children in Fiona's absence.

So bringing VERDI, a top East German spy, safely to England is among the least of Samson's problems, although he endures abundant gunfire, lumps and bruises in the process. More troubling are that he seems married to the wrong woman and his best friend has become persona non grata in Britain. A Brit raised in Germany, Samson has a bifocal view of his identity which intensifies his feeling of flux and rootlessness, the illusory quicksilver world of cloak and dagger, where what seems fair proves foul, and mistrust is everyone's outlook of choice.

What raises Deighton's genre fiction to art are not only his absorbing characters but his metaphoric grace ("once anyone began tapping this fragile hypothesis with the fingertip of reasoning, it would fall into a thousand brittle fragments"), his droll wit ("the sound of Dicky tapping his expensive fountain-pen against his still more expensive teeth"), his command of technical detail—from how glass shows bullet holes to what biscuits the Swiss eat in winter—and his sure sense of place: when he sets a scene in Zurich or Berlin, you are there.

Teasingly, Deighton leaves several matters unresolved. He's shown *Faith*. Now we crave *Hope*.