

Conspirators by Michael André Bernstein.
Faber and Faber 2005.

It is hard, if not impossible, to summarise *Conspirators*: as a first novel it is a tour de force to the standard of which its author will be hard-pressed to rise in his next work. Intellectually it is challenging and satisfying, as literature it is of the highest quality, and its intricacy is worthy of the finest thriller.

Conspirators interweaves the lives of a number of individuals, Jews and non-Jews, in pre- and post-First World War Austro-Hungary. The swirling tensions of revolutionary cells, anti-Semites, repressive autocratic governments and their intelligence gatherers on the one hand are balanced by the tensions within the Jewish community, revolutionary socialists versus Zionists, establishment versus radicals, business versus labour; and all of these form the backdrop to the stage on which the main protagonists play their roles.

There are no leading characters as such, Bernstein does credit to all of them, but among a vast cast the Jewish millionaire and fixer Moritz Rotenburg and his wastrel son Hans, the deficient Asher Blumenthal and his successful friend Alexander the writer and playwright, the sinister spymaster Jacob Tausk and his boss, the deeply paranoid Count Wiladowski, and the sinister wonder Rebbe Brugger all stand out.

Bernstein writes with humour as he spins his intricate tale and the end result is a feeling of deep satisfaction, as of a demanding journey well finished, from which the traveller emerges enriched.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh