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HEADLINE: Spying in the Twilight Zone

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BODY:

THE SAMARKAND DIMENSION By David Wise Doubleday. 303 pp. \$ 16.95

YOU'VE GOT TO hand it to anyone who can create a readable novel out of U.S.-Soviet research into the paranormal, which is what David Wise has done in The Samarkand Dimension, an arresting and engaging spy thriller in which blind trust is no match for steely-eyed betrayal, and unquestioning loyalty is sacrificed on the altar of Cold War expediency.

When the United States' most advanced ICBM test rocket inexplicably does a 180 shortly after launch and makes a beeline for the launch site at Vandenberg Air Force Base, the CIA literally gets some very bad vibes, namely that the Soviets have sabotaged the project through telekinesis -- the ability to move objects through mental concentration. The agency taps one of its most tried and trusted agents, Markham, to penetrate the Soviet parapsychology facility at Samarkand, deep in Soviet Central Asia. His orders are simple: Report back on the state of Soviet research into the paranormal. And, in the event that his cover is blown and he elects not to kill himself, he has the agency's blessing to cooperate with his captors rather than face torture.

Markham's preparation for this dicey operation consists of a crash course on the state of U.S. research into psychokinetic experimentation at a CIA-funded foundation in New Orleans, an experience which sounds like something out of The Twilight Zone. It's a surreal journey into a world of experiments where documents in remote locations are accessed by psychics through "remote viewing," thoughts are "implanted" in unrealizing humans, and laboratory animals are zombieized with doses of "psychic energy." "You've turned a rabbit into a goddamn vegetable," notes an incredulous Markham. "True," sniffs a research honcho, "but it's a far cry from being able to zap a Soviet leader in the Kremlin from a distance of 4,800 miles. In terms of practical application, we have a long way to go." Markham's time in New Orleans makes for fascinating reading.

Less fascinating by a long shot is Markham's arduous acquisition of a new "past" borrowed from a long-dead Kansas toddler named Sam Weaver. "I don't think I've ever been to Kansas," Markham cautions. Soothes the CIA identity specialist: "Before you're done, you'll think you were born there." The reader, too. Markham's immersion into the boyhood community of the not-so-late, unlamented Sammy is a dreary primer on winter wheat, "Bleeding Kansas" and the number of nanoseconds during which the Rock Island Rocket stopped in good old Mankato, Kansas, on the Denver-Chicago run.

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AFTER this lengthy lull, Wise gets things rolling as Markham/Weaver is "dangled to the Soviets as a vulnerable, alcoholic, in-debt American scientist with access to secret research into the military and intelligence applications of parapsychology." The KGB bites, and Markham is whisked off to Samarkand to try to finesse his double agent high wire act for some very skeptical Soviet interrogators. When his seemingly airtight cover is unexpectedly shredded, the Soviets start demanding hard answers, and the whole operation unravels with riveting grimness.

Markham's interrogation and torture are convincingly nightmarish -- "Ludmilla . . . grasped his forearm in both of her hands. She twisted it up toward his neck until he screamed, and then, quite professionally, she broke his arm. He heard the bone snap . . ." -- so much so that when a totally wasted Markham finally spills his guts about the New Orleans experiments ("It ran counter to everything he had believed in. But he wasn't sure he cared anymore."), it's a relief. Until he gets dumped on the CIA's doorstep -- damaged Cold War goods -- and the agency spits him out too for failing to swallow the ostensibly optional, secret poison pill with which he had been provided. (" 'In point of fact,' Dickie said, 'it might have been preferable, from an operational standpoint, you understand, if you had availed yourself of the other option.' ")

At this point, with Markham a now thoroughly disillusioned and discredited spy out in the cold, Wise is riding a winner, but he stumbles a bit in the home stretch. It is clear that Markham's gotten the double cross. The only questions are by whom and why. His quest for the increasingly obvious answer to the first question involves an interminable search at the Library of Congress. In answering the "why," Wise overreaches: Not enough that the Samarkand operation is a big gainer for one side in the Cold War (a thoroughly plausible result); the Other Side also has to begin to totter.

Fortunately, Wise regains stride and hits the wire with an ending which consigns Markham to a fate where he might well wish that while Ludmilla was breaking his arm at Samarkand, she had kept going.

Rory Quirk, a Washington attorney, is a frequent contributor to Book World.

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